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**"Free from drear decays of Age": Construction and  
Reception of the Authorial Self in Anna Seward's  
Later Career Writings (1786-1811)**

**FRANCESCA BLANCH SERRAT**

**PhD Thesis in English Studies**

**"Free from drear decays of Age": Construction and  
Reception of the Authorial Self in Anna Seward's  
Later Career Writings (1786-1811)**

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## Prefatory Note

### List of Abbreviations:

The following works and locations are cited with an abbreviation for ease of reference:

<i>Collected Letters Robert Southey</i>	<i>CLRS</i>
<i>National Library of Scotland</i>	<i>NLS</i>
<i>Samuel Johnson's Birthplace Museum</i>	<i>JBM</i>
<i>The Gentleman's Magazine</i>	<i>GM</i>

### Note about Format:

This thesis has been written in general accordance with the department of English and German's style guide and, in those instances where the style guide was inconclusive, the Modern Language Association (MLA) style guide (8<sup>th</sup> edition) has been followed.

To facilitate the reading of the electronic version of this thesis, the table of contents is hyperlinked.

### Note about Publications:

Part of Chapter 2 has been previously published as "I mourn their nature, but admire their art' Anna Seward's Assertion of Female Critical Authority in Maturity and Old Age" in *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, 40, pp. 11-31.

Part of Chapter 5 has also been published as "'To 'leave my name in life's visit'": The Intersection of Age and Gender in the Literary Afterlife of Anna Seward" in *Age, Culture and Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 5.



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## Introduction

“Lest that should be, with all its gloom,  
Life will I cherish to the last,  
And grateful for its day of bloom,  
Turn from the shadow of the tomb,  
To muse and to recall the past”

“To Remembrance”, Anna Seward.

In her old age, Anna Seward (1742-1809) set herself to complete the task of assembling, transcribing and editing her life’s work. In the comfort of the Bishop’s Palace, her home for more than sixty years in Lichfield, the author tirelessly compiled what she wished to leave behind as her literary legacy. The resulting anthology comprised the poetic corpus that had made her name, but was not limited to it. While Seward was widely celebrated for her poetry, her activity as a methodical scholar devoted to intellectual pursuit is less known, but not less important. She believed so, as the carefully prepared twelve volumes of correspondence she left behind, and the countless critical notes and essays she both published and scribbled in her books and letters, attest to. Indeed, Seward’s correspondence was a vehicle through which she fashioned a literary self, curating an image of a devoted intellectual, assertive, and self-sufficient author. Seward’s letter books shed light on her talent as a literary critic, writer, businesswoman, and socialite. From the privacy of her blue dressing room<sup>1</sup> where she entertained neighbours such as Erasmus Darwin or Samuel Johnson and visitors like Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Walter Scott, and Robert Southey; to the Ladies of Llangollen’s library in Plas Newydd; Lady Anne Miller’s assembly room in Bath-Easton; or the event rooms in Lichfield where she saw David Garrick perform, Seward enjoyed the sense of a community invested in knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> The “blue dressing room”, “blue region” or “blue sitting room” was how Seward called her and her sister’s personal apartments in the Bishop’s Palace, composed of three top floor rooms (Roberts, 2010: 65, 89).

and culture, gained valuable experience, and positioned herself as a central connecting figure within it.

In her maturity, Seward revisited and edited her letters with the purpose to either “bring them in line with her mature sentiments or to clarify passages she found obscure” (Kairoff, 2012: 169), and, before her death, she bequeathed her compiled manuscripts to Archibald Constable and Walter Scott in her will<sup>2</sup>, together with detailed directions for their publication designed to “conduct her writing career from the grave” (2008: 173). As these two instances show, the direct bearing of age and ageing in Seward’s later career cannot be overstated, as it reveals the writer’s self-awareness as an author of renown, and at her desire for her reputation to survive her. Indeed, the construction of her literary legacy evinces Seward’s belief in her authority as an author and a conviction that she deserved a place in literary history, and the underlying factor in this process of preparation for posthumous fame is no less revealing: it was conducted in her maturity and her old age. If we are to accept 1785 as the date in which Seward began compiling and editing her letters in preparation for publication (Woolley, 1972: 140), that sets the start process in her early forties, a mature age, and only five years after her rise to nation-wide popularity. The case is even more compelling if we consider that not only did Seward prepare the grounds for her posthumous reputation but also, she wished to withhold publication of her letters (Constable, 1873: 21) until after her death. Indeed, and as will be further explored in chapter 5, for a woman to publish in her old age might have been perceived as an act of vanity, negatively affecting not only the reception of that particular work but also retrospectively affecting her career, which would have had the opposite effect to her aim of securing her reputation. The fear of irrevocably blemishing the career

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<sup>2</sup> Seward communicated the contents of the will to Walter Scott in a letter dating from July 17th 1807 (Barnard, 2017: xiii).

she had for so long fought to maintain was further imbued by her advanced age, because for a once celebrated woman writer, continuing having a career into advanced age often meant putting in jeopardy the hard-earned reputation she had achieved in her youth (Looser, 2008: 7).

Through her correspondence and poetry, Seward kept her circles of close friends and acquaintances alive and in constant movement. As an elderly unmarried woman, she acted as intellectual patroness, encouraging and advising, upon their request, young writers like Henry Cary, Thomas Lister, or Robert Southey. She read their manuscripts and sent them back with notes, corrections, and words of support. She took pride in her honesty in literary matters: “my pen, let me tell you, never troubles itself to manufacture unmeaning compliments, and scorns the task of disingenuous flattery” (Seward, 1811: 1: 124). Seward’s corpus of literary criticism remains a largely unexplored aspect of Seward’s career, one that, nevertheless, was an essential part of her public persona. As Norma Clarke holds, Seward “was born a literary academic, never happier than when doing close reading” (2005: 41), and the scholarly approach to her own literary output and that of others earned her being assiduously published in the pages of the *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (1782-1800) and being sought after by her contemporaries. In this sense, her private correspondence represents a comprehensive record of her critical opinions on both canonical works and contemporary ones, discussed with some of the celebrated voices of the time; from William Hayley or James Boswell, to Robert Southey or Walter Scott.

From an early age, Seward actively engaged with aspects of literary practice, such as literary criticism, at a time when the critical essay was going through a process of professionalisation and gendering. Seward’s intellectual education was eminently typical of what a hypothetical male brother would have received, and that she managed to make

it harmonise with her domestically inclined upbringing. Teresa Barnard describes Seward as blending “her female ‘work’ and her male scholarship” (2009: 96), and this blending of the male and female realms permeated both into her professional and her domestic selves. After her father’s death, she was in charge of her household’s finances, supervising the investments and shares she inherited from her father. She also managed her own literary career and dealt with publishers and editors herself. She benefitted from a comfortable financial situation throughout her life, which afforded her full liberties in choosing how, where, and by whom she wanted her work published. She was a fierce upholder of her independence, as she was of her singleness, a matter she discussed with ease in the relative privacy of her letters. The paramount importance she placed on her legacy and her will, in which she attentively made sure to provide for her female friends and relatives, is proof of that. She fulfilled a fundamental role as the central cohesive element in a largely male dominated coterie, and she pursued the ideal of a female community. Seward’s rise to fame, prompted by the publication of her patriotic elegies, *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780) and *Monody on Major André* (1781), contributed to instil a sense of importance as well as cultural resonance to her literary activity, and throughout her life she held an influential and “unparalleled” position in the cultural landscape of her time, constantly aware of and an active participant in intellectual developments and cultural events; producing, consuming and reviewing literary texts until her death. Thus, she established herself as “an arbiter of taste” (Clarke, 2005: 35) and as a key contributor to the role of writers and critics in the consolidation of England’s national identity in the mid-eighteenth century (Wood, 2006: 457).

Anna Seward was born on December 12, 1742, in Eyam, Derbyshire. She was the eldest of two surviving sisters. Her mother was Elizabeth Hunter, a fashionable woman of a well-known Lichfield family, whose father was the headmaster of the Lichfield

Grammar School, which still survives nowadays as the King Edward VI School. Elizabeth Hunter married Thomas Seward, a well-educated clergyman from Eyam who had acted as chaplain and tutor of the duke of Grafton. Thomas, himself a poet, presumably encouraged Seward's love of the classic poets from her tender age. Thomas was interested in education and literature, and taught his daughters theology, basic mathematics, reading and writing himself; something that, on the other hand, was not surprising at the time, as female literacy in the eighteenth century was commonplace amongst the middle classes (Barnard, 2009: 36). In 1749, when Seward was seven years old, Thomas became prebendary of Lichfield's Cathedral, and the family moved to the town. In Lichfield, the Sewards quickly became integrated in the town's effervescent intellectual community. Their living room hosted personalities of the importance of Erasmus Darwin and his Lunar Society, Samuel Johnson, or James Boswell and conversations on scientific and artistic topics were held amidst an agreeable atmosphere of intellectual exchange. It was Darwin who, allegedly, encouraged her to continue writing after discovering her talent, one he deemed "worthy of attentive cultivation" as well as "far superior for her age" (Scott, 1810: vii).

In 1756 Honora Sneyd moved into the Sewards' home when her father became unable to care for his large family after her mother's passing. The young girl quickly became close to Sarah and Anna, and the latter was in charge of her literary education. Honora was to become one of the most important people in Seward's life, especially after Sarah's death in 1764. Seward wrote profusely after her, penning, amongst others: "The Visions, an Elegy" (1764), "Honora, an Elegy" (1769), "The Anniversary" (1769), "Ode to Content" (n.d.), "Epistle to Miss Honora Sneyd" (1770), "Elegy at the Sea-side and Addressed to Miss Honora Sneyd", "Epistle to Miss Honora Sneyd" (1772), "Time Past" (1773), "Lichfield, an Elegy (1781)", "Invocation to the Genius of Slumber" (1787), and

“To Remembrance” (n.d.). The particulars of the relationship between the two women have been, and remain, subject of scholarly speculation. From a critical standpoint, Seward’s arguably obsessive fixation with Sneyd as a literary subject might be read in two different ways. One, supported by queer studies specialists such as Lillian Faderman, Fiona Brideoake or Susan S. Lanser, and advocated by academics such as Stuart Curran or Paula Backscheider is that Seward had homoromantic<sup>3</sup> feelings towards Sneyd. Backscheider describes Seward’s perception of Honora as “subversive” and goes so far as to suggest that “Seward cannot imagine a relationship as complete, as multidimensionally intimate, as “heart to heart,” as hers and Honora’s” (2005: 302). On the other hand, Clarke has argued that to Seward Honora was a source of inspiration, a literary trope she used to emulate the classics: “[the] loss of the loved one offered the poetic subject of unattainability” (2005: 35). Adam Rounce concurs with this idea, and he remarks that “the level of anxiety expressed in the Sneyd poems is extraordinary” (2013: 126), hinting at the frustrating indeterminacy of Seward’s feelings. As Backscheider points out, “[the] intimate love between Seward and Sneyd becomes clearly visible because of the obviously less intimate heterosexual love story” (2005: 303). While Backscheider makes a valuable contribution in her analysis of Seward and Sneyd’s relationship, her point on lack of heterosexual love story is not entirely accurate. Seward had several male suitors and formed a lasting and intimate bond with a man from her community, John Saville, a married man who was to be the vicar choral of Lichfield Cathedral for 48 years, whom Seward met in 1766 when he became her harpsichord tutor. While it is true that Saville did not leave such a mark on Seward’s corpus as Sneyd did, as homoromantic feelings between women could be veiled under the guise of romantic

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<sup>3</sup> I use “homoromantic” here as a modern term that might hopefully help us understand a concept that lacked a proper labelling at the time for what is usually described as passionate romantic friendship in the context of the eighteenth century, aware as I am of the problematic associated with historicism and queerness.



friendship, Saville and Seward's relationship does not negate Seward and Sneyd's, or rewrite the nature of their attachment, but rather complement and enrich our understanding of the writer. In the course of their friendship, Saville and Seward became inseparable until his death in 1803, and she routinely accompanied his friend, whom she called Giovanni, to several of his performances and trips. Their bond was met with scandal. In 1772 Mrs Saville complained to both Thomas Seward and the Bishop and banned Seward from entering their house. A year after, the Savilles separated and he moved out of the family home. Years later, during his final illness, Seward provided and cared for him, both financially and personally. She continued doing so after his death, settling his debts and paying for his funeral. Additionally, she wrote his epitaph and erected a memorial plaque in his memory, which can still be seen in Lichfield Cathedral. Although the relationship between the two was undoubtedly close, we lack any conclusive indication of its nature. Scholars such as Clarke, Barnard or Marion Roberts, however, have defined it in heteroromantic terms as "platonic companion" (Barnard, 2009: 1), as did Seward's early biographers, Lucas, Pearson and Ashmun, who described him as "the great love and passion of her life" (Ashmun, 1968: 178). Be that as it may, their relationship reflects Seward's capacity and will to care for her close acquaintances, both intellectually and financially, as well as her attachment and active involvement in the cultural life of her period.

Sneyd died of consumption in 1780, after having married Richard Lovell Edgeworth in 1773. Seward's mother Elizabeth passed away shortly after. What was to follow were years of anxiety on behalf of her father, Thomas, who was bedridden for months. During his illness, Thomas Seward delegated his businesses to his eldest daughter, who was put in charge of the Seward's estate, including the shares and bonds from several local enterprises, which Seward inherited after his father's death. All in all,

her inheritance, and the Bishop's permission to continue occupying the Bishop's Palace after her father's death, allowed her to live comfortably in her old age, to provide for her close acquaintances during her life, and to leave a generous legacy to her friends and family.

Throughout her socially hectic life, Anna Seward constructed herself as a fiercely independent, unabashedly intellectual woman of letters through her correspondence, poetry, critical approaches to literature and her role as mentor and provincial patron. Seward's later literary corpus sheds light onto the ways in which the writer revised and reconstructed her biography, turning her memories into a structured narrative that was to be her literary legacy, and, arguably, an attempt of self-insertion into mainstream culture. Faithful to her self-reliant nature, Seward would not allow critics to define her once she was no longer able to defend herself. Therefore, looking back and reassessing her life's writing is to Seward an exercise of establishing her own agency, both as a woman and as an author. This thesis follows on the neglected thread of Seward's appraisal of her whole work and of her career, investigating this exercise in retrospective self-presentation and assertion of literary authority.

### **i. Corpus**

Anna Seward's literary corpus is vast, and it spans across genres. Seward was a prolific writer, interested in a myriad of topics ranging from the scientific to the politic, with an emphasis on the literary. She had access to her parents' books and to Lichfield cathedral's library, and was encouraged and schooled from a tender age by her father. As an educated and well-read woman she had proficient expertise in classic English literature, which she cultivated her whole life. She was an adamant supporter of her contemporary authors

(whom she strongly vindicated in the Pope versus Dryden debate)<sup>4</sup> and she was at the centre of a nation-wide intellectual community that encouraged and sought her knowledge. Seward's major works, all published in her lifetime, are the best-selling *Monody on Major André* (1780), *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1781), the elegiac *Poem to the Memory of Lady Miller* (1782) in honour to the Bath-Easton hostess; *Ode on General Elliott's Return from Gibraltar* (1787), *Llangollen Vale, with Other Poems* (1796), *Original Sonnets in Various Subjects; and Odes Paraphrased from Horace* (1799), the epistolary novel in verse *Louisa, a Poetical Novel in Four Epistles* (1784), and finally, the biography, *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin, Chiefly During his Residence at Lichfield, with Anecdotes of his Friends and Criticisms on his Writings* (1804).

Seward's first published long poems, *Monody on Major André* (1781) and *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780) prompted her rise to fame, gaining her recognition both in England and America (*Monody* was published in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Hanover, New Hampshire). The two elegies were so successful that she suddenly became "the most famous woman poet in England" (Backscheider 2005:286). She was labelled a "British muse, spokeswoman for national anguish, pride, and resolve" (Kairoff, 2012: 71), "th'immortal MUSE of Britain", "our British Muse", and "Queen Muse of Britain" (Backscheider, 2005: 286). Seward happily assumed the role of Britain's spokesperson in her patriotic elegies. A staunch admirer of the Neoclassical poets, Seward felt at home with the "role of the poet as public intellectual" (Moore, 2016: xvi) previously held by writers like Dryden, Pope and Swift, thus inserting herself within their intellectual, patriotic, and literary lineage. Furthermore, Seward's political epic poetry is another example of the feminisation of politics that was on the increase with the incursion of

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<sup>4</sup> See Foster, Gretchen. 1989. *Pope versus Dryden: a controversy in letters to The Gentleman's Magazine, 1789-1791*.

female voices in the public arena between the 1770s and 1780s (Guest 2000, cited in Kairoff, 2012: 90).

Seward was most prolific in letter writing. Her collected letters, *Letters of Anna Seward: Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807* posthumously published by Archibald Constable in 1811 cover a very small percentage of the total of her original correspondence and might have served as an autobiographical record of Seward's literary criticism and political thought had it not been so heavily modified by its editors (see Chapter 5). The letters, following the eighteenth-century tradition, were a falsely private document, often crossing public and private spheres, destabilising the "feminine, private, and manuscript" categories to which they have been traditionally assigned (Scarborough, 2020: 81). Seward's letters contain on-going discussions on literary, cultural, political, scientific, and personal matters, aspects that are traditionally assigned to the male arena, which may seem to suggest that in delving into them, Seward was pushing the bounds of what was traditionally assigned to women. However transgressive this might sound to the modern reader, this was in fact common and expected, and male and female correspondents participated in the discussion of a wide myriad of topics in the same epistolary format (Scarborough: 89).

As for her poetry, *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward: With Extracts from Her Literary Correspondence* was edited by Walter Scott and posthumously published in 1810. These two publications were intended to secure Seward's literary fame, and they contained what Seward considered her best work, that which would display her literary and intellectual accomplishments and consolidate her authorial merit. The material that either Seward in her compilation process or Scott in the subsequent editing left out in the *Poetical Works* has been recently published by Barnard, who compiled the four sermons and the juvenile letters in 2017 in *Anna Seward's Journal and Sermons* and Lisa Moore's

*The Collected Poems of Anna Seward* (2016). Moore's two-volume edition expands on Scott's *Poetical Works* and incorporates the original unfinished poem in three books entitled *Telemachus*, transcribed from its manuscript original found in the NLS; and those poems which she had published in periodicals during her career, such as *The Gentleman's Magazine*, the *European Magazine*, *The Monthly Mirror*, *The Analytical Review* or *The Edinburgh Review*. Another considerable element of Seward's corpus is the critical essay. Seward's role as a scholar has been overlooked, as the focus was placed on her practice as a successful poet. Nevertheless, Seward participated in four literary debates in the pages of well-known periodicals of the time (see Chapter 2). One of these, the Pope versus Dryden debate, has been compiled and appears in a modern edition published by Gretchen Foster (see footnote 4), and one of them has never been published. This is Seward's critical dissertation on the art of translation, "Observations by Anna Seward upon professor Spence's Essay on Pope's Odyssey in 5 Dialogues which had been recommended to her attention by a very ingenious gentleman", which is part of the manuscript she bequeathed to Walter Scott for publication. Seward's corpus also includes a biographical sketch (*Monthly Mirror*, 1796) and a series of marginalia containing critical insight and political commentary, which she left in the books of her library, which were then sold in a public auction<sup>5</sup> and thus scattered. The few of these that have been recovered are Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), William Cowper's *The Task* (1785), *The Poetical Works of William Collins: Enriched with Elegant Engravings* (1798)<sup>6</sup>, and *The*

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<sup>5</sup> The ad for the public auction of Seward's library was published in the *Staffordshire Advertiser* on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1809. "To be sold by auction, by Mr Harris, On Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, and 25<sup>th</sup> of May 1809, and continued till all is sold; All the household furniture of the late Mrs Anna Seward at her residence, in the Close of the Cathedral Church, of Litchfield, the sale to begin each morning at ten o'clock". The sale included "a large number of miscellaneous volumes in folio, quarto, & octavo, the works of the most celebrated Poets, and Divines, the former illustrated by the valuable manuscript notes of their late eminent possessor" ("To be sold", 1809).

<sup>6</sup> This book's location is unknown at the moment. After a thorough search it has been concluded that the library has misplaced it. On August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the Archives and Collections Coordinator

*Works of Alexander Pope*<sup>7</sup>. Finally, Seward also collaborated in published works such as *Dramas for the Use of Young Ladies* (1792), or Francis Noel Clarke Mundy's *The Fall of Needwood Forest* (1776).

For purposes of clarity, I have divided Seward's corpus in three stages of her career (early, mature, later) that correspond to three of the four stages of life (childhood, youth, maturity, old age). Age in early modernity was conceived through to two related concepts: the life cycle and its climacteric years. The life cycle was divided in climacterics, a set of seven years, the most significant being 49, the Climacteric Year and 63, the Grand Climacteric Year. These divisions had its rationale in the supposed connection between one's health and the astrological forces that supposedly influenced it (Yallop, 2015: 44). These markers, albeit useful when analysing early modern texts, will not be directly used in the present study, but are worth explaining nonetheless because they played a central part in the way Seward and their contemporaries understood age and ageing. However, one must bear in mind that in the eighteenth century the definition of old age was "flexible and fluid" (Ottaway, 2004: 18), and influenced by factors such as class, gender, health, family position and social status. In age studies of the eighteenth century the consensus is that the onset of old age is at 60, although this is different for singlewomen such as Seward, who are considered old much earlier; at 30-40 (Looser, 2008: 9). This problematises a chronology of Seward's career according to age markers. In subsequent chapters, however, the analysed textual material will not solve but rather prove self-explanatory in relation to the maturity/old age issue.

In this division of Seward's career I have established her mature age at 40 and her old age at 50, because it fits neatly with the definite peak (40) and arguable decline (mid

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of the Library of Birmingham, Paul Taylor, confirmed that "the book still remains misplaced". (Taylor, "RE: e/2289/2018").

<sup>7</sup> (*JBM*, Pope, 1754).

50s) of her reputation. Therefore, Seward's career is divided in early career (c. 1760-1780), mature career (1780-1790), and later career (1790-1811). Early career comprises her juvenilia and first literary collaborations, including her award-winning Bath-Easton poems. Her mature career, starting in 1780 (when Seward was 38) is generally considered the year of her professional debut after the international success of her *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780), and *Monody on Major André* (1781). Seward's nation-wide fame was well established by her forties, which coincides with the bulk of her published corpus (*To the Memory of Lady Miller* (1782), *Louisa* (1784), *Ode to General Elliott* (1787). Finally, later career covers *Llangollen Vale* (1796), and *Original Sonnets* (1799), both published in her fifties, *Memoirs of Dr Darwin* (1804) in her sixties, and her posthumously published collection of *Poetical Works* (1810) and *Letters* (1811). Interestingly, although the peak of Seward's career in terms of literary success and public renown was in the 1780s, the bulk of literary criticism published in periodicals fall heavily on the later career segment: the first half of the Benvolio debate beginning in 1786, the Dryden vs. Pope debates from 1789-91, the second half of the Benvolio debate resuming in 1793, the two reviews of Southey's works—*Joan of Arc* in 1796 and *Thalaba* in 1801—; and, finally, the Jerningham debate in 1805. A further detailed introduction to these debates is provided in Chapter 2<sup>8</sup>.

As this shows, Seward's corpus is diverse and comprehensive, containing an interesting number of critical essays in, mostly, epistolary format—mostly, as “private” letters to friends and editors or public letters published in periodicals. Therefore, focusing exclusively on Seward's poetic production is reductive, and it misrepresents her career. Accordingly, this thesis investigates Seward's corpus beyond her poetry. Using age

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<sup>8</sup> A graphic of this division is provided in the Appendix as Appendix A.

studies as a critical framework, the items this study engages with are all part of Seward's later career. These items are concerned with Seward's assertion of literary and critical authority in old age, exposing the sexist and ageist bias in her community and her reviewers; and, often, they do both. These items are the "Biographical Sketch" (1796), a misattributed autobiographical piece; the public and private letters that constitute the Benvolio debate (the correspondence published by both Seward and James Boswell in *The Gentleman's Magazine* and those private letters either between the two or from Seward to others discussing the matter); the recovered correspondence between Robert Southey and Seward which reveals a mentorship relationship that has been largely overlooked and investigates—opening a compelling line for further research—elderly and experienced women writers' dynamics with younger Romantic writers in the early stages of their career. Finally, this thesis also delves into Seward's preparation of her compiled works for posthumous publication and examines issues of legacy and reception. Here the analysis focuses on the published works, the author's instructions with publication and their reception in three periodicals: the *Critical Review*, the *British Review and London Critical Journal*, and *The Monthly Review*.

As mentioned before, Seward's manuscript corpus is at present scattered over English, American and Canadian archives, and many more are suspected to be privately owned. Although some of the material has been digitised and is available on *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* database, *Google Books*, *Archive.org*, and *Hathi Trust Digital Library*, the present study would not have been possible without with archival research. The primary sources used in this thesis have been sourced from different archives and libraries: Johnson Birthplace Museum, the Lichfield Cathedral, the Lichfield Record Office, and the Erasmus Darwin's House Library in Lichfield; the Staffordshire Record Office and the William Salt library in Stafford, the Cadbury Research Library in



Birmingham; Oxford University's Weston Library; Manchester University's John Rylands Library, Chetham's Library, Liverpool University's Library, Chichester's Record Office, the British Library in London, and the National Library of Scotland. Additionally, I have received the assistance of Harvard's Houghton Library and Indiana University's Bloomington Library's digitalisation resources, which kindly provided scanned copies of several manuscript items.

## **ii. State of the Art**

In reference to his generation's perception of ageing from their youth, William Hazlitt wrote that "Death, old age, are words without meaning, a dream, a fiction, with which we have nothing to do" (1836: 263). The male Romantic preoccupation with age has informed the popular notion of Romanticism's association with youth; a connection that stems from both literary grounds—disparaging their predecessors' radical ideals of youth turning into more and more conservative in their old age—, and biographical ones—Byron died aged thirty-six, Shelley aged twenty-nine, and Keats aged twenty-five. In the preface to "Romanticism and Ageing: An Introduction"<sup>9</sup> (2019), David Fallon and Jonathon Shears consider the gap in critical attention to old age issues in Romantic studies, something that "perhaps reflect[s] assumptions about literature inherited from the Romantic period itself" (2019: 217), mainly youth and rebellion. This Romantic fascination with youth has led us to oversee, or even dismiss, writings of maturity and old age. Our research of the period has failed to address issues that old age studies would help elucidate, such as, as suggested by Devoney Looser, "shared patterns of reception [...] and possibly shared features of writing that hinged on distinctions of sex and age." (2015: 176).

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<sup>9</sup> Fallon, David; Shears, Jonathon. "Romanticism and Ageing: An Introduction". In: *Romanticism*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1, 2019.

There is, consequently, a long and complex critical gap to be filled through the reevaluation of Romanticism's relationship with old age, as well as through the application of old age as a distinctive factor in the critical examination of the author's corpus. This gap has been lately addressed by the increase of interest in the field of age studies in the eighteenth century, which intersects eighteenth century (literary) studies and age studies. As a field, age studies has been described as "the critical examination and theorization of age as a marker of identity" (Henneberg, 2006: 106). Old age has been the subject of interest for thinkers ever since antiquity, the best-known examples of which are Cicero's "Cato Maior de Senectute" (44 BC), Montaigne's "La Vieillesse" (1580), and de Lambert's "Traité de la Vieillesse" (1732), translated into English by Seward's friend Eliza Hayley (1780); as well as *A Philosophical, Historical, and Moral Essay on Old Maids* (1793), written by William Hayley, husband of the latter, and also a good friend of Seward's. The modern foundational texts of the discipline can be traced back to Simone de Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse* (1970), an essay which analyses old age in a historical, social, and cultural context, but it was not until the late 90s that it proliferated, when Margaret M. Gullette in *Aged by Culture* called for the inclusion of age theory into scholarship. In *Aged by Culture* (2004), Gullette proposes that "Age, redefined and deconstructed, is what age studies foregrounds—what makes it a field" (2004: 106). Therefore, age studies is concerned with larger issues attached to the construction, evolution, self-reflection and self-(re)presentation of identity.

Following the line of argument first formulated in the 1980s by the poststructuralist Michel Foucault, who identified culture as an essential element in the creation of our identities and the legitimisation of our bodies, Looser defines age as a category of identity, together with gender, class, race, sexuality, and nationality (2015: 170). Likewise, but with a slight nuance, in the introduction to the special issue of

*Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* "Age and Gender: Aging in the Nineteenth Century", Alice Crossley defines these aforementioned categories as responsible for "identity formation" (2017: n.p.), or what is the same, not as identity traits but rather as elements that shape our identities. Similarly, Gullette argues that ageing does not refer simply and exclusively to the biological process of growing old, but rather to social and personal issues of physical and identitary self-awareness. The scholar defines identity as "the self that we change or wish we could change, because identity is really coming to mean 'me-ness'" (2004: 123). Identity is not a stable category but rather a flexible concept shaped by the passing of time; it shifts, and its changes are determined by our experiences, accumulated with age. I use 'identity' as defined by Helen Yallop, as a concept that "incorporates all the various possible aspects that help construct a person's sense of who they are, collectively or individually (...), the various concepts on offer that may help a person make sense of themselves" (2015: 122). In Seward's case, her awareness of her literary ability and knowledge is expressed in her literary criticism, and therefore, her critical debates enlighten our notion of her authorial and critical identity. At the same time, her poetry elucidates our knowledge of her more personal self, all of which are the pillars of her identity. In her book *Age and Identity in Eighteenth-century England*, Yallop examines identity formation historically and investigates how the intersection of age and identity was conceived in the eighteenth century. Yallop argues that using age as a theoretical framework brings to the fore typically overlooked aspects of identity formation that were in practice in the eighteenth century and adds that at the time, the notion of personhood was regarded as indivisible from the body and not, as we conceive it now, as mental activity (121). The scholar postulates that the conceptualisation of the self was revolutionarily developed in the late seventeenth-century, inaugurated by John Locke's formulation of the human capacity for self-reflectiveness in his 1689 *Essay*

*Concerning Human Understanding*, anticipating the eighteenth-century development of psychology as a scientific discipline and the modern scholarly interest in ‘the rise of the individual’ as one of the paramount themes in the eighteenth century (Yallop: 123). For her part, Gullette contends that the overlapping of changing identities, accumulated with age, that constitute our selfhood is a set of narratives (2004: 129), and therefore, “age identity is an achievement of storytelling about whatever has come to us through aging (...), a subset of autobiography (...) a narrative that anyone can tell about one’s self, to self and others” (Gullette: 124). To age means to narratively construct one’s own identity, a construction that is a gradual process that culminates with a subjective, self-made identity consciousness:

age autobiography’s method is to make the Latest Self explicitly present, because this is the narrator who gives meanings to time and change and who can explain where the meanings come from. How and what age and in what circumstances did the “I” learn (for instance) when in the life course we must change, what counts as difference and what continuity is considered ‘authentic’ whether only the passive changes are called ‘aging’, who can change at will (Gullette: 151).

Self-reflection is, consequently, inherent and inseparable from identity and ageing.

Amy Culley and Daniel Cook delved into the idea of gender and selfhood as narrative in *Women’s Life Writing 1700-1850 Gender, Gender and Authorship* (2012), which explores and highlights women’s letter writing, diarists, memoirs and essays as authoritative texts that conform “a distinct female tradition characterized by relational and contingent models of selfhood and discontinuous and fragmented narrative forms have largely been resisted, particularly in historicist studies” (Culley, 2012: 1). In *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain: 1750-1850* Looser brings age studies into the eighteenth-century women’s writing arena. Looser argues that our conception of life expectancy in the eighteenth century is inaccurate, and she indicates that modern over-reliance in statistical simplifications from the period such as life expectancy is to blame.

If we factor out of the equation infant mortality, Looser writes, the resulting numbers appear to be closer to reality ( 2008: ix). Indeed, many women, such as Maria Edgeworth, Frances Trollope, Agnes Baillie, Esther Piozzi, Charlotte Lennox, Mary Delany, Hannah More, or Anna Laetitia Barbauld, lived up to their eighties. Looser also vindicates the usefulness of intersecting the concept of age within literary studies and recounts the results of a gathering of information from a small sample of twenty-four women writers born before the 1870s who lived to at least their seventies. The results indicate that the peak of their published literary production was in their fifties, and that they published as much in their twenties as in their eighties. Although Looser does not investigate Anna Seward in her book, her study serves as a nexus between the critical framework of age studies and the field of eighteenth-century women writers. Looser set the bases for further investigation in the area. Her prompt is recently being taken up by several scholars in England and the United States, with conferences and publications within which the present study is situated. These are the special issue of *Romanticism* “Romanticism and Aging” (2019); the “Narratives of Ageing” conference in Lincoln in July 2019 organised by Alice Crossley, Amy Culley, and Rebecca Styler; and the collection of essays resulting from it, *Narratives of Ageing in the Nineteenth Century* published as a special issue for *Age, Culture, Humanities: an Interdisciplinary Journal* (2021)<sup>10</sup>. The present work is, therefore, relevant in this very particular point in time, and part of an on-going interest in the field of age studies within the long eighteenth century, particularly, within women’s writing. Anna Seward, however, is an overlooked author within this trend, something that is surprising given that both her trajectory and her writing make her an apt case study.

Through an analysis of Seward’s later corpus, and its contemporary reception, from the perspective of age studies, this thesis hopes to bring to light Seward’s

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<sup>10</sup> The special issue includes an article based on chapter 5 of this thesis, “To ‘leave my name in life’s visit’”: The Intersection of Age and Gender in the Literary Afterlife of Anna Seward”.

introspective evaluation and subsequent representation of her identity. In this sense, Seward's later corpus is regarded as an intimate and self-aware act of reminiscing from old age, and this idea informs our understanding of how, in the eighteenth century, Seward and her contemporaries perceived age and ageing as affecting one's own career.

Although mentions of Seward as one of the major women writers of the British Isles are consistent throughout the nineteenth century in newspapers and magazines in both England and the United States, the interest in Seward was reawakened in the early twentieth century with E.V. Lucas' *A Swan and her Friends* (1907), Martin Stapleton's *Anna Seward and Classic Lichfield* (1909), Margaret Ashmun's *The Singing Swan* (1931) and Hesketh Pearson's *The Swan of Lichfield* (1936). However, none of these books can be considered scholarly either in intent or execution. They offer a poorly researched overview of Lichfield's circle, with Seward at its centre. These productions reflect a cultural interest in the writer while at the same time attest to an unfounded exclusion of Seward from the eighteenth-century canon. She is deemed unworthy of scholarly attention—the reasons behind this left unexplained—and thus relegated to the second-rate status of literary and cultural curiosity. The revived interest in the Bluestocking circle in the 1990s prompted the inclusion of Seward in Gary Kelly's 1999 series *Bluestocking feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle, 1738-1785*, although it is arguable whether or not Seward actually fits in this description. In the same period she was also included in anthologies such as Paula Feldman's *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era* (1997), which attests to an academic interest in questioning and contributing new voices to the canon. Furthermore, Paula Backscheider's seminal study *Eighteenth-century Women Poets and Their Poetry* (2005), dedicates a chapter to Seward's elegiac poetry. On the other hand, scholars like Norma Clarke, Gillen D'Arcy Wood, Melissa Bailes, Margaret Dickie, David Wheeler, Claudia Kairoff, John Brewer, or Stuart Curran have all authored

articles and book chapters arguing that Seward's place is "right at the cusp of the shift of the prevailing Enlightenment ideology to a Romantic one" (Wheeler, 2008: 311). D'Arcy Wood's article highlights Seward's status as a sociable poet, a theme also investigated by Amy Prendergast in her *Literary Salons across Britain and Ireland in the long Eighteenth Century* (2015), which informs the idea of Seward as hostess.

At present there are two monographs on Anna Seward, and two modern compilations of her works (not including Kelly's selection in the aforementioned *Bluestocking Feminism* book). The monographs are Barnard's *Anna Seward, A Constructed Life* (2009), and Kairoff's *Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century* (2012); and the compilations are Lisa Moore's *The Collected Poems of Anna Seward* (2016) and Barnard's *Anna Seward's Journal and Sermons* (2017). Barnard's monograph focuses on Seward's vast epistolary production and it remains extensive and influential. Barnard's aim is to provide a much-needed revised and reliable account of Seward's literary biography. For this purpose she uncovered several previously unpublished items, such as Seward's private letters to two of her closest friends (from the 1770-1780 period), as well as her sermons, which she published in a subsequent book that also recovers the original "letters to Emma", Seward's juvenile work. Barnard's research not only offers an overview into the writer's biography, but also fills its gaps. It gives a context to her most celebrated works and argues for the careful and deliberate self-construction of Seward's literary persona, from youth to maturity, with a focus on the first. On the other hand, Kairoff's concern is with Seward's place in the canon. She reevaluates her corpus in order to substantiate her claim that Seward embodies the liminality of two literary periods. The present thesis' focus on maturity and self-(re)presentation in Seward's writing, therefore, offers a new line of investigation that will, evidently, draw from that of Barnard and Kairoff. Whereas Barnard's emphasis is on

Seward's early writings, mine is on her later corpus. The primary sources used in my research are beyond those previously tackled by Barnard and Kairoff, as is the critical framework used in the present study, which departs completely from these two scholars, and therefore offers a new, original, and relevant insight into Seward's career.

Barnard and Kairoff's interest in Seward has not been isolated. In the last two decades, special scholarly attention has been paid to Seward in two main critical approaches: queer studies and botanic literary studies. Queer studies theorists highlight Seward's relationship to Honora Sneyd and to the Ladies of Llangollen. Susan Lanser's "Befriending the Body: female intimacies as class acts" (1998) constructs an argument around the eighteenth-century negotiation of sapphic bodies and social respectability, revealing that the intersection of class and the institutionalization of female friendship, was a means for the self-preservation (social and legal) of sapphic bodies, arguments that she would later develop further in her book *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565-1830* (2014). In this context, Lanser discusses Seward's poetry dedicated to the Ladies of Llangollen and to her sister, Honora Sneyd. Furthermore, Stuart Curran's "Dynamics of Female Friendship in the Later Eighteenth Century" (2001) also deals with female friendship and argues, in agreement with Brideoake that the arguably sapphic poetry Seward produced recreates the relationships she could not have. Similarly, Lillian Faderman's ambitious book *Surpassing the Love of Man* (1998), a critical historical and literary overview of queer relationships between women from the Renaissance to the twentieth century which once again addresses and highlights Seward's relationship with the Ladies of Llangollen as an important part of Queer history. Drawing on Seward's attachment to the Ladies, Fiona Brideoake's "Extraordinary Female Affection: The Ladies of Llangollen and the Endurance of the Queer Community" (2004) study, developed into the monograph *The Ladies of Llangollen: Desire, Indeterminacy, and the*



*Legacies of Criticism* (2017) discusses Seward's poem 'Llangollen Vale' and maintains that Seward's public celebration of the ladies sought to enact the relationships she was not able to conduct with the women in her life. As for Botanic literary studies, scholars have focused on Seward's relationship with the Lunar Society of Birmingham, Erasmus Darwin and on Seward's engagement with scientific themes and female education. Sam George's *Botany, Sexuality and Women's Writing 1760-1830: From Modest Shoot to Forward Plant* (2007) discusses Seward's botanical poetry within its tradition in terms of educational and arguably feminist work. Other examples of research in this field are Melissa Bailes' "The Evolution of the Plagiarist: Natural History in Anna Seward's Order of Poetics" (2009), which discusses the antagonistic relationship between Seward and Charlotte Smith, suggesting that Seward incorporated botanical ideas not only to her poetical works but also to her conception of authorship, mostly related to ideas of originality and hybridity. Similarly, bringing together ecology and literature, ecofeminism is yet another area of research interested in Seward. The writer's poem "Colebrook Dale" has caught the critical attention of academics such as Sharon Setzer, who in "'Pond'rous Engines" in "Outraged Groves": The Environmental Argument of Anna Seward's "Colebrook Dale" (2007) offers a reading of the poem that challenges canonical man-made narratives of progressive history; Sylvia Bowerbank's *Speaking for Nature: Women and Ecologies of Early Modern Women* (2004) also deals with Seward as an environmental writer, and Malcolm McKinnon Dick's "Discourses for the new industrial world: industrialisation and the education of the public in late eighteenth-century Britain" (2008), argues that Seward's vision of industrialisation as invasion of the natural space was prophetic and anticipated the Romantic vision of the industrial world.

This thesis fits within the expanding and gaining in recognition critical framework of age studies of the eighteenth century and intends to contribute to it by approaching the corpus and biography of a Romantic figure from an under-investigated critical perspective, and seeks to fill the gap in the scholarship devoted to Anna Seward by paying attention to overlooked aspects of her corpus: her autobiography, a selection of her critical essays, the posthumous publications project and the mentorship in her correspondence. The study of Seward's relationship with old age also seeks to demonstrate the usefulness of intersecting age studies with literary studies, using the former as a theoretical framework rather than a theme in an author's corpus. Consequently, it is one of this thesis' aims is to convincingly demonstrate that re-examining literary matters from an age studies perspective allows us to examine the relationship between old age reputation and reception and the authorial self-awareness of literary merit (or authority) by offering a methodology that will be of practical use beyond the appraisal of Seward's work.

### **iii. Research Question**

Taking this into account, this thesis approaches the personal and literary figure of Anna Seward from her vast corpus of poetry and correspondence, and places the author's sense of authorial self at the centre of this analysis. Exploring Seward's self-presentation and reputation and the ways these interacted with maturity and old age, this thesis' aim is to address the following research questions: how did Seward's authority as a writer unfold in the later part of her career (1786-1809)? How did the identity markers of gender and (old) age inform Seward's sense of authorial self and her self-presentation in her maturity and old age? And finally, how did age, gender, and singlehood affect the success of said self-presentation?

In the course of my research I have examined a largely overlooked portion of Anna Seward's later writings (1796-1809), irrespective of their genre, in order to tackle

the question of Seward's self-presentation. Seward's identity as an elderly, unmarried, woman and writer informs her later production, and she uses it to articulate her authorial and critical authority. At the same time, the critical dismissal of her assertion of authorial and critical authority is constructed on precisely the same terms: she is dismissed for being an elderly unmarried woman. Seward's scholarly work, her critical essays, have been largely overlooked in favour of her poetic endeavours. However, it is precisely in her critical work that Seward positions herself as a woman of letters and asserts her knowledge and her authority. This assertion is further articulated in her mentorship of Robert Southey, and it is finally settled in the management of her posthumous publications. Therefore, the present thesis explores four instances ("Biographical Sketch", Benvolio debate, the posthumous publications, and the Seward-Southey correspondence) in which through her writing, and in her old age, Seward has sought to assert her authority; and investigates the way in which this assertion has been received. The process of transcribing and editing, especially the latter, from a mature age, points towards an interesting exercise of self-knowledge and self-(re)presentation of the writer as an experienced woman of letters who asserts her intellectual authority from this mature standpoint.

#### **iv. Thesis Structure**

The present thesis is organised in five chapters. Chapter 1 offers an overview of women's writing in the eighteenth century within the context of age studies in order to situate the present research within its critical framework and historical dimension. The aim of this chapter is to introduce Anna Seward and her literary corpus within the literary and cultural movements of the time. It gives an overview of Seward's youth and maturity that contextualises a subsequent focus on her later career, where the bulk of her themes, and of her most assertive production is located. Seward enjoyed a long life (she died at sixty-

seven) and a similarly long and successful career of more than 20 years. As this chapter will explain, her physical maturity coincides with her intellectual prime. Her old age corpus does not show a decline of her capacities, but rather a maturity of her faculties. It also introduces Seward's relationship with the periodical press and her role as literary critic, both of which aspects are generally overlooked in favour of her other publications, and which shall be further investigated in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 examines two of Seward's contributions to the press in which the author both presents herself and asserts her literary and critical authority, and interrogates how she was received. In order to address these questions, this chapter analyses Seward's autobiography, published under her cousin and amanuensis Henry White's name, written in 1796 and published in *The Monthly Mirror* a year later. This piece has been mistakenly attributed to White, but my archival research has revealed that it was, in fact, penned by Seward, which makes it a vital source of information because it uncovers Seward presenting herself, from her maturity, to the general public. Therefore, it allows us to discern what aspects of her much-divulged life she herself deemed relevant and how she chose to publicise them. Furthermore, this chapter also explores Seward's assertion of critical and authorial authority during the Benvolio Debates (1786-7 and 1793-4) in *The Gentleman's Magazine*. This section seeks to demonstrate that Seward's maturity, reputation and experience as a published author, which she had reached by the time of the debates, enabled the articulation of her authority in a public context and against an author of increasing reputation, James Boswell, and one of uncontested authority, Samuel Johnson. However, in the Benvolio Debates, Seward's authority is not ratified but rather dismissed. This analysis will demonstrate that this dismissal is formulated through a discourse that uses misogyny and ageism as its core arguments, and that Seward responds to them in full awareness of them.

Chapter 3, in turn, addresses Seward's self-presentation in her collection *Original Sonnets* (1799). This publication is part of the eighteenth-century women-led sonnet revival and it contains Seward's own claim to poetic legitimacy, which is articulated by connecting herself to Milton through the poetic form of the sonnet. The verses in this volume cover three decades of Seward's reflections on several experiences, from which loss emerges as the most profuse. My analysis, then, focuses on how Seward presents herself as an ageing and aged woman, and how she comes to terms, through her poetry, with the many losses she suffered in her life. In order to address this issue, I have categorised the analysed selection of poems into sonnets of grief, sonnets of Remembrance, and sonnets of Decay; which I argue are written from the perspective and insight of old age.

Chapter 4 investigates an overlooked aspect in Romantic studies and age studies: intergenerational friendship and the role of elderly women writers as mentors. This chapter delves into the much-ignored relationship between an elderly Anna Seward and a young and inexperienced Robert Southey, who sought her advice and support. This analysis seeks to shed light into the paradigm of the wise old man versus the garrulous and dismissed old woman in general and Seward's role as mentor in particular. Through the two authors' incomplete correspondence, which includes an unpublished letter from Southey to Seward, I have attempted to reconstruct their conversations on literary matters. This chapter suggests the continuation of Seward's assertion of critical and literary authority after the Benvolio Debates as well as her on-going relevance from the mid eighteenth century and into the first generation of Romantics. Seward's significance in the last decades of the eighteenth century has been dismissed both by her contemporary and posthumous criticism and by a section of modern scholarship (although less so since

the 1990s), however, her bearing in the formation of the poet laureate contradicts this interpretation.

Finally, Chapter 5 focuses on Seward's posthumous legacy and reception. In this chapter I will evaluate Seward's meticulous preparation of her compiled works and letters, which I believe attests to her desire to control her posthumous legacy—her authorial persona and her corpus—even after death. In this analysis I will also consider the role Walter Scott and Archibald Constable, who were given the compilations in Seward's will and testament, played within this plan for posthumous fame. Moreover, this chapter delves into the critical reception of Seward's posthumous publications in order to determine the extent to which they influenced the failure of Seward's plans to secure her posthumous literary legacy and reputation. I argue that Seward's status as an unmarried elderly women writer puts her in a position of vulnerability—in the context of eighteenth-century views on “old maidism”—that the reviewing press uses to dismiss her claim to posthumous fame.

# Chapter 1

## Historical Context

### 1.1 Seward's Georgian Britain

From a modern perspective, the eighteenth century at large is regarded as a period of innovation, commercial and cultural development, and outburst of intellectual debate, creativity and productivity. Politically, Georgian Britain (1714-1837) was a time of progress, economic growth, and social change, as well as conflict and warfare. Inaugurated by the Interregnum and the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution (1688) and concluding with the French Revolution (1789) and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars, the period saw the reinforcement of the power of the Protestant church with the monarchy of the unambiguously protestant kings (George I, II, III, and IV) and was accompanied with prevailing Whig rule throughout. The development and strengthening of religious dogma and dissent, the rise of material culture and industrialisation, and the onset of the imperial power that would define British trade during the Victorian age were some of the dominant themes of a period in which conflict and progress reigned hand in hand. The century saw the dawn of the scientific and industrial revolutions, the growth of the artisan classes into a demanded, well-to-do bourgeoisie, and the onset of institutionalised cultural patriotism in Britain. Cities became prosperous commercial capitals. Inevitably, the *zeitgeist* of Georgian Britain became interwoven with the principles of the Enlightenment that were sweeping through the continent—a cultural and ideological movement at the shadow of the *ancien régime*, either within it or against it is still a matter of speculation for scholars (Porter, 1990: 5). Heralded either or both by an elite of *philosophes* and *gens de culture* who were committed to challenging the *ancien régime*, their main objective was the emancipation of mankind through education and science from “superstition, theological

dogma, and the dead hand of the clergy” in order to reconfigure society into a fairer, more tolerant, and free version of itself (Porter, 1990: 5).

The Neoclassical movement (1680-1780), first termed as the Augustan Era by Francis Atterbury and Joseph Warton in 1690 and 1756 respectively (Haslett, 2003: 262), was governed by the principles of classicism and emulated the style of the celebrated authors Virgil, Homer and Horace whilst encapsulating the values of the Enlightenment. The term “Augustan” was first chosen for its association to “a time of ideal culture, a golden age of writing which emulated the original ‘Augustan’ age under the reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus (27 BC–AD 14), when the Latin writers Ovid, Juvenal, Horace, Virgil, Propertius, Tibullus and Livy all flourished and excelled” (Haslett: 262). The texts produced in this period combined an elegant form with didactic content and followed the principles formulated by John Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), and Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), in which art must follow the natural principles found in the classics, based on reason and order. Recent scholarship has criticised the term “Augustan” to refer to this period for its reductivism, arguing that it promotes the exclusion of other equally relevant influences in the cultural and literary production of Neoclassicism (Haslett: 262).

In this socio-literary context, the publishing market thrived thanks to the technological advancements in the print industry, which in turn led to the expansion of the book market (Bennett, 2004: 20). This, coupled with the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 (after several futile renewals of the 1662 Licensing Act) and the removal of the Stationer's Company monopoly encouraged the dissemination of printed matter and allowed for a relative freedom of the press as registration and control became a challenging task for the government. The massification of literary production and the consolidation of a national market fostered the expansion of the publishing trade, which



on the one hand united readership across the country from the capitals to the provinces, while on the other hand promulgated the thematic specialisation of authors and booksellers (Brewer, 2013: 158). The period saw the rise of the novel, with Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson as leading authors, the popularity of children's literature, and of sentimentalism as the preferred literary mode of the reading market. The century also witnessed the beginnings of serial publications. Periodicals, often short-lived and critical with the political status quo, took their cue from long-established newspapers and became massively produced and distributed. The precursors of the periodical world were the academic and scientific journals *Le Journal des Sçavans* in France and the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* in Britain, both founded in 1665. *The Athenian Gazette* (later *Athenian Mercury*) followed in 1691, offering readers a miscellany based on a less formal question-answer format that was able to attract a wider readership than its predecessors. In 1704 Defoe started his essay periodical *Review*, a subgenre followed by Steele's *The Tatler* and the *Spectator*, in collaboration with Addison—which in turn inspired Samuel Johnson's *Rambler* and paved the way for *The Gentleman's Magazine*. These periodicals were read and discussed in an expanding business: the coffee house. This thriving of the trade was directly proportional to an increase in literacy, and consequently, a greater demand for reading material. Coping with this increase in demand was made possible by the technological advances in printing. The public diversified the ways in which literature was consumed. People read on subscription, borrowed and purchased books in the newly founded circulating libraries, and discussed what they read in book clubs, in print reviews, and in their private correspondence. The spread of anthologies, miscellanies, and collections point towards an institutionalisation of culture that was to develop, in the Romantic era, into the establishment of the canon (Bennett, 2004), through what Backscheider has defined as

“the cultural obsession with developing and displaying taste” (Backscheider, 2008: 3). It also implied the adoption and promulgation of Enlightened values such as politeness, a class-coded charged concept that informed the contemporary notions of social status, promoting inclusiveness and the democratising of culture—that is, amongst the learned classes. Politeness was, therefore, inherently correlated to the economic development of Georgian Britain (Langford, 2002: 318; Pocock, 1985: 241) and of crucial importance in the construction of a national identity (Klein, 2002: 870).

The steady availability of culture, as attested by the large number and variety of printed matter<sup>11</sup>, also permeated the scientific realm, which underwent notable changes. In the eighteenth century, scientists divulged their newfound discoveries with the general public with an eagerness to teach and share, making scientific insight a matter of public interest and thus democratising knowledge. In its newfound determination to exist independently from politics and religious dogma, knowledge became secularised. It was no longer harboured by a Latin-speaking elite funded by aristocratic patronage, and it ceased to be dominated by the Church of England or its more radicalized Puritan factions. Invention succeeded experimentation. Societies were formed. In Birmingham, a group of friends met every Monday closest to the full moon to discuss their ideas, discoveries and creations: thus was founded the Lunar Society of Birmingham. The Lunar society’s members were the poet and physician Erasmus Darwin, the manufacturer Matthew Boulton, the steam engine inventor James Watt, the potter Josiah Wedgwood, the dissenters and chemists Joseph Priestley and James Keir, the clockmaker John Whitehurst, the diplomat William Small, the botanist William Withering, the writer

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<sup>11</sup> According to John Feather 25,131 works of literature were printed between 1701 and 1800. 47% of these were poetry, with a marked increase in the 1770s that Feather attributes to private subscription publication; 16% was satire, which decreased by 1750s; novels (11%), in turn, dramatically increased from the 1750s onwards; was drama, 6% letters, and 5% essays (1986: 41).

Richard Lovell Edgeworth, and the author Thomas Day. Of these free-thinking dissenting men, only a few had studied at University, and therefore they were outsiders to the Establishment, and consequently, “unhampered by old traditions of deference and stuffy institutions” (Uglow, 2002: xiv). Ten of the members of the society would become members of the Royal Society. In the eighteenth century, science was knowledge, and knowledge was meant to change the world: “this became the first great age of the public scientific lecture, the laboratory demonstration and the introductory textbook, often written by women. It was the age when science began to be taught to children, and the ‘experimental method’ became the basis of a new, secular philosophy of life” (Holmes, 2009: xix).

At the onset of the modern world, England adapted to the new times through social, demographic, and geographical changes. English cities flourished into European capitals where merchants, manufacturers, artists and scientists traced networks of exchange of ideas, patronage and creation. Birmingham, one of the eight main industrial towns in England, had been growing since the Restoration, but by 1750 it doubled its size to 20,000 inhabitants (O’Gorman, 2016: 123) and established itself as a “City of the Enlightenment” on a par with European capitals such as Bordeaux or Edinburgh (Uglow, 2002: 21). However, this development was not limited to big cities. Towns grew and prospered as well. Benefitting from its optimal geographical location, on the main road to the north-west of the country, and although a relatively small town compared to Birmingham, Lichfield similarly expanded. Christened as “the mother of the Midlands” (Uglow: 40), this historical ecclesiastical town rapidly grew into a prosperous intellectual and cultural centre: “[I]t was the heart of a web of country families, and the cultural centre of the region” (Uglow: 40). By 1781 the city had 3,600 inhabitants, a number that rapidly increased in the following years. A contemporary of Seward described the city as “a place

of little mercantile business (...) chiefly inhabited by gentry, of which the families are ancient and numerous” (Jackson, 1805: 18). Lichfield’s commercial landscape in the last decade of the eighteenth century attests to its prosperity: “13 grocers and drapers, a fruiterer and poulterer, a confectioner, a pastry cook, a tea dealer, a haberdasher, and a china and glass dealer (...) four apothecaries and druggists.” (Greensdale, 1990: n.p.).

In consonance with the nation-wide expansion of the trade, the bookselling commerce in Lichfield thrived. Lichfield was the home of Samuel Johnson, the son of a bookseller that would become one of the most celebrated literary critics of British literature, who presumably gave the city one of its most famous quotes: “We are a city of philosophers. We work with our heads and make the boobies of Birmingham work for us with our hands” (Boswell, 1953: 708). Indeed, Lichfield was a city of thinkers and inventors, individuals who found in this intellectual coming together a source of inspiration and a network of support and exchange of ideas. This community was formed by names that would eventually settle in the national intellectual canon (like their predecessor and fellow Lichfieldian Joseph Addison): Samuel Johnson and David Garrick, one of the most celebrated actors in the English world; the apothecary and founder of a local museum, Richard Greene; the inventor John Wyatt, and the architect Joseph Potter, both future members of the Lunar Society. Lichfield’s prosperity attracted both visitors and professionals seeking to settle themselves down. That was the case of another Lunar Society founding member, Erasmus Darwin, who set up his medical practice in the city in 1758.

Life in Lichfield was rich and exciting. Occasional guests, mainly from the gentry and aristocracy, visited the city, attracted by its prosperity and the inventiveness of its inhabitants. Richard Lovell Edgeworth, the politician, writer and inventor, stayed for extended periods of time in Stowe House, beginning in 1770. Occasional visitors who

were welcomed into this coterie were Esther Thrale Piozzi, Frances Brooke, or James Boswell, all of them close friends of Johnson. Some years before, Mary Wortley Montagu, writer and vaccination advocate, had lived in the Cathedral Close. Even Jean Jacques Rousseau became involved with the Lichfield circle, introduced by the translator and writer Sir Brooke Boothby. Allegedly, Rousseau corresponded with Erasmus Darwin since the two men became acquainted over their mutual interest for botany. Furthermore, Brooke Boothby, Edgeworth and Wright greatly admired him and made it a rule to follow his precepts, especially those concerning the upbringing of children (Uglow, 2002: 182). But the thinker influenced no other as much as he did Thomas Day, who modelled his life after the Rousseauian principles. Other occasional visitors were the writers William and Eliza Hayley, the violinist Wilhelm Cramer, and the landscape gardener Humphry Repton. Interestingly, the famous writer Walter Scott, and the poet Robert Southey also came to call on Anna Seward in the Bishop's Palace in the final years of her life.

Lichfield's neighbours actively participated in its cultural life forming a close-knit community united by threads of intellectual exchange and affection. Lichfield offered everything its middle-class could need. Lichfieldians attended the performances of leading London actors at the playhouse or the concerts hosted by the St Cecilia musical society. They could also visit Greene's museum, call on Darwin's house and visit his botanical garden. And they could also, as they did, gather at the Bishop's Palace, home of the Sewards, in search of intellectual conversation and poetic inspiration. The Sewards, a well-connected middle-class family, moved from the rural village of Eyam to Lichfield in 1749 when Thomas was appointed canon of Lichfield Cathedral. Thomas, a former chaplain and tutor of the Duke of Grafton, was a clergyman and a man of letters. He

published several sermons<sup>12</sup>, an essay “The Conformity between Popery and Paganism” (1746), the poem “The Female Right to Literature” (1748) published in an anthology, and was a co-editor of *The Works of Beaumont and Fletcher* (1750). However, his literary career never took off. He instructed his daughters Anna and Sarah in theology, mathematics, reading and writing, and fostered in them an attachment to the classics. Elizabeth Hunter, their mother, came from a well-known Lichfield family; her father had been the master of the Lichfield Free School which Johnson, Garrick and Addison attended. In 1754, the family moved into the Bishop’s Palace, which, in the absence of a resident Bishop, was to become their home until the last of the Swards, Anna, died in 1809. Richard Lovell Edgeworth, who would marry Seward’s foster sister, described her father as “a man of learning and taste; he was fond of conversation, in which he bore a considerable part, good-natured, and indulgent to the little foibles of others” and her mother as “a handsome woman, of agreeable manners, she was generous, possessed of good sense, and capable of strong affection.” (Edgeworth, 1820: 237). The Swards quickly became the centre of social and intellectual life in Lichfield, assuming the role of their predecessor, Gilbert Walmisley, a diocesan registrar, who in the 1720s gathered in his living room the city’s literary men, among which were two young Johnson and Garrick (Greensdale, 1990: n.p). The location was ideal for the meeting of a literary circle since the Palace had originally been designed as an extension of the Cathedral and hosted its library until 1758, four years after the Swards moved in (Prendergast, 2015: 148). In the words of Edgeworth, the gatherings at the Bishop’s Palace organised by the Swards

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<sup>12</sup> According to ESTC, Thomas Seward published four sermons between 1750 and 1756: *An assize sermon preach’d at Stafford on Sunday, August 19, 1750.* (1750), *The folly, danger and wickedness of disaffection to the government* (1750), *A charge to the clergy of the peculiars belonging to the Dean and Chapter of Lichfield* (1755), and *The late dreadful earthquakes no proof of God’s particular wrath against the Portuguese* (1756). In addition, the Lichfield Cathedral Catalogue of Printed Books (1998) lists *The Conformity Between Popery and Paganism* (1746), “bound with other five pamphlets” as a work by Thomas Seward (Benedikz, 1998: 349).

were “the resort of every person in that neighbourhood who had any taste for letters” and added that “every stranger, who came well recommended to Lichfield, brought letters to the palace” (Edgeworth, 1820: 237).

As a little girl, these gatherings allowed Seward to expand her interest, through reading and discussion, to all areas of knowledge: politics, history, music, literature, painting, religion, medicine, botany, technology, commerce and economy, as much as to the sciences. Encouraged by her fascination for literature and constantly surrounded by writers, Seward started collaborating with Darwin, Francis Mundy, and Anna Roger Stokes (Barnard, 2009: 110). She dabbled in her own writing as well: her juvenilia includes a series of poems written between 1759 and 1765 and a private journal written in epistolary format. In 1780, upon her mother’s death and his father’s infirmity, Seward took over their parents’ role as hosts. In her own blue dressing room, she cultivated friendships, connections and intellectual stimulus, quietly but constantly waving a network of similarly inclined authors, like Hayley, and pupils, like Henry Cary. Hence, Seward stands as an example of the eighteenth-century authorial detachment from wealthy, aristocratic patrons and engagement with the literary community and the capitalist network of printers and booksellers.

As hostess, Seward began constructing her authorial persona, pursuing not only cultivation but also strategic connections, and a progressively wider platform. Hers became, with time, one of the most well-known provincial salons in England (Prendergast, 2015: 133), a literary coterie of sorts that has yet to be reconstructed by modern scholarship. Seward “benefited from and engaged with provincial publishers and booksellers, enabling advancement for both provincial and metropolitan writers alike, and ensuring the continuation of elite sociability outside of London” (Prendergast: 133). Unsurprisingly, her next step from her private circle towards her literary

professionalisation was another salon, Lady Miller's, in Bath. In her book "Pope to Burney, 1714-1779", Moyra Haslett maps out the well-defined literary and intellectual spaces of debate of the period, from the Kit-Cat Club in 1696 to the Bluestockings in the 1760s, and describes them, as well as their provincial, amateur and informal counterparts, as "networks of exchange, support and influence between writers" (2003: 12). In other words, as a heterogeneous literary community that thrived in exchange and collaboration. However, as Seward's Lichfield salon was not formally considered as such (Haslett: 12), unlike the aforementioned., but rather functioned in an informal way, as was the fashion at the time (Haslett: 12). It was, in essence, "a select group of individuals linked by ties of friendship founded upon, or deepened by, mutual encouragement to original composition; the production and exchange of manuscript materials to celebrate the group and further its members' interests; and the criticism of one another's work and of shared reading materials" (Schellenberg, 2016: 2).

Indeed "salon" is a late eighteenth century concept, and therefore it would not be an appropriate term to describe the gatherings at the Swards hosted by Thomas and Elizabeth, although it might be accepted to refer to those hosted by Anna Seward, which could not have been earlier than late 1750s. Emma Clery notes that the Parisian salon culture was absent from British life throughout the first half of the eighteenth century (2004: 4). Nevertheless, Prendergast argues that the literary salon was "warmly embraced by hostesses in Ireland and Britain", where salons flourished, "particularly in the metropolitan cities of London, Dublin, and Edinburgh, but also in provincial areas" (2015: 1; Schmid, 2013). The salon was an integral part of the Republic of Letters, a "defining social institution", and one of the "central discursive practices of the Enlightenment" together with polite conversation and letter writing (Goodman, 1996: 3). In these spaces, "conversation was the means for its achievement and politeness the



means by which social improvement and refinement could be realised (...) it placed culture at the center of its analysis” (Brewer, 2013: 90). Salons were governed by the rules of sociability and politeness: cooperation, tolerance and agreeability at the service of intellectual discussion in order to enhance the participants’ rational judgement through conversation. In these mixed gatherings, women were the organisers and moderators, and consequently, the woman in the role of leading *salonnière* was “the basis of this social order and the governor of its discourse” (Goodman: 5). In the tolerant, comfortable and encouraging environment that these gatherings offered, women had the opportunity “to join critical conversations and to develop their personal reputations as critics and writers” (Kairoff, 2012: 39)<sup>13</sup>.

Politeness has been used by literary critics and historians of the eighteenth century to refer to a myriad of aspects (Klein, 2002: 871). Originally, “the polite was associated with decorum in behaviour and personal style” (Klein: 874) and worried about the concern with “form, sociability, improvement, worldliness, and gentility” (Klein: 877), which extended to fashion, taste, and literature. Indeed, politeness promoted “moderation, mutual tolerance, and the overriding importance of social comity” (Klein: 874), values that were to be found in polite conversation and helped shape a common social, and national, identity. Langford distinguishes between two modes of politeness embedded in two social groups. The first, or “Spectator mode” found in Addison and Steele’s periodical and promulgated in didactic literature and fiction permitted people of no rank or education to climb the social ladder “by adopting a looser, supposedly more ‘natural’ code of behaviour” (Langford, 2002: 312). The second, or “Shaftesbury mode”, was embraced by intellectuals and learned gentry and promoted “notions of virtue and taste

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<sup>13</sup> Another clear example of this mixed-gender sociability would be the London-based salons by the Bluestockings, but I have chosen to limit my commentary on those provincial salons Seward, who did not engage with the salons in London although many of her close acquaintances attended them, chose to align herself with, such as Anne Miller’s in Bath.

that challenged the assumptions of an older intellectual order, and in principle made polite culture open to all suitably enquiring minds” (Langford: 312). This latter mode might have been practiced by those who attended Seward’s salon –albeit Seward did not have the earl of Shaftesbury’s in good consideration and deemed his writings cumbersome (Seward, 1811: 2: 26).

Politeness “could not flourish in isolation”, but rather “it thrived on being watched and seen (...) the home of politeness was in company” (Brewer, 2013: 92). Indeed, it was in the consolidation of a social, culturally driven community, like the one found in the Bishop’s Palace, that intellectual improvement was achieved. Anna Seward was at the heart of this community, fulfilling the role of the hostess whose function was to “make the ideal of *politesse* a reality through her governance and upholding of the new rules of sociability within her home” (Prendergast, 2009: 5). John André dubbed Seward’s coterie “the happy social circle” and portrayed it as “enlivening your dressing-room, the dear blue region, as Honora calls it with the same sensible observation, the tasteful criticism, or the elegant song; (...) dreading the iron-tongue of the nine o’clock bell, which disperses the beings, whom friendship and kindred virtues had drawn together” (Smith, 1809: 211). The key words here being “sensible”, “observation”, “tasteful”, “criticism” and “elegant”, all of these attributes of polite conversation and thought, highlighting reason, intellectual advancement, and good taste.

Those were precisely the terms one might use to describe Anne Miller’s salon as well. Anne Miller’s Bath-Easton assemblies were popularised between 1775-81. Participants in Miller’s salons were asked to produce *bout-rhymés* (poetic rhyming games) that were placed in an urn, which were then considered by a *committé* and eventually awarded a myrtle crown (Prendergast, 2009). Seward, who had been persuaded to take part by her friend and fellow author Anna Rogers-Stokes, was crowned

after her poems “Invocation of the Comic Muse”, “Charity”, and “Ode to the Pythagorean System”, later on included in her collected works. Furthermore, she produced an ode on the occasion of Miller’s death that attests to the value Seward placed on their relationship. Prendergast suggests Seward’s participation in Miller’s assemblies and the subsequent friendship that flourished between the two women “transformed” Seward’s literary career from amateur to professional (Prendergast: 146). In accordance with the principles of politeness, the Bath-Easton assemblies were restricted to those of rank, fame, and reputation. Indeed, they were attended by authors of renown such as Frances Burney, Hester Thrale Piozzi, or the Duchess of Devonshire (Wood, 2006). In spite of their virtual disappearance in modern scholarship and popular knowledge, the Bath-Easton assemblies were a “tremendous success” (Kairoff, 2012: 35). These were avidly followed by nationwide periodicals, which characterised them as mediocre, pretentious, and mocked them and its participants. In contrast, Miller’s salons emphasised cordiality and politeness above all: “the poetic culture of Batheaston emphasized sociability over originality and community over critique” (Wood, 2006: 463). It is worth emphasising the idea of community here. In this coterie, poets and poems become interwoven through a complex group achievement involving three components: “the private act of reading”, “the likewise private act of poetic composition by which she gives physical and aesthetic form to her emotional and intellectual responses” and “the public act of publication through which she submits the record of her own transaction (...) to other readers” (Behrendt, 2009: 11). This is true for the Bath-Easton salons, which also produced collections of poetry anthologising the productions of its participants. Miller provided authors and readers with “an alternative cultural venue for poetry”, one “defined by public performance and consumption, not private reading, and governed by a poetics of tribute, gratitude, humor, and entertainment, not the socially poisonous “sarcasms” of satire or

critique.” (Wood, 2006: 464). Indeed, these assemblies upheld the genteel social and literary values Seward followed and wanted to be identified with. Therefore, they may have seemed to her a natural transition from her Lichfield assemblies into a nation-wide publication market, a topic I shall explore further later in the next section of this chapter (1.2).

Politeness is often regarded in opposition to sentiment and sensibility. Whereas politeness seeks to elevate the individual both in morality and rationality, through education, sensibility seeks to exploit feeling over reason: “many of the ideals of sensibility contrast with those of politeness—authenticity rather than show, spontaneous feeling rather than artifice, private retreat rather than urban sociability, the virtues of humble rank rather than high station” (Brewer, 2013: 101). Sensibility was in vogue in the 1740s, so it is understandable that Seward became in contact with the trend early on in her career. In fact, she has usually been labelled a sentimental writer, an epithet that is reductionist if not mistaken. Seward’s most distinct work of sensibility is the epistolary novel *Louisa*, published in 1784, and was heavily influenced by Rousseau as well as Pope and Prior. Although it enjoyed a wide reception, *Louisa* was not a product of the early 1780s, because it was first drafted in her teens, and its success attests to the prevalence of the sensibility trend, later on dismissed by the Romantics (Kairoff, 201). It is therefore not unlikely that Rousseauian sensibility would permeate its style and content, as it was also in her teens that Seward became in contact with sentimental literature. Novels such as Rousseau's *Julie*, Richardson's *Clarissa* or Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* were widely read during that time, and Seward borrowed books from the Lichfield’s literary society (Barnard, 2009), a group greatly attached to Rousseauian principles. Barnard argues that in Seward’s writings we can find a balance between the fashion of politeness that rules her style and her life-long pursuit of rational thought and self-(re)presentation with

sensibility “by conveying an emotional response to sights and situations through her writing.” (Barnard, 2009: 13).

From 1762 until 1768, Seward composed thirty-nine letters to a fictional friend, Emma, an early corpus that Barnard named “the juvenile letters”. The juvenile letters are a private journal, which offers a marked contrast with her published letters, intended to act as an authorised biography. Although Seward wished the juvenile letters to be published and edited them in her maturity, Scott’s editing has reduced them into an anecdotal record. Keeping a journal was a common practice at the time, and one strongly associated with politeness, since journaling was considered a refined activity recommended for the improvement of one’s own intellect and morality. Indeed, the self-reflection prompted by the act was considered to be one of the key elements in the shaping of a polite individual (Brewer, 2013: 95). In addition, a young Seward shows a preference for the epistolary novel, very much in vogue at the time, and reproduced the style of the works of Richardson and Rousseau in her juvenilia. In fact, it is in the juvenile letters where Seward begins, at the age of nineteen, to show her strong interest in self-presentation, and more importantly, in portraying herself as intellectually superior to her (younger) peers, and more mature than them, which was to be a constant throughout her life and corpus, and the fundamental thread of this thesis. Seward describes her writing at the beginning of the first letter as a place where she “moralizes thus sententiously, at an age when it is more natural, perhaps more pleasing, to feel lively impressions, than to analyze them?” (Seward, 1810: 1: xlvi). With this remark, Seward is reproducing the principles of politeness, which encouraged reflection and rationality. She is also suggesting that the natural instinct to moralise and analyse that she feels from an earlier age sets her apart from her peers: she reflects on her maturity and revels in it. Indeed, in the journal Seward “reinforces” her “literary self-definition” (Barnard, 2009: 11) by

displaying her literary, intellectual, and moral knowledge, impressive in one so young. In a further show of maturity beyond her age, she bestows moral counsel to her imaginary correspondent. Possibly influenced by the authors she learned to regard as superior and sought to imitate and the conversations she was a part of in her parents' salon, which exalted them, Seward's juvenile letters emphasise masculine virtues (Barnard, 2009: 11), and in her journals she positions herself with the "university-educated masculine intellect" (2009: 13) of her adult acquaintances. Seward's juvenilia allowed her the ground to gain experience and confidence with her own writing abilities from an early age, providing her with the skills and background that would later develop into an internationally renowned literary career.

## **1.2. Literature and Gender: Seward's Marketplace in Context From Neoclassicism to Romanticism**

The seventeenth-century authors Katherine Philips and Aphra Behn have been regarded as forerunners of the female literary Enlightenment. The different trajectories, styles, and social circles of these two authors are useful to illustrate what Backscheider terms the "chaste-versus-transgressive paradigm" (Backscheider, 2008: 6), a binary model acknowledged by their contemporaries and still in use by modern scholarship. Philips (chaste) represented female virtue and would eventually become the emblem for a tradition that "privileged piety, virtue, and learning" (Bigold, 2013: 5), having "firmly established [her literary persona] as what men would allow women poets to be" (Backscheider, 2008: 6), "men" standing for institutionalised heteropatriarchy or the status quo. On the other hand, Behn (transgressive) deviated from the "proper woman" path and is said to have "inaugurated the moral stance that women poets would claim as their own and institutionalize by the end of the century" (Backscheider: 7). The "chaste-versus-transgressive" paradigm is not as clear cut as it might seem, as eighteenth-century

women's realities were much richer and more diverse than this dichotomy and critical labels might suggest.

It may be argued that by attaching themselves to the “chaste” paradigm middle-class women writers were defending their social status and that of their families, while at the same time contributing to the production of a literature that was shaping public opinion. Furthermore, writing from a position of apparent complacency with the patriarchal structure allowed a space for political dissent. Their status as socially respected women of means provided most of them with both a credible platform and a class-coded audience that included gentry, aristocracy, and any person of merit and agreeability who attached themselves to the values of politeness. However, their status and reputation as “proper ladies” (Poovey, 1985) required them to be careful lest they deviated from the status they had been conferred. In Seward's case, this is made evident in the editing and rewriting of her work as well as in the choice of poems to be published or left out. Indeed, the proper lady, “was difficult for contemporaries to challenge, and at times it is difficult even for us to distinguish her from the real women who lived in her shadow” (Poovey: 4). Poovey maintains that in a time of rapid social changes –the progressive separation of social classes and, in the latter half of the century, the establishment of a well-defined middle class—, Christian morality reinforced its role in British life as defender of the status quo: “women were increasingly assigned a central role in maintaining this 'moral institution'. Their connection with the traditional hierarchy and values of patriarchal society thus remained strong even as they extended their influence beyond their 'proper sphere', the nuclear family” (Poovey: 10). Consequently, while women writers were well aware of the expectations placed upon their conduct, they managed to navigate those whilst being major contributors in all the literary genres and trends of the century.

Poovey's view of women as representatives of morality leads us to consider the relationship between the Church of England's clergy and these "chaste" women of letters. It may also help clarify the particular meanings of such a denomination for Seward as an author. Seward belongs to a class coded group of learned women with ties to an eighteenth-century Anglican clergy, a group that actively contributed to women's education, significantly participated in women writers' communities and also assisted for these women authors in publishing their writing (Bigold, 2013: 2). Indeed, the Church of England, who had the monopoly of prestigious education, provided "intellectually ambitious women, themselves excluded from university study, [with] various kinds of educational and literary assistance" (2002: 81). Seward's education was supervised by her father and complemented by her unlimited access to several well-stocked libraries, her father's, Lichfield's cathedral's, and those of his father's connections with the highest ranks of the clergy. Furthermore, Seward also learned from the learned guest who visited the Bishop's Palace. These accomplished men and women formed an heterogeneous group that was Seward's first intellectual community, halfway between the salon and the literary coterie. The author sought this same model in her adulthood and found it in Lady Miller's Bath-Easton Salon, Seward's second community. She also reproduced it hosting her own gatherings in Lichfield and maintaining an extensive network of correspondents she cultivated throughout her life.

The exposure to this diversity of influences made it possible for Seward's education to be versatile, something that transpired in her life and corpus: her interest in science and innovation went hand in hand with her preoccupation for literary merit and the nature of poetry. Moreover, Seward flirted with the theological limits of Anglicanism. She never shunned away dissenting voices, but was rather curious about them. In 1771 she met with Mrs Knowles, a Quaker, in the Bishop's Palace. What attracted her most



from Quakerism was women's prominent role within it (Barnard, 2009: 91), and she wished to convert but was deterred by her father's insistence (Barnard, 2017: 7).

The relationship between learned women and the Anglican clergy is further exemplified by sermon writing, a literary genre Seward contributed to. Barnard, who in 2017 published for the first time Seward's four sermons, stated that the texts had not seen the light before because her family considered them too subversive for the press (Barnard, 2009: 5). In the sermons, Seward "uses an unwary minister as her spokesperson to encourage women away from domesticity, (...) a clear attempt to motivate the women to take control of their own lives" (Barnard, 2017: 6). These sermons were included in the manuscript compilation she bequeathed to Walter Scott for publication after her death. The fact that Seward wished them to be published and attached to her name exemplifies her self-assertive, transgressive nature and complicates, or complements, her inclusion in the "chaste" paradigm: "for an Anglican woman to intrude into this male domain with her own ideology, she would have to mount a challenge to the traditional structures and in wishing to publish the sermons under her own name, albeit posthumously, Seward was doing exactly that" (Barnard: 6).

Throughout her life, Seward played a dangerous game of testing the limits of propriety, more often than not bringing them to a breaking point<sup>14</sup>: "Her combative outspokenness and high seriousness were at odds with conventions about female passivity and in breach of prevailing ideas of genteel politeness" (Brewer, 2013: 457). More often than not, Seward failed to comply with the rules established in conduct manuals that dictated proper behaviour for women. In fact, in her maturity she mockingly referred to Thomas Gisborne's *An Enquiry into the Duties of Man* (1795) and *An Enquiry into the*

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<sup>14</sup> Apart from notable biographical instances of deviance from the "proper woman" ideal (Barnard, 2009), the present study engages with textual examples in which Seward challenges the barriers of propriety. In Chapter 2, the Benvolio debates will explore one of these examples, and will show how Seward navigates these societal rules.

*Duties of the Female Sex* (1797) as “admirable receipt books (...) to make human angels”; and deemed them “too strict” and unnecessary “where the young heart is pure or capable of improving” (Seward 1810: 4: 351), especially in its advice to women, adding that Gisborne’s advice would not have succeeded in taming her young self. This attitude persisted throughout her life. Seward frequently eschewed modesty in her public letters, and routinely refused to “defer to others (especially men and their elders) and to insinuate rather than assert their views” (Brewer: 457), a notable case in point being her impassioned public debates with James Boswell (explored in Chapter 2). Indeed, Seward’s writings depict a woman who was critical with her contemporaries, with the government, and with the press, and was not afraid to voice her opinions. Seward was adamant to have her voice and opinions heard even if doing so challenged notions of morality and propriety. As for her domestic role, although she fulfilled her obligation as mistress of her household and caretaker for her ill father, she did so while at the same time managing on her own terms the family’s wealth and commercial investments as sole inheritor of the Seward estate. She never married, thus maintaining her autonomy, rejecting to be dependent on male authority after the death of her father. Furthermore, and despite her parents’ insistence and society’s disapproval, she had a very close relationship with a married man, John Saville, bordering on limits of respectability, caring for him emotionally and financially throughout his final illness. Finally, Seward always took care of her deals with publishers and booksellers herself and, when necessary, she did not trust anybody other than her cousins to act on her behalf. She managed herself the copyright and the finances, as well as paying attention to the reception of her writing, both from readers and critics, the reviews of which she read, commented on, and often replied to. In spite of all this, in this reductive binary of chaste versus transgressive, scholarship so far has tended to pair Seward with her contemporaries Elizabeth Carter, Hester Thrale Piozzi

and Hannah More, as the embodiment of a conservative style of female writing that would fall under the “chaste” category. However, in light of the arguments provided, I suggest that Seward’s inclusion in the chaste category warrants revision. A thorough examination of her life and literary corpus would certainly challenge her addition to the “chaste” group. And, perhaps, challenge the binary altogether. The chaste-transgressive paradigm highlights an issue of modern scholarship of relevance in connection with the creation of a women writers’ canon. In modern analyses of the eighteenth-century tradition of women’s writing we find an underlying feminist anxiety that drives academics working from a gender critical perspective into manufacturing an anachronistic feminist story that does not “appear to conform to a tradition of anger and proto-feminism” (Bigold, 2013: 5). Ascribing herself to an idea previously promoted by Margaret Ezell, Bigold argues that feminist scholarship searches for “forebears who are ‘good feminists’”, which has inevitably “occluded our sense of the differences within the female literary tradition, particularly among the conservative element” (Bigold: 5). I believe the same applies not only to Seward but also to many of the women writers who compose the current canon of eighteenth-century women writers. While the chaste-transgressive dichotomy might prove useful to understand the sociocultural context in which these women wrote and interacted, it should not condition our understanding of either their production or their relationships. Both become richer when studied from an intersectional perspective: “Any attempt to contain the many histories of women’s writing within a single, feminist trajectory risks ignoring the extent to which that narrative is resisted or problematised by diverse historical and individual realities.” (Bigold: 4). This dichotomy not only obscures the complexities and contradictions that arise from an individual analysis of some of these authors, but also disregards the critical potential of the literary community, both in terms of collaboration, support and networking between women writers and as a wider literary

marketplace community of eighteenth-century authors. In point of fact, women “women poets sought to create communities” (Kairoff, 2012: 9); Behrendt, 2009: 11). This community was found—and can be recovered—not only in their participation in salons and assemblies, in manuscript circulation, and in correspondence with other writers, but also in their texts, often collaborative efforts: “The literary community of the Romantic period in England was precisely that: a community, and the works that emanated from it were often characterized by a complex and sophisticated intertextuality that was apparent to contemporary readers” (Behrendt: 11). This intertextual component is reminiscent of the Republic of Letters of the Enlightenment and its permanence and reconfiguration well into the Romantic movement. In “The I Altered” Stuart Curran describes this community as a “school of poets –women poets– who came to maturity in the 1770” united and prompted to existence by the Bluestocking circle: “they were well aware of one another, sometimes conceiving themselves as rivals of one another, and found an audience that followed their careers and bought their books. That they constituted a coterie, however far-flung from its London origins, is absolutely true” (1988: 187).

The inner workings of this literary community are diverse and the repercussions of their collaborations far-reaching. Backscheider paints a picture of the eighteenth-century female canon, a community of women who had an awareness of being such:

Mary Chudleigh and Elizabeth Thomas were friends, and several, including Sarah Fyge (Egerton), Elizabeth Singer (Rowe), and Chudleigh, belonged to circles of literary women; Rowe and Anne Finch knew each other, and Rowe read Finch’s work in manuscript and encouraged her to continue writing. Elizabeth Carter subscribed to the poetic works of Sarah Dixon, Jane Brereton, Mary Jones, Mary Masters, and Helen Maria Williams. Jane Brereton and Judith Madan wrote poems and letters to each other, some commenting on Rowe’s work, as did Brereton and Elizabeth Carter, who were introduced to each other by Edward Cave and then carried on a lively correspondence beginning in 1738. A few of them, including Chudleigh, Egerton, Thomas, and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, knew Mary Astell, were influenced by her example, and versified some of her ideas (Backscheider, 2008: 81).

Consistent with the idea of the female community, women writers of the period increasingly reflected about their role in the public arena. Both Behrendt and Backscheider define this community of authors, in which Seward is included, as “activists women poets” (Backscheider, 2005: 8; Behrendt, 2009: 9), a self-aware group that perceived their writing and their voice as a “right and responsibility” to express their opinion in matters of public concern and social, political, moral, economic, and intellectual importance, producing a body of work that inserted them in the larger nation-wide conversation (Behrendt: 9). Seward was more than happy to comply with the role of the poet as “public intellectual” (Moore, 2016: xvi), as her corpus attests to. Seward’s political epic poetry encapsulates what Guest defines as “the feminisation of politics” in the last decades of the century (2000, cited in Kairoff, 2012: 90) , and it is one more example of women’s public participation in political life in a war-ridden time of instability that required a cultural reinforcement of what it meant to be British in order to create a national cohesive unity (Colley, 2003; O’Gorman, 2016). It was not any benefactor, as was the case of Dryden and Pope before her, but her publications that conferred Seward the authority and the public reputation that in turn allowed her to participate in the public debate. From 1780 onwards she became recognised as “British muse, spokeswoman for national anguish, pride, and resolve” (Kairoff, 2012: 71) after the immediate success of her patriotic elegies on national heroes—*Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780) and *Monody on Major André* (1781).

Mellor asserts that these women were, for the first time in western culture, participating “equally in the discursive public sphere” (Mellor, 2000: 88). But how did women become, through their literary endeavours, part of the national public forum? How did they manage to join the public realm with their writings and achieve a public presence? The answer to these questions is in their own formulation, which brings us to

an analysis of the public/private spheres paradigm from a gender perspective. Amanda Vickery suggests that the trope of the separate spheres coincided with the rise of feminism and gender studies in the 1960s and 1970s and sought to address the issue of institutionalised patriarchal oppression. According to Vickery, the ideal of the “domestic woman” as token of the private sphere and in direct opposition to the male dominated public sphere was manufactured through modern scholarship: “the glorification of domestic womanhood became associated with the deterioration of women's public power, which was itself presented as a function of industrialization.” (Vickery, 1993: 384).

The foundations for the dichotomy of the separated spheres , first formulated by Jürgen Habermas in his deeply influential book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962, has been a matter of interest and discussion in academia for years. In the 1990s the theory was put into question by scholars like Nancy Fraser, arguing for a reconfiguration of our ideas about the gendered spheres. In her article, Fraser questions four of the pillars of Habermas’ theory, suggesting that they are only valid for a “bourgeois masculinist” conception of the public sphere. Although Fraser’s framework is not in line for the present study both in terms of period (modern) and area of research (sociology), some of her arguments can be applied to a more historical approach to the separation of the spheres’ theory. Fraser questions four assumptions of Habermas’ formulation: social class is in fact not suspended in the public forum, doing so only benefits the dominant factions; a single public sphere is better than multiple ones; the public sphere must only be concerned with the common good and not with private interests; and a separation between civil society and the state is necessary for the public sphere to function. Fraser argues that these assumptions further marginalise(d) women. This systematic marginalisation works in two ways: incidental silencing of their voices (Fraser, 1990: 64, 69) and isolating and misrepresenting their specific concerns. Indeed,

“the rhetoric of domestic privacy seeks to exclude some issues and interests from public debate by personalizing and/or familiarising them; it casts these as private-domestic or personal-familiar matters in contradistinction to public, political matters” (Fraser: 73).

In a closer approach to the same issue (both in terms of period and of area of research to the present study), Goodman hypothesizes that the Republic of Letters in seventeenth-century France emerged redefined public sphere that offered a space for political debate divorced from “closed culture” promoted by the crown (Goodman, 1996: 1). During this period, the mixed members of the Republic of Letters “came to value reciprocal exchange based on a model of friendship that contrasted markedly with the absolutist state, corporate society, and the family.” (Goodman: 2), which brings to mind the polite society found in the salons and assemblies Seward both organised and attended, as well as her extensive network of correspondents, immortalised in her posthumously published collected letters. Women were a central cohesive element in the Republic of Letters: “The French Enlightenment was grounded in a female-centered mixed-gender sociability that gendered French culture, the Enlightenment, and civilization itself as feminine” (Goodman: 6), an idea that connects to the aforementioned community of women writers. This mixed-gender public sphere provided a platform for women to consume and produce literature. The emphasis on politeness and taste of this circle, however, indicates what McDowell has termed as a “reconstruction” of the public sphere, and not an emerging new phenomenon. This reconfiguration into an “idealised community” (McDowell, 1998: 8) was necessary to resist the elite’s fears of civil unrest that could lead to another Civil War, and acted as an arbiter, promoting those who belonged to it and systematically silencing those who were at its margins. In this sense, Behrendt suggests that the public and the private were in fact multiple “overlapping and competing (or alternative) spheres” (Behrendt, 2009), an idea first intimated by Schochet

when arguing that the public sphere is the common ground of private people to voice their needs and pursue their objectives (Schochet, 1996: 263). Women's literary communities were formed, then, in a private sphere that was in fact "training ground for civic membership and participation" (Schochet: 253).

There has also been a growing critical dissatisfaction in the last two decades about assigning the category of "private" to women while leaving the "public" to men. Lawrence Klein opposes Habermas' formulation from an eighteenth-century perspective, contending that women in the eighteenth century "had [conscious] public dimensions to their lives." (Klein, 1995: 97). Klein questions "the hegemonic role often assigned to binary oppositions in the discursive worlds of past people" (Klein: 98),—which can be applied to the public/private separation as well as to the chaste/transgressive paradigm—and deems it faulty. Likewise, Gordon Schochet asserts that to speak of a division between public and private realms is a misconception, and attributes the inaccuracies in Habermas' theorisation of said dichotomy on an etymological and cultural misstep (Schochet, 1996). Klein further illustrates the problem comparing our modern understanding of public and private with eighteenth-century social configuration and demonstrates that they are not equivalent concepts. In the eighteenth century, "privacy was ascribed to forms of life that we would consider public", and viceversa, and "people at home, both men and women, were not necessarily in private. Even if, then, women spent more time at home, they were not necessarily spending more time in private." (Klein, 1995: 105). In the eighteenth century, the public and the private interplay, and its lines are blurred: "it is an error to assume, as has often been done, that the activities of men and women were therefore wholly delineated and separated on the basis of notions about the 'separate spheres' that have become commonplaces in twentieth-century criticism and theory" (Behrendt, 2009: 8). Indeed, McDowell suggests that women's



participation in the public arena is factual evidence of women's central role in the creation of a British critical political press (McDowell, 1998: 9). In fact, McDowell insists, a close analysis of the prolific literary corpus of political writing of women of the middling and lower classes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries debunks the theory of an original masculine bourgeois public sphere (McDowell: 9). Emma Clery has analysed the so-called "feminization debate", described as "a means by which women, and in particular women of letters, were brought to public prominence in the early to mid-eighteenth century; a factor quite distinct from the history of sensibility or of domestic ideology, the most familiar contexts for discussion of the role of women in eighteenth-century culture." (Clery, 2004: 11). With regard to the establishment of the public sphere, Goodman contends that "it was the zone of interaction between the state and the individual that formed the ground of an authentic public sphere, the realm of civil society and the public" (Goodman, 1996: 13).

This overlapping space was possible through the development of spaces of debate, both physical and otherwise. Therefore, rather than endorse the public/private binary, it would be more fitting to envision eighteenth-century gender relations, dominated by the values of politeness, especially in the case of learned men and women of means, as a space of exchange and cooperation that bring together men, women, the social, and the home that conform the public arena of sociability. This space is not a physical place, but rather "both places and non-places. They are not only situated between public and private but also lack a definite space: sociable activities create their own spaces while they last" (Schmid, 2013: 14) in what Schmid calls "The Third Space", describing salon sociability as "what happens in an in-between space of mutual visiting and conversation, in a "Third Space" situated between the private and the public sphere" (Schmid: 13). An example of this "Third Space" is made evident in the use Seward makes of her correspondence,

adopted to create her own public forum of political and intellectual discussion, which in turn she uses to assert her literary authority. This will be further explored in Chapter 2, in which Seward's Benvolio debates, a series of letters published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in conversation with James Boswell, serves as a case study.

Another example of the blurring of the public/private boundaries is the coffee house. The coffee house originated in the seventeenth century in the main commercial European capitals. Any man who was able to pay the penny of the entry fee was welcome, thereby encouraging "the blurring of social distinctions" (Hunter, 2001: 11). They were conceived as a space of homosocial egalitarianism: "open to all ranks, the coffee houses were places of free expression, [and] of political opposition to the crown", notably, they "undermined the hierarchical values of monarchical absolutism centred on the court: they encouraged a polyphony of public conversations which challenged the voice of the crown, trying to assert its monopoly over opinion and taste, and they usurped the prerogative of the prince by debating politics, religion and literature." (Brewer, 2013: 40). Its *raison d'être* contrasts with that of the Parisian salon: "Whereas in the Parisian salon equality was a function of exclusivity whose purpose was to create a harmonious, cohesive group, in the London coffeehouse the social identity of complete strangers could be created by conversation itself." (Goodman, 1996: 120). Reading in the coffee-house was encouraged, so books, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and periodicals were purchased, perused and discussed. Even though the number of women present in the coffee-houses was limited to their role in running the business, women were published in periodicals and magazines, and therefore their writings became part of the public forum. In her ground-breaking study *Mothers of the Nation*, Anne K. Mellor argues that eighteenth-century women were "openly and frequently" published and participated in the public discussion on a myriad of topics of interest, and these publications circulated

freely in a wide range of public spaces, “not only through the economic institutions of print culture (newspapers and journals, books, circulating libraries) but also through the public forums of debating societies and the theatre”. What is more, not only did they actively participate in this public sphere, but “[their] opinions had definable impact on the social movements, economic relationships, and state-regulated policies of the day” (Mellor, 2000: 2-3). The periodical press and the literary marketplace emerge, then, as another space of interaction and dialogue between genders, a “third space” that perfectly embodies the sociocultural zeitgeist and constituted a vehicle for women writers to enter a male dominated social space.

### **1.3. Periodical Culture: Seward’s Role as Literary Critic**

A larger number of women writers than in any preceding period before entered the literary marketplace in the eighteenth century. These women, who belonged to every social status, both benefited from and participated in the expansion of the book trade. The increase in the demand for books, led these authors to avid publishers looking for business, thus opening the market to new voices. It also made books more accessible for everybody, and the consequent dissemination of knowledge led to increased rates of literacy. Women explored and exploited every literary genre: from satirical periodicals to plays that would be performed in Covent Garden or the Drury Lane; and from children’s literature to essays on education, science, or literature. In this section, I delve into literary journalism and periodical culture from a gender perspective in order to place Seward in the literary marketplace of the period not just as a published and successful writer—with her *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780) and the *Monody on Major André* (1781)—but also as a widely and routinely read writer embedded in one of the most successful trends of the century: the professionalisation of literary criticism. Apart from acknowledging Seward’s status

as a writer, this contextualisation hopes to accomplish the following: first of all, to elucidate what I consider a largely overlooked and yet very important part of Seward's career, namely, her role as a literary critic and her corpus of critical essays. And, secondly, to examine the ways in which she expresses and configures her critical identity and her critical authority. For this purpose, I will be addressing literary journalism in general and women's periodical presence in particular; as well as analysing Seward's four main literary debates in the pages of *The Gentleman's Magazine*.

The rise of literary journalism came hand in hand with the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 and both the increase in printing and publishing and in public demand for reading material, all part of the game-changing break from "courtly, manuscript literary culture to the print-based, market-centred system" (McDowell, 1998: 5) that developed into the modern literary marketplace and the professionalisation of writing. O'Gorman calculates that by mid-seventeenth-century, around 320 periodicals had been published, whereas by the end of the century the number increased to 700: "Newspaper circulation rose steadily from about 50,000 per week in the first decade of the century to about 200,000 in the middle. (...) it is likely, therefore, that at least one million people each week were reading a newspaper by the middle of the eighteenth century" (O'Gorman, 2016: 137). Indeed, by 1745 the market offered thirty regular periodicals, and for each cancelled publication another periodical was founded (Backscheider, 2008: 3). There existed "a consistent periodical female readership." (Powell, 2012: 132), due to an increase in literacy, especially in major cities, but women's presence in the periodical world was not relegated to their role as readers. Women of all social classes were involved in the production and distribution of writing, and between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for the first time in history, a large number of "politically literate women who were neither aristocratic nor genteel obtained access to the closest thing that their culture

had to a ‘mass medium’: the press” (McDowell, 1998: 11). Furthermore, women writers were also editors, writers and collaborators of well-known publications. As Kairoff aptly put it, “for eighteenth-century women, reading and writing were complementary activities” (Kairoff, 2001: 157). Their writing, as mentioned before in the discussion of the literary community of women writers, form a web of references and acknowledgements to other writers that reveal intertextual links: “their literary productions reveal them to have been studying the writings of predecessors for instruction, competing with each other and with their predecessors.” (Kairoff: 157).

One of the first women periodicalists was Elizabeth Singer Rowe, who debuted in the *Athenian Mercury* in 1693. She belongs in the pantheon of celebrated periodical editors, together with the male voices of Steele and Addison, Defoe, Goldsmith, Johnson, and Swift were Eliza Haywood, celebrated editor of the *Female Spectator* (1744-46), Mary Wortley Montagu’s *Nonsense of Common Sense* (1737-38), Charlotte Lennox’s *The Lady’s Museum* (1760-61) and Frances Brooke’s *Old Maid* (1755-6). Powell ascribes to Haywood the role of the pioneer of this female periodicalist phenomenon and contends that it was “thanks in part to Haywood” that “women began to make strides not only in writing short pieces for miscellany periodicals (...) but also in writing periodicals themselves.” (Powell, 2012: 150). Indeed, the 1750s proved auspicious for literary women. They “were well established and accepted as translators and poets, were increasingly writing and being commissioned to write essays, poems, and reviews for the numerous periodicals, and had made strides in establishing novel writing as respectable.” (Backscheider and Cotton 1997, cited in Powell: 150).

Seward’s poetical career in the periodical world began in September 1782 in the renowned *Gentleman’s Magazine* with “The Celebrated Old Ballad, The Battle of la Hague. Altered and applied to the late Naval Victory in the West Indies” (Montluzin),

published in the “Select Poetry, Ancient and Modern” section and advertised as “A Ballad by Miss Seward”. This effusive patriotic poem’s topic was a conscious choice in line with *Monody* and *Elegy* that had made her famous. *The Gentleman’s Magazine; or, Trader’s Monthly Intelligencer* (*GM* henceforth), ran from 1731-1922 in five different series and is believed to have had a circulation of 10,000 issues (O’Gorman, 2016: 138). The *GM* was founded in London by Edward Cave, who edited it under the pen name of Sylvanus Urban, a pseudonym adopted by every editor that succeeded him. Cave’s design for his periodical was to provide the widest possible readership with a “variety of material at a modest price and expected them to browse and select articles of personal interest, rather than reading cover to cover” (Italia, 2005: 20). For this purpose, the periodical took no definite political stance but rather embraced both Whig and Tory ideologies. The *GM* contained a choice of “the best essays from the daily and weekly papers, combined with book reviews, translations, short biographies, poetry and readers’ correspondence, as well as items of practical interest to businessmen, such as the prices of grain and stocks, shipping reports and foreign affairs that might affect the course of trade” (Italia: 20).

The *GM* promoted poetry, and especially poetry by women writers. They “printed eight pages with two columns of poetry in selected issues in 1733 and in all issues beginning in 1735” (Backscheider, 2008: 3). According to the electronic database of the 12,561 poems published by the magazine between 1731 and 1800 by Emily Lorraine de Montluzin, some of the female contributors to the *GM* were Jane Hughes Brereton and her daughter Charlotte Brereton, Mary Barber and Elizabeth Rowe (early 1730s), Mary Whateley Darwall and Mary Masters (1750s), Catherine Stephens (1790s), Phillis Wheatley, Mary Leapor, Ann Batten Cristall, Anne Kingsmill Finch, Mary Latter, Sarah Dixon, Mary Young Sewell, Esther Lewis Clark, Mary Chandler, Elizabeth Bentley, Mary Jones, Ann Yearsley and Elizabeth Pennington, Helen Maria Williams, and Mary

Scott Taylor (Montluzin, 2003: n.p.); these last three members of Seward's circle. Other occasional contributors included Aphra Behn, Frances Sheridan, Anne Hughes Penny, Hannah Parkhouse Cowley and Catharine Cockburn (playwrights); Charlotte Lennox, Ann Radcliffe (novelists), Hannah More, Charlotte Smith, and Jane West (poets and essayists); translators like Susanna Watts and Elizabeth Carter; Constantia Grierson (classicist); Hester Chapone (essayist); Mary Locke (writer of children's literature), Laetitia Pilkington and Catherine Yeo Jemmat (authors of memoirs), and Hester Lynch Piozzi, Anna Williams, and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (prolific writers of renown). What this impressive list of names reveals is that many women writers opted for the pages of the *GM* for publication (and indeed, that women were very prolific authors during this period) and that the magazine facilitated the distribution of these women's voices. Montluzin notes that Seward's career in the *GM* was a very prolific one, with 53 poems between 1782-1800. Interestingly, Montluzin notes that, contrary to the common practice upheld by many of her women contemporaries, Seward<sup>15</sup> eschewed altogether the use of a pseudonym in her submissions (Montluzin, 2003: n.p.). One might attribute this decision to Seward's confidence in her authorial persona, as well as a will to maintain the national fame she had already achieved. Seward's will to be recognised as an author was clear, as well as to have a publicly acknowledged name of her own.

Editors worked towards the creation of a "republic of authors, a world of temporary equality, in what was otherwise a highly stratified society" (Brewer, 2013: 123). The authors that contributed to this galaxy of periodicals were a heterogeneous group, with different social backgrounds, needs and motivations, brought together by a

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<sup>15</sup> There are only two occasions in which Seward signed her work with a pseudonym, both in letters published in the periodical press: she signed "A.S" and "A Constant Reader" in her critical disagreement with Clara Reeve and as "Benvolio" in the Benvolio debates with James Boswell. This is detailed further in Chapter 2 and again mentioned in Chapter 3.2.1 in relation to the Weston Debate.

willingness to make their incursion into the printed page. Periodicals opened the door to many writers who wished to begin their careers. Was this Seward's case? At the time of her first publication in the magazine, she was already known by editors and readers alike after the success of the *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780) and the *Monody on Major André* (1781). Scholars like Kairoff consider that Seward chose to begin her career as an author in Lady Miller's salon in Bath-Easton. Prendergast contends that thanks to the Bath-Easton salons, and the approval and support and that community, Seward felt prepared to take a further step in her career and make it to the printing press. Therefore, Seward's debut did not take place in the periodicals, these were instead a continuation of her career and a step further in its advancement, since by the time of her debut in its pages, the *GM* had a staggering scope of readers "in both sides of the Atlantic" (Okker, 2003: 1).

The *GM* was not Seward's sole publisher. Her poems appeared in *The London Review*, *The Weekly Entertainer*, *The Edinburgh Magazine*, *The Poetical Register: And Repository of Fugitive Poetry* (especially from 1803 onwards), *The Scots Magazine*, *The Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*, *The New Annual Register*, *The Monthly Mirror*, and *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, Seward published posthumous portraits of Samuel Johnson and Thomas Day in *The General Evening Post*, an autobiographical account in the *Monthly* (1796), several reviews in the *European Magazine* (discussing Southey's *Joan of Arc*, in 1796), and the *Poetic Register* (on Southey's *Thalaba*, in 1802).

A periodical Seward did not write for was the *Analytical Review*. Albeit the reasons behind this choice are a matter of speculation, they help elucidate Seward's relationship with her periodical publications as well as shedding light on her opinion in regard to the concept of the "professional writer", which I would like to differentiate from

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<sup>16</sup> A thorough selection of those pieces has recently been anthologised by Lisa Moore (2016).



that of the literary critic. In 1788, when invited by her friend Thomas Christie to become a regular contributor to the newly founded magazine, she refused, alleging a lack of qualifications: “with great fondness for literature, my life has been too much devoted to feminine employments to do much more than study”, so that “upon a stock of knowledge so limited, you see how impossible it is that I should accept your proposal of contributing to the Analytical Review” (Seward, 1811: 2: 6). Seward was, however, excited with the prospect of the periodical, outlined by Christie not as the radical platform we know it as today, but rather as a magazine “aloof from personal, political, and professional controversy, intending instead that his staff strive for neutrality” that sought to provide readers with an “objective summary of the work with perhaps sufficient extract to allow readers to appraise it themselves without evaluative commentary from the reviewer.” (Waters, 2004: 92). Seward praised Christie’s project in the same letter where she refused to contribute, and she highlighted her hope for a new, unbiased critical approach:

if only men of ability shall be employed, and if they will hold fast integrity promises, shunning all blended interest with the corrupted or incompetent brethren of their profession the public may perhaps see, what it has yet seldom seen, a literary journal superior to the meanness of celebrating worthless publications, and to the injustice which attempts to vilify genius, or to degrade its claims by faint and inadequate praise (Seward, 1811: 2: 4-6).

However, it could also be argued that Seward might not have wanted to attach her name to a magazine with such a radical political point of view. Although it is true that she did not eschew controversy, she tried to limit her strife to literary matters almost exclusively. The vast majority of the intricacies and ambiguities of Seward’s political stances in matters such as the American War of Independence or the French Revolution are recorded in her letters, and thus relegated to a semi-private sphere. As Kairoff has pointed out, Seward feared “the possible legal retaliation against such verse when prosecution for sedition [had] hushed many potential dissidents (...) as a gentlewoman she had a more

fragile reputation to guard than did Wordsworth.” (Kairoff, 2012: 99). This was especially true since the passing of the *Royal Proclamation Against Seditious Writings and Publications* in 1792. I would argue that Seward did not see her contributions fit in a publication such as the *Analytical Review*, whereas the *GM* was a perfect platform for her discussions on literary merit and taste. Brewer qualifies the latter as a “forum for different opinions solicited from readers. Its prose polemics and short verses were understood to express rather than shape current knowledge and taste” and adds that this might have appealed to Seward because of her Whig political principles, namely the understanding that “everyone should have a chance to display their natural genius.” (Brewer, 2013: 482). Brewer rightly points out the bilateral democratic spirit of the *GM*, written by many and for many, constituting itself as a platform of opinions and discussion.

Literary criticism, understood as an intellectual practice and discipline, shapes and is shaped by its practitioners. This is the view of more recent accounts of intellectual history, such as Whatmore’s argument of the impossibility to detach intellectual history from political history (2005). The emergence and growth of periodical culture follows this dynamic, so reviewing the same poetry they published was common practice: “In this new print-rich world, publishers created a need for the review of almost every book published. (...) These journals gave generous space to poetry and made clear the benefits of reading poetry by women. Reviews of Barbauld’s 1773 Poems were, for instance, overwhelmingly favorable” (Backscheider, 2008: 3). Seward was assiduously reviewed, and she kept a strict, although apparently aloof, control over her reviewers. She never missed a chance to censure and criticise reviewers, as made evident by her letters, often so indignant they border on the comical: “can you take a review, or magazine, without meeting criticism on poetry which outrages everything like taste, feeling, or even common-sense?” (Seward 1811: 5: 223). Although the critics were largely favourable to

her own compositions, she took to heart any discrepancy between her opinions and those of the reviewers. She attributes to contemporary criticism the faults of incompetence and literary insensibility, as well as disdain for those pieces she held in high esteem: “the combined ignorance and arrogance of modern criticism on poetic subjects has, as you well observe, a repulsive influence on the resolution of genius to publish its effusions.” (Seward: 5: 38).

Seward was a shrewd critic and intellectual concerned with amplifying the voices of her contemporaries (something especially true of the Benvolio and the Pope versus Dryden debates). In her public letters she ensured “that the refined genteel voice of the modern poet was given a full hearing” (Brewer, 2013: 483). In the series of letters between Seward and Joseph Weston, otherwise known as the Pope versus Dryden debates (1789-91, *GM*), Seward rebukes Weston’s claim on the inferiority of modern poetry compared to the classic literary icons in his “Essay on the Superiority of Dryden's Versification over that of Pope, and of the Moderns”. Seward set herself to champion those who she considered were the most meritorious examples of praiseworthy poetic excellence amongst her contemporaries. John Williams argues Weston’s crusade against modern poetry is at the centre of the period’s debates on aesthetic taste and compares it to the criticism over Wordsworth’s classicism (Williams, 2001: 150). The group of poets defended by Seward, Williams argues, are the challengers of the preeminent aesthetic classicism of the period, and therefore at the core of the Romantic spirit of dissidence and progressiveness: “a challenge to a literature that had yoked itself to Enlightenment culture, and in consequence to a belief in the inevitability of progress” (Williams: 153). Weston’s position, Williams continues, is a reactionary position against which Anna Seward defines herself as a “modern progressive” (Williams: 152). By positioning herself publicly, Seward enters the debate over who is entitled to the role of deciding on literary

taste and merit, and makes a claim for her own literary authority in the matter (this will be further discussed in Chapter 2): “she knew that battles over the interpretation of poetry were often struggles about who should interpret literature” (Brewer, 2013: 483). Seward consumed and critically evaluated literature—above all she *knew* literature. Seward “believed in a catholicity of taste” and she “was adamant that people like her had every right to voice their opinions about poetry and letters” (Brewer: 468). By “people like her” Brewer is referring to amateur writers, as opposed to metropolitan writers, considered professional, the women and men of intellectual sensibility who were part of the enlightened circles and consumed and produced literature following its classical principles and the ideal of politeness. Klein has argued that it was precisely “politeness” what set these writers “against professionalism” and “allied with the spirit of the amateur” (Klein, 2002: 876).

Clarke has claimed that “during her lifetime Seward held a position as a woman of letters that was unparalleled (...) she set herself up as an arbiter of taste, a critic.” (Clarke, 2005: 35). Seward “was born a literary academic, never happier than when doing close reading” (Clarke: 41). Seward’s reviews and critical opinions in periodicals appeared in the form of sonnets, epitaphs, and letters to the editor, where she displayed her talent as a literary critic, both reviewing other works and engaging in debates. These debates are of paramount importance in my analysis since I seek to argue that their function was to uphold Seward’s identity as a literary critic. This idea is consistent with Anne Mellor’s argument that women critics were “committed to changing the hegemonic ideology of the day” by constructing “a coherent program for the production and consumption of literature, clearly defining the proper goals of literature and the nature of the aesthetic response.” (Mellor, 2000: 88). Seward’s role as a literary critic has been acknowledged by modern scholarship. In his 1954 article “The Critical Attack upon the

Epic in the English Romantic movement”, Foerster quotes Seward alongside the outstanding names of the Romantic canon for her critical talents. Upon reading “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” Seward described Wordsworth as “this egotistical manufacturer of metaphysical importance upon trivial themes” (Seward, 1811: 6: 365). Coleridge and Jeffrey had expressed similar views (Newey, 1974: 228), which was the cause of “widespread public concern” (Shaffer, 2000: 44). Therefore, Seward’s considerations fit within a wider critical school of thought. According to Clarke, this school of thought responds to one of the two sides in the literary criticism dichotomy “between the academy and what used to be called Grub Street”, that is, “precise academic criticism which only other academics are likely to read on the one hand, and literary journalism intended for general readers on the other.” (Clarke, 2009: 43). Clarke argues that in her criticism, Seward “highlighted a difference in reading (...) Seward took a resolute stand for scholarship and impartiality. Her opinions were not for sale; they were the considered views of a gentlewoman sedulously studying her books and comparing notes with other readers as disinterested as herself” (Clarke, 2005: 43). In other words, Seward’s literary criticism places her at the crossroads between an emerging professional, mostly male, criticism and a progressively outdated amateur classicist criticism taken on by many women—and also men—of the period. Mellor describes this group as “leading women literary critics of the Romantic era”, and places Seward together with intellectuals like Baillie, Barbauld, Inchbald, Reeve and Wollstonecraft (Mellor, 2000: 85) who contested, through their creative writing and literary criticism, the male Romantic aesthetic theory with another one, “different but as coherent” (Mellor: 85). Consistent with Mellor’s argument, Hilda Smith contends that Seward and her contemporaries, following the example of the preceding generation of women intellectuals, followed a specific and distinct methodology from their male peers in their approach to criticism:

they “developed their own perspectives on the intellectual movements of their day, adopting those methods and ideas that they found most applicable to their own thought, and discarding those they did not.” (Smith, 2007:364). By doing so, they shaped a recognizable history of women’s intellectualism: “While representing a uniform attachment to reason and philosophical pursuits, there is an early utilitarianism not always found in male thinkers.” (Smith, 2007: 364).

This aesthetic theory seeks to balance “reason and emotion” (Mellor, 2000: 86) and is anchored in a morality that is both created in and created for the community – whether social or domestic. Literary theory and criticism are essential aspects of Seward’s identity as an author. Her professional literary practice bestowed on her a position of merit and importance in her time and circle: not only her poetry, but her knowledge was sought after. It is interesting, then, that this side of Seward’s production has been largely disregarded, and her literary role relegated to the reductive epithet of provincial writer. Melissa Bailes has argued that contemporary reviewers disregarded Seward’s scientific writings and their intellectual contribution because of her gender (Bailes, 2009: 107). One could argue that the same holds true in her role as literary critic, which has been overlooked in favour of her poetry. In the next chapter, I propose to redress this critical gap, introducing Seward’s critical essays, contextualising them within her larger literary corpus and examining how Seward used them to position herself in an increasingly gendered and professionalised area of literary production.

## Chapter 2

### **“I mourn their nature, but admire their art”: Asserting the Authorial Self in the “Biographical Sketch” and the Benvolio Debates**

Seward public identity as a woman of letters began to be construed, consciously or not, in 1776. This was the year of her debut in Lady Miller’s Bath-Easton assemblies, where her award-winning poems and the support of its genteel community led to her entrance into the publishing world in 1780. Her public image was consolidated in the decade of 1780 after her success with the publication of her best-known works, the *Monody on Major André* (1781) and the *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780). The reviewers applauded both the poems and their author, and these first reviews unveil the public image Seward maintained throughout her career. The *GM* described her as an “accomplished lady” and traced her abilities back to her father, saying that she appeared to have “inherit[ed] the genius<sup>17</sup>, and to justify the arguments, of the author of a Female Right to Literature” (“[Review of *Elegy*”], 1780: 432). *The Monthly Review* referred to her as an “ingenious authoress”, an “Atalanta, if we may judge from her present career, that will not easily be overtaken” (“Seward’s *Elegy*”, 1780: 458), and described the *Monody* as an “elegant specimen of poetical abilities” (“Seward’s *Monody*”, 1781: 371), infused with “splendid and original imagery (...) animation and pathos” (“Seward’s *Monody*”: 371). Similarly, *The Critical Review* deemed her “a fine writer, who has a fine glow of fancy” and celebrated her ability for “pathetic tenderness” and “persuasive harmony of numbers” (“[Review of *Elegy on Captain Cook*”], 1780: 69) and for a composition most “elegant and pleasing” (“[Review of *Elegy on Captain Cook*”]: 70). A year later, the *Critical* would refer to the *Elegy* as being of “greater merit” than the celebrated *Monody*, and exalt

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<sup>17</sup> At the time, “genius” would refer to natural aptitude.

Seward as a “new and splendid star in the female galaxy”. It prophesied that she was to become “one of the most distinguished writers of her age” (“[Review of *Monody on Major André*]”, 1781: 232). A year later, in 1782, an anonymous correspondent wrote to the *GM* signing under the pseudonym Philo-Lyristes who described her as “a poetess of the age, in whom almost every poetical excellence seems to be united. I need not tell you, that it is Miss Seward; [...] her merit is so universally acknowledged, that I trust I shall not be suspected of flattery even to a female” (Philo-Lyristes, 1782: 22). Overall, the image of Seward that transpires from these reviews is that of a respectable, patriotic singlewoman from a well-connected, reputable family (as the allusions to her father and to Honora Sneyd and Major André show) and dignified author (the elegance of her verses is often remarked upon) who was well-educated and well-read and whose evident literary talent promised her a successful future.

This portrayal of Seward was sanctioned by the author herself, who by 1790 lacked the social protection of a male relative and had a reputation to care for on her own. As she aged, she maintained her respectable public identity, but her efforts in presenting herself as an erudite writer increased. This chapter will focus on Seward’s self-presentation as a public persona from her old age, at a period where she had the experience and stability to design how she wished to be perceived by critics, contemporaries, present and (especially) future readers. Engaging with the later part of her career, I will examine a selection of Seward’s contributions to the press as case-studies: the “Biographical Sketch” and the Benvolio debate. I propose that, albeit they worked in different ways, both instances were key in the construction of Seward’s public image and in her efforts to consolidate her critical and literary authority as well as her fame. The first document,



a previously misattributed autobiography<sup>18</sup> published in *The Monthly Mirror* in 1797, shows how Seward curated her public image from her old age, and reveals how she wished to present herself, what aspects of her identity and her career she publicised, and to what purpose. The “Biographical Sketch” (“Sketch” henceforth) was written in 1796 and published in *The Monthly Mirror* a year later as a first-hand account of her life and, more importantly, as an authorised portrayal of the author penned by the author herself. This autobiography, as I will argue, was designed to maintain control of her public image, but the fact that it was written and published so late in her life seems to imply that it was also intended as a step in securing her legacy, and in controlling not just the way she was perceived by her contemporaries, but also the way in which she would be remembered. In this analysis of the “Sketch” I will also examine other biographical accounts in contemporary periodicals: one in the *European Magazine* (1782), two in the sixth volume of *Public Characters* (1801 and 1804), and the best-known portrayal of Seward’s life and career of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Walter Scott’s “Biographical Preface”, included in Seward’s posthumously published *Poetical Works* (1810). Comparing the images of Seward that emerge from either biographical account will reveal those aspects each author chose to emphasise and will question and contextualise those decisions. The version of the “Sketch” I have used for my analysis is my own transcription of the manuscript (*William Salt*, “Biographical Sketch”). It only differs with the “Sketch” published in *The Monthly* in occasional punctuation that does not alter the meaning in either version. The document is transcribed in full in the Appendix B, maintaining

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<sup>18</sup> The “Sketch” has been attributed to Seward’s cousin Henry White (Barnard, 2009: 18). However, as I will clarify in section 2. 1. “Biographical Sketch”, the manuscript evidence found during my archival research at the William Salt library has led me to the conclusion that the “Sketch” was actually written by Seward herself. A transcription of this original manuscript can be found in the Appendix section at the end of the thesis.

Seward's original spelling, grammar, and emphasis, as I have found it in the manuscript text.

The second group of items analysed in this chapter are the Benvolio debates, two extensive public debates (both in length and in the span of time it covered) in the form of an epistolary exchange with James Boswell in the *GM* between 1786-87 and 1793-9. As mentioned in the introduction, Anna Seward's literary career extended beyond her poetry, letters, and (occasional) biographical prose. Although these items are the most studied, and often the only aspects of her corpus known to the general public, there is another section of her production she was most engaged in: her literary criticism, which remains a significantly understudied area of her corpus. Throughout her career, Seward engaged in four major public literary conversations, all of them in the form of letters published in the *GM*. These are the aforementioned Benvolio Debates; the Weston Controversy, a debate over the merits of Dryden and Pope (1789-91); a pulpit oratory debate with Edward Jerningham over the merits of French Catholic sermons over Anglican ones (1801); and a rather aggressive anonymous attack on Clara Reeve in the pages of the *GM* in 1786 after the latter claimed *Pamela* to be the best of all of Richardson's novels. It is worth mentioning that Seward's criticism was not limited to these publications, but rather disseminated in her letters, unpublished essays, and marginalia. This was not an uncommon occurrence at the time. Eighteenth-century criticism was not limited to critical essays but expanded to other genres, such as "reviews, philosophical dialogues, lecture courses, treatises; but also in novels, epigrams, plays and theatrical prologues and epilogues, long poems, editions of texts, conversations, duels, gardens" (Jarvis, 2004: 25). In addition, as Seward's lack of interest in becoming a paid reviewer when Thomas Christie offered her the position in the *Analytical Review* (see Chapter 1.3) proves, Seward's critical corpus had less to do with earning money than with precisely the

recognition and legitimisation of said authority. Examining the Benvolio debates, then, will showcase Seward's assertion of her authority as a literary critic.

There are two particularities that make an analysis of this critical corpus especially compelling for the present study: chronologically, most of Seward's critical essays were written and published in the later period of her career, and must therefore be studied as having been produced in her old age; and, secondly, they reveal how Seward took on in full force a public role as literary critic right at the time when criticism "developed generic forms and institutional contexts that are still recognizable today, and in which the critic emancipated himself into an independent professional" (Domsch, 2014: 3). In other words, literary criticism became professionalised, and at the same time, gendered as a site of male authority. I have chosen to analyse the Benvolio debate out of the four debates for several reasons. Mainly, for its scope. While the other debates are either too specific or deal with matters that have little to do with literature (the Jerningham debate, for instance), in the Benvolio debate the matters in discussion exemplify Seward's drive for the legitimacy of her critical authority. It is also the longest of the debates, which allows for its development to be traced, from its origin to its aftermath; it was the most publicised and therefore the one that had the greatest impact; and it is the one with the most primary sources available, not only the debate itself but also public and private letters that make direct reference to it.

### **2.1. "Biographical Sketch" (*The Monthly Mirror*, 1796)**

The "Biographical Sketch of Miss Seward" was published in *The Monthly Mirror* in January 1797 ("Biographical Sketch": 9-14) and February 1797 ("Biographical Sketch": 73-77). The text covers Seward's life and work until 1796, and its composition can be located between 1796 and 1797, thanks to an allusion to Seward's latest work, *Llangollen Vale*, published on that year. The "Sketch", therefore, was written in the later part of her

career. Seward makes reference to both the “Sketch” and the portrait the *Monthly* attached to it in her correspondence. In a letter to Anna Rogers-Stokes, from June 1797, Seward writes “You had not seen White’s anecdotes of me in the *Monthly Mirror* last winter, when you adjured me to write my life. I do not wish to say more of myself than is there said, and I am sure I do not know how to say it better” (Seward, 1811: 362). In the letter Seward attributes the authorship of the “Sketch” to her cousin. Barnard’s attribution of the “Sketch” to “Harry”, or Henry White, Seward’s cousin (Barnard, 2009: 18) corroborates the author’s words. However, the manuscript copy of the “Biographical Sketch”, now held in the William Salt library (*William Salt*, “Biographical Sketch”) is clearly in Seward’s hand. The text, written in the third person, contains several phrases intended to suggest that she is not its author: “I have heard her say” (“Sketch” r2), “she has been heard to observe” (“Sketch” v2), “often also does she acknowledge” (“Sketch” v2). Although I first suspected it could be a transcription from the publication, a way for Seward to keep track of what was said of her in the press, or perhaps, to save this overview of her life and work for her records, it is not an isolated example of Seward writing about herself in the third person: the *JBM* holds a letter by Seward (*JBM*, Anna Seward to Thomas Seward, 16 April, 1781) also written in the third person, and, like the “Sketch”, it seems that this letter was also intended for publication. Furthermore, the manuscript contains evidence of having been proofread by herself, as there are many deletions, additions, and corrections to the manuscript text. There is also archival evidence of White assisting his cousin in dealing with the editors of *The Monthly* regarding this publication. The William Salt library holds three letters from White to Bellamy, editor of the magazine, dating from January 12th, 31st, and February 2nd, 1797. In the first of these missives White reminds Bellamy to publish the text anonymously (*William Salt*, White to Bellamy, 12 January, 1797). In the second one, he denounces in an angered tone that

Bellamy failed to send them the portrait of Seward, intended to accompany the “Sketch”, before publishing it (*William Salt*, White to Bellamy, 31 January, 1797). In the last letter it seems that the issue has been solved, because White comments on the engraving by Ridley, in a much calmer tone (*William Salt*, White to Bellamy, 2 February, 1797). This was not the first instance in which White acted as Seward’s publicist. He also interceded in her favour during the second Benvolio debate and reproduced her views on the Sonnet in a letter to the *GM* that she then quoted in the preface to the *Sonnets*. That White and Seward collaborated in her control of the public image and reputation is obvious. He supported his cousin and lent the authority and advantage of his gender and status to her, and White continued fulfilling this role after Seward’s death. Nevertheless, acknowledging Seward’s authorship of the “Sketch” gives us the opportunity to revisit the piece under new light, as a first-hand account of her life and work by a mature Seward (aged 54-55 years old at the time of composition), about ten years before her death. It depicts Seward describing herself from maturity, considering and reflecting on the public image she wishes to establish.: it is the first major step in her plan for posthumous fame. Additionally, this authorised version offers an authorised biographical account of Seward that we can confront to the one that has been the standard for years: Scott’s “Biographical Preface”.

### **2.1.1 Contents of the “Sketch”**

The structure of the “Sketch” shares the gist with Seward’s desired plan for her posthumously published works (see Chapter 5), which is another argument for Seward’s authorship of the piece. This, in addition to the overview of her career up to 1796 that the text contains, underpins the nature of the “Sketch” as an authorised account of her life and work, written in retrospect from the later part of her career, as well as its purpose in constructing her self-presentation for posthumous literary fame. It is also a testament to

Seward's ability and determination to design and control her public image in the last decades of her life.

One of these shared elements between the "Sketch" and the plan for the published works is the attention Seward paid to her father's legacy. In her instructions to Walter Scott, she explained she had included "a small collection of my late beloved father's poetry" in her bundle of manuscript works, which she wished would "be admitted into the said miscellany and succeed my own" (Seward in Oulton, 1813: xiv). Seward is buried next to her father's remains, following her wishes "to be laid at the feet of my late dear father" (Lucas, 1907: 322) in the family vault, which included her mother and her sister Sarah as well. Additionally, her funeral monument, for which she covered the costs in her will and testament, erected on the left-hand side of the entrance to the Lichfield Cathedral, was initially intended as a monument to her father: "I will that my hereafter executors, or trustees, commission one of the most approved sculptors to prepare a monument for my late father and his family" (Lucas: 322). The monument, of a significant size, includes a sculpture of a female figure holding a roll of paper, head cast under a weeping willow in mournful attitude. At her feet there are two books, one opened and one closed, and above her head there is a lyre (or harp). Under this figure there is an epitaph to Seward, written by Walter Scott. This epitaph was commissioned by her lawyer, Charles Simpson, and not by herself, at least as far as the evidence shows (Barnard, 2009: 149). All of these gestures speak of Seward's affection for her father. The "Sketch" opens with a brief biographical account (eight pages) of her father's youth as a tutor, his education, his publications, and his influence in her career. She affectionately describes him as possessing "graceful manners, great hilarity of spirit, uncommon singleness of heart, & active benevolence" ("Sketch" r1), his poetic aptitude "by no means inconsiderable". She recounts his publications and briefly accounts for their successful reception "learned &

ingenious” (“Sketch” r1). In the same paragraph, Seward, always the literary critic, finds fault with the publication of one of his works: “in the later Editions, two of the lines are spoild [sic] by substituting the word Swain for the original word, Swan”, an error she attributes to either the press or “an ill-judged desire in the Editor to improve the xxx rhyme, at the ^expense of ruin to the sense, as Mr Seward has often been heard to observe. The change destroys the antithesis, & confuses the metaphor.” (“Sketch” v1).

Seward also alludes to her mother, describing her as “a woman of strong sense” and “extreme beauty” but lacking “taste for literary pursuits” and exerting “the chillness of maternal discouragement” (“Sketch” r3) on their daughters, who, Seward writes, were “indebted to their father” (“Sketch” v1) for that. Additionally, she credits her father for having cultivated her love for literature, albeit, she remarks, not from a “desire that she shou’d ever become an Author” (“Sketch” v1). Childhood memories exemplify this early poetic instruction: “At three years old, before she cou’d read, he had taught her to lisp the Allegro of Milton, & in her ninth she was enabled to speak by rote the first books of the paradise Lost” (“Sketch” r2). In this first section of the “Sketch”, Seward pays homage to her father, his cultivating of her literary aptitudes and his support, while at the same time she traces the background of her own literary education, writing that from an early age she was familiar with the “Epic, & Lyric Poetry, in Milton, & Gray; ^for the Dramatic, & from the deepest [,] fullest, & xxx ^richest sources on the pages of Shakespear [sic]” (“Sketch” r2), and presents convincing arguments that demonstrate that she was a well-educated, well-read and talented writer whose skills were honed from infancy. It also serves her to justify her ignorance of Greek and Latin, typically ascribed to male education. Rather than expressing regret for this lack and justify it on account of her gender, Seward contends that in order to write English poetry, one has to read English poetry: “intimacy with Homer, Virgil, & Horace, never enabled a Person to write English

verse (...) Nature had sown the germs of poetic genius, they can only be well cultivated in the bowers of the English Muses” (“Sketch” r2), thus making a virtue of necessity.

Her father’s support and encouragement were “induced to withdraw the animating welcome he had given her early muse” when she “grew into womanhood” (“Sketch” r3). It is unclear if the withdrawal was induced by her wife’s influence or by Seward’s ageing, but it is nevertheless significant that she marks the boundary between the two first stages of her life so clearly: on the one hand her childhood, occupied with learning and experimentation; and on the other her early youth, where she was actively discouraged from literary pursuits. Upon entering the third stage, maturity, Seward describes as “irrestrainable” [sic] the “ardor” (“Sketch” r3) that she felt towards literature, and misquotes two lines from James Beattie’s *The Minstrel* (1771) to illustrate it: “Aonian Song was yet her first pursuit;—/“Its harp had rung to her adventurous hand.” (“Sketch”) either misremembering or adapting them from the original “Song was his favourite and first pursuit./ The wild harp rang to his adventurous hand” (Beattie, 1809: 24).

There is another significant reference to her age: in relating Honora Smith’s departure from the Bishop’s Palace, when she left the Sewards to be reunited with her biological family two years before her marriage. Seward describes this event as occurring “long ere the meridian of her life” (“Sketch” v3), which in this case is referring to her 29th anniversary. This is significant because it points, once again, towards Seward’s own socially and historically conditioned conception of age and ageing in the eighteenth century. Taking into account that she was presumably writing this in 1796, aged 54, it stands to reason that she regarded her present age her old age. Therefore, in this text she is looking on her literary career and fame with the perspective of time and experience. More importantly, in this text she is presenting herself to the public as she wishes to be remembered: as a successful, talented writer and a valued intellectual. Seward remarks



upon her intelligence, shielding herself from sure accusations of vanity in the pretence that the “Sketch” is written by an admiring cousin. She describes herself as cultivated individual and able to converse in a variety of topics with anybody: “When any attempt is made by People of talent, either in small or large companies, to lead xxx conversation upon the higher ground of moral disquisition, ^or the works of Genius, or the new universally momentous theme of the National welfare” she writes, “she follows that lead with glad alacrity, pleased to assist in tracing the meanders of the human mind, the sources of exalted, or of mean actions, ^and in discriminating the difference, & degrees of Genius” adding that “It is then that she is always found ardent & ingenious, but impartial.” (“Sketch” v4). She further supports her claim for literary impartiality, which in turn reinforces her aptness for literary criticism, in the following terms: “she feels every charm of the page, & brings forward to the observation of the ingenious every obvious, & latent beauty, superior to literary jealousy, the frequent misery of authors, & always distinguishing between the merits of the heart, & the head.” (“Sketch” v4).

The final section of the “Sketch” addresses her publications. It opens with a reflection on Lady Miller’s influence on Seward’s public career. Seward writes that she had never considered pursuing a career as a published author, “so little native is the desire of public eclat xxx ^in her mind” (“Sketch” r5), until she met Lady Miller, “by whose persuasions she was induced” to participate in the genteel poetic contest of Bath-Easton she organised. By placing her literary debut in the context of provincial, polite society that Lady Miller embodied, Seward eschews once more possible accusations of vanity. This protective screen is reinforced by the choice of the terms “persuasions” and “induced”, suggesting that publishing was never her desire, but rather than she was inevitably driven to it when her talents where recognised. She persuades the reader to believe that hers is a noble pursuit, to which she was destined. The author’s need to justify

her public career is underpinned by distinctions of class and gender. As a gentlewoman, Seward enjoys a social status that protects her, and she also has the responsibility to maintain it.

Seward begins her bibliographical survey with her best-known works, *Elegy on Captain Cook*, which received a “flattering reception” (“Sketch” r5) that encouraged her to “pour impassioned regrets into the public ear” (“Sketch” r5) in the form of the *Monody on Major André*. Both poems were acclaimed by critics and readers alike, and she quotes Darwin bestowing upon her the title of “Inventress of Epic Elegy” (“Sketch” r5), a genre she describes as “a new species of funeral song” (“Sketch” r5). As she had done with her father’s poetry, she also takes advantage of the occasion to clarify some contentious aspects of the work. She corrects her accusation of General Washington, who she condemned in the poem for having “needlessly sacrificed” André; and writes an equally long paragraph on *Poem to the Memory of Lady Miller*, the first four stanzas of which appear quoted. There are five differences between these four stanzas in the version from the “Sketch” and the version of the poem published in 1782 and later compiled in the *Poetical Works*. In the “Sketch”, “shades” (Seward 1810: 2: 150) becomes “tombs”, “mournful train” (Seward: 151) is “mournful strain”, the comma after “lay” (Seward: 152) becomes an exclamation point, the determiner in “this hallow’d” (Seward: 152) is exchanged for the article “the”, and “which glow’d” becomes “that glow’d” (Seward: 152). These differences might be attributed to several inconclusive reasons: they could be printing errors, they could have been taken from a previous manuscript version rather than from the published one, or Seward might have been quoting from memory. These lines are followed by a summary of the poem, in which the author highlights an anecdote as “the gem of the poem” (“Sketch” v6), executing her role as literary critic upon her own work.

After the elegy, it is the turn of *Louisa*, by then in its fifth edition, and “perhaps the most popular of all her compositions” (v6). The work is described as “interesting”, “dramatic”, its sentiments “just, pathetic, & impressive” and the author highlights that its landscape descriptions are drawn not from other books “but from Nature” (v6). If *Louisa* was her most popular work, *Ode on General Eliot* is “estima[ted], in poetic value, above all her other writings” (r7). Devoting four pages to it, Seward summarises the poem in a descriptive manner, and again she uses the “Sketch” to vindicate the ideas first expressed in the work. In this case, she declares “it is justly asserted” in the *Ode* that Great Britain is indebted to thee general because he “restored” its “glory & prosperity” (v7). The descriptions of the works are (mostly) lacking the usual critical approach and read as advertisements rather than commentaries, which seems logical given the commendatory aim of the “Sketch”.

After a “long interval” (r9)—9 years in which she did not publish anything—, *Llangollen Vale* appeared in 1796. She denounces that the poem was unfairly criticised by “a Critic thrice profound” (“Sketch” r9), who, she adds in a sardonic tone “discovered that neither our Author, or, by consequence, Doctor Johnson knew the meaning of the word thrill, since the description in ^his xxx xxx Dictionary exactly corresponds with all the use she has ever made of that word” (“Sketch” r9). This review was the *British Critic*’s (“Miss Seward’s Llangollen Vale”, 1796: 404-407) and it had already been challenged with a lengthy letter signed by her cousin Henry White and published in the *GM* (“Comment on Review”, 1796: 556-559) that responded to each and every one of the reviewer’s criticisms. Interestingly, Seward presents some of the poems in *Llangollen Vale* as being inspired by “the days that are flown” (“Sketch” v9), including those “Winter evenings that were gilded by the smile of Honora” (“Sketch” v9). She remarks that the six sonnets included in *Llangollen Vale* are “given as specimens” (“Sketch” v9) of her

future publication of “centenary of Sonnets” (“Sketch” v9), which “were written in a course of more than twenty years” (“Sketch” v9). Albeit the “Sketch” does not abound in reflections on age, this last paragraph of the “Sketch” foregrounds the thematic influence that ageing had in the *Sonnets* (See Chapter 3).

From this analysis, we can learn about those aspects Seward chose to emphasise: her relationship with her father, her early literary instruction and her precocious talent, her role as a loving daughter who took care of her ailing parent and never eschewed her obligations, always obeyed their parents’ wishes, and did everything by the letter. In short, she portrays herself as a dutiful woman who and never transgressed any societal or familiar rules, and an author with an accomplished, yet unfinished, literary career. What Seward does not explicitly say but the reader can perceive is that she is a conservative, proud, author who aims to be in control of her writings as well as of her image. The portrayal of Seward that comes to the fore in the “Sketch” is a carefully manufactured image intended to protect its author and to secure her reputation as a woman and as a literary author. The image that emerges is that of deeply intelligent, gifted woman of her time, faithful to her domestic obligations but possessor of a fervent passion for literature, and an innate talent honed with study and diligence that led, inevitably (or so she seems to suggest), to a successful literary career.

### **2.1.2. Other Accounts of Anna Seward in the Press Before and After the “Sketch”**

I have selected three accounts that featured biographical descriptions of the author before and after the “Sketch” was printed: *The European Magazine* (1782) and the sixth volume of *Public Characters* (1801 and 1804). The “Sketch” was intended as the standard for Anna Seward’s biographical accounts, and this was indeed the case in her lifetime, as the two versions in *Public Characters* demonstrate. This standard was challenged with the publication of Walter Scott’s biographical account prefacing her collected works in 1810,

due to the weight of Scott's name, which made the "Biographical Preface" the go-to source for periodicals, readers and scholars alike. Indeed, I have found examples of at least three biographical descriptions in periodicals between 1821 and 1830, all of which either paraphrase details that appear only in Scott's version, or directly quote or reference him (*The Lady's Monthly Museum*, 1821: 121-123; *Christian Union*, 1891: 245-46 ; *Ladies' Magazine and Literary Gazette*, 1830: 97-103). The authority of the "Sketch", then, was short-lived. Its appearance in the pages of a popular periodical ensured that it would reach many readers when it was published, but that reach diluted with time.

#### **2.1.2.1 *European Magazine* (1782)**

In the "Sketch", Seward alludes to a 1782 publication in the *European Magazine*: "for an account of the experiments her Father practiced upon ~~xxx~~ ability to write verse in Infancy, & for the criterion of them by the celebrated Dct. Darwin of Derby, then resident <sup>^Physician</sup> at Lichfield in her sixteenth year, see anecdotes of Miss Seward, in the *European Magazine* for April 1782" ("Sketch" r2), and claims that these anecdotes were collected by "a Lady, lately deceased, to whom, from her birth, she [Seward] had been intimately known, & who always contrived one of the most affectionate of her Friends". The *European Magazine* gives further clues as to the identity of this lady "a lady, who knew her in infancy, when the family lived at Eyam in Derbyshire", which makes Anne Mompesson a very likely candidate. In "Anecdotes of the author" (1782: 288), Mompesson (presumably) describes the young Seward in the language of sensibility and recounts how a five-year old Seward would stop "in the midst of that childish playfulness with which she bounded amongst the rocks and over the Alpine heights of her native mountains [in Eyam, Derbyshire]" and, "with eyes swimming in delight, and an air of the most animated enthusiasm" she would "repeat poetical passages from her memory, and apply them to every smiling, or awful grace or prospect which met her young and

wandering attention” (“Anecdotes of the author”, 1782: 288). The text makes a claim to Seward’s precociousness, which would be repeated by Walter Scott in the preface to the *Poetical Works* in the often-quoted ability the very young Seward had for reciting Milton: “she put several of the psalms into verse at nine years old, and in her tenth year, her father having promised her half a crown if she would produce him a copy of verses upon the first fine day of a stormy spring, she earned her reward in a few hours, by writing twenty-five lines upon the subject” (“Anecdotes of the author”, 1782: 288). The lines, *The European Magazine* writes, may “surely, without partiality, considering her youth”, presage “a poetic summer, whose flowers and fruits should not be crude or immature” (“Anecdotes of the author”, 1782: 288). In the “Sketch”, Seward remarks that “the romantic sublimities of that Country increased her native enthusiasm” (“Sketch” v2) and inspired “a pensive luxury of sensation, ever after attached to her survey of wild, & lovely scenery” (“Sketch” v2). Finally, the reader is told that Seward “could never be persuaded to think anything she had written worth the attention of the public; and has been heard to say, that, but for an accidental interview with Lady Miller in the year 1778, she never could have been induced to consent that a poem of hers should pass the press.” (“Anecdotes of the author”, 1782: 290). The successful reception of the poems she submitted to the vase among the participants of Bath-Easton assembly, which earned her the prize myrtle on several occasions, and “persuaded” Seward to pursue publication with *Monody of Captain Cook* and *Elegy on Captain André*.

The contents of these anecdotes, published at the peak of Seward’s fame in 1782, contain features that can be found in most of the succeeding biographical accounts of the author, including the “Sketch”, such as the influence Lady Miller had on her publishing career.

### 2.1.2.2. *Public Characters* (1801-1804)

Seward was later immortalised in *Public Characters* (1801), an encyclopaedic collection of biographical accounts of figures of renown. In this volume, Seward is surrounded by politicians like Fox and Pitt, scientists like Hershel and Darwin, and several bishops and archbishops and actors like Kemble. Only three women are featured in the collection: the actress Sarah Siddons, Hannah More, and Seward. Seward's biography occupies two pages (398-399) and covers her career up to 1799, with the publication of the *Sonnets*. Comparatively, Siddons' biography is six pages long (413-18) whereas More's is nine (463-71). Seward's short biography is very similar—in content and structure—to the one published in the *European Magazine* in 1782 and it covers very briefly her literary accomplishments, emphasising her precocious talent. Interestingly, in the sixth volume of the series, *Public Characters* (1803-1804), an appendix is included which features a much lengthier biographical account (fourteen pages). The piece is prefaced by the following notice:

AMONGST the honours of the English nation is to be enumerated the females of high intellectual attainments and great natural possessions of mind. The present age is pre-eminently distinguished in this respect and in no instance more transcendent than in the rare genius and other brilliant endowments of the subject of the following memoir which we insert in our Appendix to the present work because a too brief and hasty account found its way into a former volume and we are by no means unwilling to correct our own precipitation or the mis statement of others and it is with particular satisfaction we collate and adopt more authentic and liberal materials (*Public Characters*, 1804: 541).

This version is very similar to the “Biographical Sketch” published in the *Monthly*, but includes additions, presumably by the editor of the volume, that cover her career up to its publication in 1804, making reference to her biography of Erasmus Darwin (*Public Characters*, 1804: 554). Interestingly, they comment upon her physical and character traits through an ageist lens: “Miss Seward is now advancing in life”, they write, adding,

in an overly flattering tone that “She was extremely captivating in her youth, in point even of personal attraction, and still bears the marks of a lovely woman” and that “Her eyes were of uncommon lustre, expressing at once power of intellect and sensibility of heart” (*Public Characters*: 553). The emphasis here is on the past, her beauty *was* captivating, her eyes *were* “of uncommon lustre”, and its marks are *still* present, but they are remnants of their younger self. The description does not indicate a beauty that has settled into her maturity, but rather remarks on the fleeting nature of beauty, and of youth. Contrastingly, the writers refer to those aspects not concerning her physicality in the present tense: her voice *is* “distinguished by sweetness and energy” (*Public Characters*: 554), her address *is* “elegant”, her manners *are* “courteous and commanding” (*Public Characters*: 554), and her conversation *is* “like her composition, full of fire and fancy, tempered by softness” (*Public Characters*: 554)<sup>19</sup>. These reflections on her advancing age are regrettably missing from the original “Sketch”, which makes only passing allusions to it.

### **2.1.2.3. Scott’s “Biographical Preface” to the *Poetical Works* (1810)**

Walter Scott’s “Biographical Preface” (“Preface” henceforth) to the posthumously published *Poetical Works* presents a different image of Seward, one over which she had no control. Whereas the accounts in the *Monthly*, and the *Public Characters* and the *European* were more or less based on her own biography and could have been contested by the author had a detail been inaccurate, the biographical preface that opened the compilation of her entire career was written by her editor. While the “Preface” shares many points in common with the “Sketch”, it also deviates from its source on many occasions.

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<sup>19</sup> My emphasis.



Its structure is similar to the “Sketch”: after an introductory paragraph where Seward is celebrated as having “held a high rank in the annals of British literature” (Scott, 1810: iii), Scott dedicates a few passages to Thomas Seward’s life and career, moving onto Seward’s childhood and literary precocity. He addresses the famous anecdote of the author’s ability to recite Milton at the tender age of three contending that while it is “absurd to suppose that she could comprehend this poem even at a much later period of infancy”, one’s “future taste does not always depend upon the progress of our understanding” (Scott: v). He adds that teaching children poetry from an early age helps them develop an appreciation for it, especially when they are children “of a lively imagination and a delicate ear” (Scott: v). Indeed, he concludes, “Miss Seward was one of these gifted minds which catches eagerly at the intellectual banquet” (Scott: v). After that, the similarities to the “Sketch” continue: her childhood in Derbyshire and her early attempts at composition are recorded, as is the move to Lichfield and Lady Miller’s influence in her literary debut, followed by her literary works and their reception. While borrowing the structure and basic content from the “Sketch”, Scott’s writing is his own, and he often comments on certain anecdotes, or embellishes basic information with his own. Scott’s description of Seward’s circle (he mentions her acquaintance with Thomas Day, Edgeworth, Darwin, Johnson and William Hayley in her youth), for instance, comes entirely from his own research, possibly acquired in his visits to the author. In another instance, an anecdote was possibly provided from Seward’s *Memoirs of Dr Darwin*. What is clear is that Scott did not simply copy the “Sketch”, but instead produced a new, improved, and more complete account. Where Seward discreetly mentions her friends with that epithet only, Scott names them: “While Miss Seward’s fame increased, it had the advantage, which she highly prized, of extending her acquaintance among those who were candidates for literary reputation” (Scott: xii), among which he lists Mundy, Crowe,

Whalley, and Fellowes, and later on, Southey. Furthermore, while the “Sketch” ends before the publication of the *Sonnets*, the “Preface” covers this and Seward’s last work, the *Memoirs of Dr Darwin*.

Scott adds a section in his account on his own impressions of Seward upon meeting her for the first time in 1807 after months of corresponding with each other, and sings his praise for her “appearance and conversation” (Scott, 1810: xxii), and her beauty and intellectual prowess, “well worth a longer pilgrimage” (Scott: xxii). At sixty-five, Seward is described as possessing a “regularity of features”, which, together with “the fire and expression of her countenance”, gave her face “the appearance of beauty, and almost of youth” (Scott: xxii). She, continues Scott, had a “melodious” and “well suited” reading voice, her society “delightful”, and a great capacity for “literary anecdote” (Scott: xxiii), feeling comfortable discussing any topic “with the keenness and vivacity of youth”, which made it difficult “to associate the idea of advanced years either with her countenance or conversation” (Scott: xxiv). Like the editors of *Public Characters* did, Scott conflates Seward’s physical, mental and intellectual attributes and her character to her age. Her advanced age is not presented as a sign of wisdom or experience, but rather highlighted in spite of itself: in spite of her age, she is beautiful; in spite of her age, she is lively; in spite of her age, she is keen to engage in conversation. Both accounts reflect the social perspective of the time in regard to elderly women.

On the other hand, Scott remarks that his poetic production after the publication of the *Sonnets* in 1799 was “unequal to that of her earlier muse”, a fact that he argues is due to her (advanced) age: “age was now approaching with its usual attendants, declining health, and the loss of friends summoned from the stage before her” (Scott, 1810: xxi). Seward was in fact between fifty-seven and sixty-seven years old. The correlation of Seward’s advanced age and a supposed dwindling of her literary talents, an argument

heralded both by Scott and by most of the reviewing press, will be properly examined in Chapter 5. In the “Preface”, however, Scott addresses Seward’s ability for literary criticism, hinting that her assessments were motivated by imaginary offences and jealousy rather than by intellectual thought processes: “Miss Seward united sensibility to coldness, or to injuries real or supposed”, injuries, Scott argues, “she permitted to disturb her more that was consistent with prudence or with happiness” (Scott, 1810: xxiv). Furthermore, he remarks that these traits “rendered her jealous of critical authority, when exercised over her own productions, or those of her friends”. Indeed, he continues, she hasd “very strong” “prepossessions upon literary points” (Scott: xxiv). Scott supports this point with an example, contending that while Seward praised Erasmus Darwin as one of the greatest poets of their generation, no contemporaries would agree with such encomium (Scott: xxv). With this reference to Darwin’s long-gone fame Scott subtly hints that Seward’s is likewise a thing of the past: without naming her, he writes that “there is a fashion in poetry, which, without increasing or diminishing the real value of the materials moulded upon it, does wonders in facilitating its currency”, which implies that while a particular style is in fashion, the production of the writers in this stylistic school are praised and held in the greatest value, whereas “when the mode has passed away” that style goes against their reception (Scott: xxv). Seward, Scott continues, belonged “that school of picturesque and florid description, of lofty metaphor and bold personification, of a diction which inversion and the use of compound epithets rendered as remote as possible (...) from common life, and natural expression, to retain its popularity” (Scott: xix). Furthermore, he concedes, “her taste (...) readily admitted the claims of Pope, Collins, Gray, Mason, and all those bards who have condescended to add the graces of style and expression to political thought and imagery” (Scott: xxvi). These stylistic differences upon which Scott remarks signify the generational divide between Seward’s

circle and the younger Romantic generation and are one of the most significant arguments for what Kairoff has defined as Seward's "critical disappearance" (Kairoff 2012). And, while Seward's contribution was never limited to her poetry, but rather extended through correspondence and, significantly, critical essays, Scott contends that her attachment to this outdated style invalidates her contributions to literary criticism.

However, Scott concedes that, in literary matters, she was both knowledgeable and persuasive. Indeed, he writes, it was not "easy for the professors of an opposite faith to sustain either the art of her arguments, or the authorities which her extensive acquaintance with the best British classics" (Scott, 1810: xxvi). At the same time, the younger author denounces Seward's supposed lack of subjectivity in commenting on the writing of her personal acquaintances, something Seward had strongly denied on many occasions throughout her life. He argues that this lack of objectivity was founded in her "warmth of heart" and "ingenuity" and resulted in "an occasional anomaly in her critical system" (Scott: xxvii). These two terms are indeed at the heart of Scott's criticism. While he reasons that her poetic style is outdated and that affects her taste and therefore permeates into her literary criticism, at least he respects her poetic talent, even if he denies its claim for immortality and posthumous fame. Her critical acumen, however, he denies and disregards as mere unfounded and naive praises to her acquaintances. Thus, Scott disavows Seward's role as literary critic and articulates her argument based on her (feminine) feelings, such as her "warmth of heart", implying that her opinions on literary merit are not so much based on her intellect, her knowledge, and her experience but rather on her flimsy sensibility, bound to favour those she considers her friends as much as to hinder the efforts of those she personally dislikes. Pushing further on this argument, Scott tells the reader that Seward's "benevolence" in terms of literary praise and encouragement "was universally felt among those to whom it afforded active and important support, as

well as those whose pursuits it aided, and whose feelings were gratified” (Scott: xxviii). Finally, he invites the readers of the volumes to form their own conclusions on Seward’s talent from her own writing, deeming it self-explanatory and self-evident. In the final section of the “Preface” Scott added a selection of two of Seward’s letters to him in the last years of her life. Dating from March 1809, the letters recount the illness she endured during her last weeks: “considering my pains, my raging thirst, my utter debility, it would be a mercy if I should not be in existence [Thursday next]” (Scott: xxxi), she wrote, adding “what a blessing is sudden death!” (Scott: xxxii).

The second half of Scott’s biographical account is plagued with veiled dismissive comments against Seward on the basis of her gender: he describes her love of literature as an indulgence and dismisses her correspondence as mere “personal anecdote” and “incidents of private life” (Scott: xxxviii). Whereas Seward’s autobiography can be taken as a subjective exercise in self-presentation, Scott’s is neither objective nor successful in accurately—or even fairly—portraying the author. In fact, he misrepresents her character. Finally, Scott expresses, in no veiled terms, his doubts about the success of the volume: “To the numerous friends of Miss Seward, these volumes will form an acceptable present (...) the general reception they may meet with is more dubious, since collections of occasional and detached poems have rarely been honoured with a large share of public fervour” (Scott: xxxix).

The “Preface” is one element of the variety of critical processes that interacted with—and were articulated by—Seward’s critics, (later replicated by the reception by the press) that would eventually lead to her critical and cultural exclusion. Scott presents the *Poetical Works* as a conclusion to a finished career, rather than, as I will argue in Chapter 5, a continuation of it. Since the “Preface” was the mostly read and quoted source of Seward’s life from 1810 onwards, its portrayal of Seward was of enormous consequence.

The image of Seward that arises from the “Preface” is that of an outdated author whose years of fame are long gone. In addition, her critical acumen is dismissed, described as subjective and insubstantial, and corresponding to Seward’s emotions rather than to her intellect. This contrasts severely with Seward’s own portrayal in the “Sketch”, that of a knowledgeable, successful and capable author in charge of her own career. Her image turns from a first-hand account to a second-hand one, from an editor who was somewhat acquainted to her, and whose supposed objectivity (lacking in the “Sketch” as well) is clouded by his own bias. In the next section, an analysis of Seward’s critical essays and the public debates on matters of literary merit and taste she triggered will demonstrate that Scott’s idea of Seward’s critical role as fickle and indulgent are untrue and unfounded.

## **2.2 The Benvolio Debates: Assertion of Authority in Seward’s Literary Criticism**

Seward’s public literary controversies took place between 1786, when she was forty-four, and 1801, when she was fifty-nine. As a woman in her forties with a career in the publishing world, both with periodical contributions and her own publications, Seward had the experience and the repute to participate in public debates on literary matters. Seward was aware of her literary and critical acumen, a self-awareness bestowed by her maturity. By engaging in a public debate with her contemporaries, she demonstrates a strong sense of selfhood and literary identity and a strong belief in both her ability and her authority. After all, critics were in charge of “sifting the good from the bad and moulding the tastes of readers” (Lipking, 2005: 472), a role for which a certain level of experience and expertise in literary matters was required: “at the level of reviewing, [...] knowledge of the gradations between discrete genres would give a decided turn to a critic’s opinion of a work” (Bromwich, 1987: 2). In all the debates she participated in, Seward demonstrates discursive control in the ease with which she moulds her arguments

in response to the critics' denunciations, as well as a management of literary knowledge, both of which define her a discerning scholar. Her criticism, as her writing, is infused by her experience as a reader. It is also methodical and systematic. She always provides primary and secondary source examples to support her arguments when she is either contesting or making a point, and she addresses her adversaries' expostulations in a clear and well organised manner, offers quotations to support her arguments, performs close reading of the pieces under discussion, and is able to sustain her line of argumentation and defend it with poise. Seward's public literary criticism is, then, closely related to her authorial maturity, and it illustrates the period in which Seward was in her authorial prime, at the peak of the formation and consolidation of her identity as an author. The debates allow us to explore the ways in which Seward performs and engages, publicly, both with literature, her contemporaries, and issues such as the literary canon or patriotism. Furthermore, her public criticism is evidence of the literary and critical authority that her maturity imbued her with. Critical authority is here understood as the "virtual currency in the literary world's economy of opinion. It is the capital, or rather the credit, of the critic, the willingness of a recipient to give credit or value to a critic's evaluative statements" (Domsch, 2014: 4). The term invokes a power relation between the subject of the critique (text, author, or theme) and its critic, between the critic and its readers and between the critic and other critics, and consequently, it depends on a system of acknowledged legitimacy to work. Seward believes hers to be the critical authority but depends on Boswell and her readers to legitimise it. As my analysis hopes to prove, their refusal to acknowledge her legitimacy, her critical authority, is articulated through discourses of gender difference and ageism that work to alienate her from her position of authority.

### 2.2.1 Introduction to the Benvolio Debates

Seward engaged in a public argument with James Boswell in the *GM* between the late 1780s and early 1790s. The argument was divided into two main debates. In the first debate (1786–87) the *GM* published three letters addressing Boswell's *The Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson* (1785) behind the pseudonym "Benvolio". Although Seward does not explain the choice of pseudonym or justify the choice to use one, I contend that her choice of alias evinces Seward's intended aim behind the first debate. Benvolio is both a character in Christopher Marlowe's *Faustus* and in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and while Marlowe's is derisive and unlikeable, and ends up being punished, Shakespeare's Benvolio is the one character who attempts to make peace between the Montagues and Capulets. In addition, etymologically Benvolio means "well-meaning". Although modern scholarship has regarded the Benvolio letters as a "controversy" (Ashmun, 1968: 139; Brewer, 2013: 482), Seward's first letters are not as incendiary as one might surmise from that epithet. Careful examination of the correspondence reveals that Seward does not attack Boswell directly, but rather she intends them as an open appeal to the readers, reviewers and Boswell himself to re-evaluate the ongoing construction of the posthumous portrayal of Samuel Johnson. Similarly, although addressing the editor was common practice at the time, it is significant that Seward generally avoids directing her arguments to Boswell, save for one direct accusation that does not change the tone of the letter. It is clear from this that Seward is not willing to engage in a public fight with Boswell. In this first letter, she stays away from a possible conflict and engages in criticism with the editor of the *GM*, Mr Urban, or what is the same, with the readers, making both publisher and audience a part of the debate. She knows he is aware of the issue at hand –Johnson's reputation and his ongoing canonisation– is a matter at the mercy of the readership as much as at the hands of the critics. As if also aware of that, Boswell refused to engage with this first debate, but he



replied to Seward in the second one (1793–94), in which the latter denounced the former’s exclusion of her contributions in his *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791).

While Boswell’s *Account of Corsica* (1768), re-edited on three occasions, had enjoyed a warm reception and afforded him certain literary renown, his reputation was not established until the publication of *Tour of the Hebrides* (1785) and *Life of Johnson* (1791). On the other hand, Seward—who was in fact two years younger than Boswell—had already published three best-selling works by 1785. Her *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780) and *Monody on Major André* (1781) had undergone five and three editions, respectively (the *Monody* had two in England and, by then, one in America); and *Louisa* (1784) had five. Her knowledge of literature was well-known: “in critical acumen she was always unrivalled, and no latent excellence nor defect could escape her observation—she had the poet’s taste and the poet’s eye” (“[Obituary]”, 1809: 319). By 1786, when the first debate took place, Seward’s national fame was well established. She had the knowledge, skill, and reputation to participate in public debates on literary matters. She was mature, too, not only in terms of career experience, but also in age—she was forty-four in 1786 and fifty-one in 1793.

This section engages with the “Benvolio letters,” their public and private responses, and its aftermath. My argument is two-fold. First, I argue that Seward’s Benvolio letters sought to assert her literary and critical authority that was further reinforced by her experience and maturity. Secondly, I examine the role that age and gender played in the dismissal of Seward’s assertion and I demonstrate that Boswell’s discrediting of Seward’s authority is articulated by using her gender and her age against her. In order to support both these claims, this section examines the Benvolio debates through the theoretical framework of gender and age studies. As we have already seen, age studies, applied to the eighteenth century, is concerned with the construction, evolution, self-reflection and

self-(re)presentation of identity. The discipline is of relevance in this context because of the timeframe in which the Benvolio debates took place; in this case, in the later part of Seward's career. Hence, using age studies to analyse the motivations behind Seward's choice to assert her critical authority and the way the backlash against her claim was articulated brings to the fore the impact age had in the reception of elderly women authors such as Seward.

According to Barnard, "the controversy was more often than not a delicate balance of intellectual reasoning than the 'invective' it is most usually credited to be. It was the form of literary jousting" (Barnard, 2009: 139). The debates constitute an exercise in critical insight designed both to assert her claim and reinforce her authority as literary critic and are intrinsically tied to her maturity. Age is, therefore, a double-edged sword that reinforces Seward's claim to participate in the public sphere of criticism and canon-formation, but is also used against her to devalue her contribution. It has been argued (Barnard, 2009: 134; Kairoff, 2012: 243; Wood, 2010: 35; Woolley, 1972: 145) that the underlying motive for Boswell's harshness lies in Seward's rejection of his romantic advances towards her in 1784 (Heiland, 1993: 381), some years prior to the publication of the Benvolio letters. However, I suggest that although this personal aspect might have exacerbated Boswell's rancour, this heated conflict is not due to personal enmity or to Boswell's bitterness at her rejection, but rather to a much larger issue: a clash between two opposing, gendered modes of literary criticism. Seward's public exchange with Boswell in the Benvolio debates had at its core Seward's assertion of her literary and critical authority within the changing, increasingly gendered landscape of late-eighteenth-century literary criticism. The debates represent a conflict between the female and the male Romantic literary aesthetics and can be read as a paper-war between two contending, gender-coded factions of literary criticism, each pushing for dominance. Kairoff

describes Seward as being “caught between” (Kairoff, 2012: 261) two centuries of competing tastes, her standards and style being regarded as equally as outdated as herself. Consequently, her criticism was “expressive of her generation’s tastes and concerns” (Kairoff: 261), which were losing ground to those of the emerging Romantics, who repudiated the principles of Seward’s generation: “what had been an uncontroversial and shared genteel vocabulary in the 1740s [...] had begun to seem fusty and old-fashioned” (Clarke, 2005: 44). Although, in fact, Seward was two years younger than Boswell, her marital status and ornate and affected style led to her being perceived as older.

The Benvolio debates illustrate “the profound cultural shift [...] in the course of which critical authority became gendered as male. Opinion [...] became professionalised and in the process, women were effectively squeezed out” (Clarke, 2005: 38). In this cultural shift that the Romantic movement promulgated, provincial genteel writers such as Seward “lost ground” (Kairoff, 2012: 52). Clarke connects this shift with the broadening of the gender divide already introduced in Chapter 1—the further separation of the public/private spheres—that was established in the nineteenth century, a consequence of what Gillen D’Arcy Wood has termed the emergence of the “rhetoric of professionalism” (Wood 2010:35). This new rhetoric highlighted the so-called “natural differences” along the gender binary: “men belonged in public life, women in the home” (Clarke, 2005: 44). Such an assumption upholds Ann K. Mellor’s claim that male critics “assumed that men were rational and should dominate the public sphere while women were emotional and should be confined to a private, domestic sphere” (Mellor, 2000: 91). In fact, in the Benvolio letters, the opposite seems to be true: in the first set of letters Seward asks that Boswell’s portrayal of Johnson be not so biased, but rather that he adopt a rational, impartial and truthful approach in his task. She calls him one of Johnson’s “blind idolaters” (“Letter from Miss Seward”, 1793: 1100) and blames his books for

“spread[ing] a veil” over Johnson’s true character (“The Battledore”, 1786: 125). Seward is thus both resisting and challenging the gender dichotomy of the spheres in two ways. First, she points out Boswell’s failure to perform supposedly male rationality and objectivity. Second, she occupies the public sphere of the *GM* with her public letters on literary criticism, not only participating in but in fact disputing Boswell’s critical authority and competence.

At the time, it was not unusual for women writers to address the nation publicly on matters of politics or literary taste—Seward had been applauded by the reviewers for doing so in her *Monody* and *Elegy*, as we saw in the introduction to this chapter. However, at the end of the century, attitudes towards this phenomenon were changing with the professionalisation of criticism, causing a “pronounced hostility to both women and literary amateurism” (Wood, 2010: 35), which in literary criticism were, incidentally, often synonymous. By confronting Boswell’s authority, Seward resists this shift. These two issues, gender and amateurism, were brought to the public’s attention in the second Boswell-Seward exchange. Boswell’s responses to the Benvolio letters show how he alienates and disenfranchises Seward. His replies assume a patronising attitude: “our poetess has made a second attack [...] and in such temper as must be very uneasy to a gentle bosom” (“Mr Boswell’s Reply”, 64: 32). Most importantly, they are intended to publicly disavow Seward in particular, and women in general, as literary critics: “I was wearied with this female criticism” (Boswell in Barnard, 2009: 139). The development of the debates, and especially their conclusion, I contend, epitomise the conflict between the Romantic aesthetics of “professional” literary criticism that Boswell embodies over the Enlightened, “amateur,” and female ones that Seward represents. Boswell saw Seward’s public appeal as an attack to his own male authority and opposed it in two ways: first, refusing to engage; and then with sexist and ageist hostility, knowing that Seward

would not be able to respond within the limits of female propriety. Boswell is therefore marking where the boundary of Seward's—and women's—public opinion is. In these debates, Seward demonstrates discursive control in the ease with which she moulds her arguments in response to the critics' denunciations, and an absolute management of literary knowledge, both of which showed her to be a systematic and astute scholar. More importantly, however, Seward shows awareness and skill in navigating and resisting Boswell's aggressive replies that sought to undermine her claim to literary authority by using her gender and her age against her.

### **2.2.2 The First Benvolio Debate (1786–87)**

After Johnson's death in 1784, Seward refused to participate in the national deification of a man she had described as "sicken[ing] with envy over literary fame," adding that "his bigotry and superstition pass credibility [...] he exults from the anguish and disgrace of every person [...] from the instant that the slightest opposition is made to his opinions, he exalts his voice into thunder" ("Original Letters", 1793: 199). Similarly, in her collection of *Original Sonnets* (1799), she published "On Doctor Johnson's Unjust Criticisms in His LIVES OF THE POETS" (Seward 1799: 69) and "On the Posthumous Fame of Doctor Johnson" (Seward: 70). In the former, she described "aweful Johnson", his "insidious Envy", and his tendency to "lift the mean, and lay the Mighty low" (Seward: 69). In the latter, she further condemned the exoneration of his character in his posthumous canonisation:

[W]ell it becomes thee, Britain, to avow  
Johnson's high claims!—yet boasting that his fires  
Were of unclouded lustre, Truth retires  
Blushing, and Justice knits her solemn brow (Seward, 1799: 70).

With these verses, Seward was emphatically denouncing Johnson's supporters for failing to acknowledge his true character. The notion of truth cited in the last line anticipates a theme on which she would later expand in with her criticism of Boswell. Specifically, she decried the fact that Johnson's biographers were bending truth and objectivity and thus failing the standards of accuracy she deemed essential in literary criticism: "at the heart of the matter was the question of truth, not the truth of biographers [...] but the truthfulness of the subject. If he was not truthful, could he be good? And if he was not good should he be emulated?" (Clarke: 43). For Seward, this "goodness" is moral goodness as opposed to literary merit, which she termed "greatness." The latter is not in dispute; it is the former to which Seward objects. In 1787 Seward wrote of Johnson, Cowper, and Swift: "I mourn their nature, but admire their art, adore their head, while I abjure their heart" (Seward, 1811: 1: 297). For Seward, as with many women writers, the ideas of truth and moral character were paramount to the exercise of literary criticism. A writer's moral character—in Johnson's case, "envy," "bigotry," or "superstition"—was an essential element in their public recognition and it was not to be overlooked at the service of the exaltation of genius. Eighteenth-century women writers acted as "judges not just of aesthetic taste and literary excellence but also of cultural morality" (Mellor, 2000: 100), and indeed Seward's critical approach "derived from earlier models" and was imbued by the trend of sensibility (Kairoff, 2012: 260). Women were the upholders of a literary criticism at the crossroads of "a neoclassical mimetic aesthetic that was limited by its commitment to abstract universals [...] and to an outdated hierarchy of the arts" and a "masculine Romantic aesthetic devoted to celebrating the originality and passionate feelings of the poet" (Mellor, 2000: 99). Seward's emphasis on morality and her refusal to join in the chorus of Johnsonian canonization, therefore, was perceived by Boswell as a threat to the masculine Romantic aesthetics.

Between 1786 and 1787, the *GM* published three letters signed by Benvolio: “The Battledore Kept up for Boswell’s Shuttlecock” (1786: 125–26), “Remarks on Dr Johnson’s Character as Given by his Biographers” (1786: 302–04), and “Strictures from Benvolio on the Character of Johnson in our last” (1782: 684–85). Seward’s authorship was corroborated by the author herself: “The three letters signed Benvolio in the numbers for February and April, 1786, p.129 and p.302, and for August 1787, p.684, are *mine* ; I avowed them at the time they appeared, to almost all my friends, and, I think, to Mr. Boswell” (“Letter from Miss Seward”, 1793: 1100). In the first of the Benvolio letters, Seward argues that Boswell’s *The Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides* (1785) will allow the audience to “perceive” the true Johnson as comprising: “genius and absurdity, wisdom and folly, penetration and prejudice, devotion and superstition, compassion and malevolence, friendship and envy, truth and sophistry” (“The Battledore”, 1786: 125). Seward insists that to hail a man as a literary icon of uncommon ability, which are the terms in which Johnson is being celebrated, he must possess artistic greatness as well as moral goodness. Seward’s argument at the core of the Benvolio letters is precisely the aforementioned lack of balance in the posthumous homages to Johnson, which she denounces in Boswell’s *Tour* and subsequent *Life*. She chastises Boswell for “spread[ing] a veil” (“The Battledore”: 125) over Johnson’s faults and demands impartiality and truth in his posthumous public recognition. In her second appeal, “Remarks on Dr Johnson’s Character as Given by His Biographers” (1786: 302–04), Seward is again both apologetic and conciliatory. She seeks to avoid conflict and concedes “the impossibility of satisfying the captious multitude” (“Remarks”, 1786: 302), referring to either her criticism towards Boswell’s *Tour* or to the book itself. Seward terms Johnson as “*one* of the greatest *geniuses*, and certainly the *most extraordinary* being that ever existed” (“Remarks”: 302), reassuring the reader that she is not questioning his literary merit. However, Seward

insists on accusing Boswell of being untruthful and writes that Johnson's "stains of malice and irascibility should, by the hand of friendship, no more be concealed in the pictures of his mind, than the unwieldiness of his limbs, and the deformities of his countenance, should be omitted in those of his person" ("Remarks": 302).

The reasons why Seward, Boswell, and *GM* readers engaged in this public discussion in the first place, surface when considering the reception of Seward's major works in 1780, which is related to her public reputation and authorial maturity. Seward's public antagonism towards Johnson and his biographers was based on her very identity as a writer of renown, as she envisioned her reputation as a British muse as a duty towards the nation. For Seward, "Johnson's failure to comment justly on the nation's poets was a moral failure" (Kairoff, 2012: 243), and the object of her letters is not to stir controversy, but rather to "[enact] her proper role as British muse, exposing Johnson for the glory of British poetry" (Kairoff: 243). Indeed, Seward is asserting her "claim to a powerful cultural authority [...] who writes best for the good of the nation" (Mellor, 2000: 85). Therefore, Seward is fulfilling both her role as an admired and well-regarded writer *and* as a literary critic: "during her lifetime Seward held a position as a woman of letters that was unparalleled [...] she set herself up as an arbiter of taste, a critic" (Clarke, 2005: 35). Seward was always in contact with intellectual developments and cultural events, as a producer, consumer and reviewer, and ultimately as one of the consolidators of a "unified national culture" (Wood, 2006: 457). By carrying out her role as writer of the nation, Seward is asserting her claim to literary authority, a claim reinforced by her experience and maturity. Seward believes that it is her responsibility—toward the nation as much as toward the developing literary canon—to publicly interrogate Johnson's posthumous reception. This resolution informs Seward's literary identity and is consistent throughout her career but especially so in her maturity: she is firmly asserting her authority as an



experienced writer with an already established career and reputation. However, as a periodical wrote after her death, age influenced the decline of her reception and reputation (“Seward’s *Poems and Letters*”, 1811: 178). In order to maintain the reputation they were afforded at their prime, mature women were usually required to abandon the public arena. In other words, avoiding a reputation for being outdated “implied graceful, polite retirement” (Looser, 2008: 34). Seward’s refusal to do so had an effect on how her letters were perceived by Boswell and readers alike, and on how Boswell articulated his response to it.

The third and last Benvolio letter, entitled “Strictures from Benvolio on the Character of Johnson in our last” (1787: 684–85), is a reply to a response by a third party published in the magazine, “Character of Johnson from the Olla Podrida,” and it furthers the arguments on Johnson’s morality. The *Olla Podrida*, or rotten pot, was a periodical consisting of forty-four issues published between March 1787 and January 1788. It was edited by Thomas Monro and published by John Nichols, also editor of the *GM*. In the 13th issue of the periodical, dated June 1787, an anonymous correspondent addressed Seward’s comments on Johnson. The anonymous author was in fact Bishop George Horne (“Character of Dr Johnson, from the Olla Podrida”, 1787: 559), fellow and president of St. Mary Magdalen College, dean of Canterbury, and vice-chancellor of Oxford University (Aston, 2004: n.p.). In his essay, Horne argues that contrary to Benvolio’s arguments, Johnson’s talent outweighed his alleged moral failings. “His eminence and his fame must of course have envy and malice but let envy and malice at his infirmities and his charities and they will melt into pity and love that he should not be conscious of the abilities” (Monro, 1788: 77). Horne fully engages with Seward’s main argument when he argues that “his genius, his learning, his good sense, the strength of his reasonings, and the happiness of his illustrations” are “once good, and always good”

(Monro: 74). The essay was reprinted in the *GM* (“Character of Dr Johnson, from the Olla Podrida”, 1787: 559) and prefaced by a short communication signed “A.D.” In this brief note, the author protests that “many very unfair attacks have been made on Dr Johnson’s character” (“Character of Dr Johnson, from the Olla Podrida”: 559) which demanded a response. A.D. also characterises the Benvolio letters as a “malevolent attack” (“Character of Dr Johnson, from the Olla Podrida”: 559), to which Seward’s answer is curt and firm. She insists on her objectivity: “The author of the letters signed Benvolio had neither obligation nor enmity to Dr Johnson: and has therefore a better right to *retort* the charge upon himself.” She adds that “of him who has calumniated the moral and religious character of [...] Milton; —who has bestowed the name of scoundrel upon the royal protector of the Protestant religion; —and who has tried to brand the whole poetic fraternity it cannot be malevolent to say he was *malignant*” (“Strictures”, 1787: 685).

The most interesting part of the letter prefacing the “Olla Podrida” is its allusion to Seward’s gender. A.D. mentions that the “malevolent attack” (“Strictures”, 1787: 685) to Johnson in the *GM* was produced by “a lady with the misapplied signature of *Benvolio*” (“Strictures”: 685). To which Seward responded: “be it remembered that souls are of no sex, and their effusions therefore may, at pleasure, assume a masculine or feminine appellation” (“Strictures”: 685). With this answer, Seward resists being gendered by arguing that intellect and knowledge itself are genderless, and she demands that her critical acumen be considered regardless of her gender. Wolfson’s postulation in “Gendering the Soul,” contextualises Seward’s response. The scholar reasons that when women of the long eighteenth century write of sex in souls, they “confront a literary tradition in which the female soul is contained by paradigms that mean to serve male privileges and interests” (Wolfson, 1995: 67). Wolfson claims that Seward’s contemporaries’ legacy laid the groundwork for challenging the idea that intellectual skill

has to be masculine: “the persistent tensions of [Romantic women writers] texts generate an important cultural legacy” by “ungendering” their souls (68). This theory is further supported by Seward’s choice of a genderless pseudonym in the first debate (Blackwell: 34; Bailes, 2009: 125). In this sense, in this letter Seward is bringing both male—and female—coded paradigms together, and proclaiming that intellectual acumen is genderless and can be harnessed by men as well as women; and, by this logic, so is literary and critical authority. Moreover, the anonymity of the letters is used by Seward in an attempt to eschew gender altogether in order to protect herself from attacks that would belittle her literary and critical authority as well as her literary and social reputation.

In this first exchange, Boswell did not deem it relevant to address the issues raised by Seward publicly, but he wrote privately to Seward a few months after the last *Benvolio* letter was published. In this letter from April 1788 (*JBM*, Boswell to Seward, 11 April 1788), Boswell protests that “there has now been a long and lamentable cessation of our epistolary intercourse” (fol. 1r) and requests “a renewal of which and to inquire after you and your Reverend Father, and my other friends at Lichfield” (fol. 1r). Notably, he mentions the *Benvolio* letters: “I do not fail to trace your writings in the Gentleman’s Magazine when your name appears, and sometimes (if I guess right) when it does not” (fol. 1r). He then proceeds to comment, in an amiable, subdued tone, on Johnson’s posthumous reception: “What a variety of publications have there been concerning Johnson. Never was there a Man whose reputation remained as long in such luxuriant freshness, as his does” (fol. 1r). He then adds, pointedly, what seems to be a reference to Seward’s letters: “how very envious of this do the little stars; of literature seem to be, though bright themselves in their due proportion” (fol. 1r). Furthermore, Boswell calls Seward his “charming friend” and “dear madam,” and himself her “faithful humble servant” (fol. 1v) which with the general sarcastic tone of the letter has a rather

paternalistic hue. Boswell does not engage in any kind of bickering, but rather ignores her criticism, while acknowledging Seward's authorship of the letters. By ignoring her criticism, Boswell is dismissing her authority as a literary critic as well.

### **2.2.3 The Second Benvolio Debate (1793–94)**

The second debate with Boswell took place six years after the Benvolio letters and began as a response to Boswell's "The principal Corrections and Additions to the first Edition of Boswell's *Life of Dr. Johnson*" (1793), in which he mentions Seward: "in my first edition I was induced to doubt the authenticity of this account, by the following circumstantial statement in a letter to me from Miss Seward" (Boswell, 1953: 67). The debate differed with the first one in three essential points: first of all, because she had been mentioned by Boswell, Seward eschewed the pseudonym and signed with her name. Second, Boswell replied publicly. And, finally, this debate was much more aggressive and personal than the Benvolio letters ever were. Boswell's reply attacks Seward on two fronts: on the one hand, he dismisses Seward's claim to literary authority on the grounds that she is a woman and, on top of that, an old maid.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, in his reply Boswell mocks Seward's claim because it comes from one he considers an ignorant amateur writer, discrediting the critical skill and authority of Seward in particular and women writers in general. Examining Boswell's replies elucidates the role that both gender and age played in the dismissal of Seward's assertion of literary and critical authority. However, Seward's various responses to Boswell's attacks demonstrate great skill in navigating the gendered boundaries of propriety as well as her resistance to Boswell's dismissal.

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<sup>20</sup> The negative connotations associated with this social identity will be explored in detail in Chapter 5.

Seward began the second debate in 1793 and Boswell ended it in 1794. There were four letters in total, two by Seward, and two by Boswell (dated October, November, and December 1793 and January 1794). In his first reply, Boswell admits that Seward sent him Johnson's anecdotes, and he justifies his decision not to publish them arguing that they were "not only poetically luxuriant, but, I could easily perceive, were tinctured with a strong prejudice against the person to whom they related. It therefore became me to examine them with much caution" ("The Veracity", 1793: 1009). In this statement, he openly questions Seward's credibility and accuses her of bias. He lists several anecdotes Seward included in her sheets and claims that he fact-checked them and they proved not to be true. Boswell writes, with corrosive irony, that "as my book was to be a real history, and not a novel, it was necessary to suppress all erroneous particulars, however entertaining" ("The Veracity": 1009). Thus, Boswell disqualifies Seward as a biographer. Boswell finishes his retort hoping that "the fair Lady will be convinced that I have neither been impolite nor unjust to her" ("The Veracity": 1010). He adds that "from the veneration and affection which I entertain for the character of my illustrious friend, I cannot be satisfied without expressing my indignation at the malevolence with which she has presumed to attack that great and good man" ("The Veracity": 1010). In choosing these adjectives, "great and good," Boswell scornfully references Seward's main idea in the composition of the Benvolio letters, adding that "Dr Johnson's strict, nice, and scrupulous regard to *truth* was one of the most remarkable circumstances in his character" ("The Veracity": 1011). Boswell accuses her of envy, reducing her arguments to personal matter based on her emotions rather than her intellect, and references the Benvolio letters once more deeming it unnecessary "to take up any part of your valuable miscellany in exposing the little arts which have been employed by a cabal of minor poets and poetesses who are sadly mortified that Dr. Johnson, by his powerful sentence, assigned their proper

station to writers of this description.” (“The Veracity”: 1011). With this final retort, Boswell once again dismisses Seward as an amateur by calling her a “minor poetess,” an epithet that was both hurtful and inaccurate. As aforementioned, Seward’s fame had crossed the Atlantic in 1781, as the many editions of her most celebrated works demonstrate. However, Boswell’s comment is interesting. It is based on the idea that age negatively affected women’s earlier publications and altered their reputations: “gradual neglect or devaluation of their earlier contributions seems to have made posthumous notice that much less likely. A number of aged women writers saw their reputations and fame diminishing before their eyes” (Looser, 2008: 7). In fact, Seward was accused of “writing herself out of reputation” (“Seward’s Poems and Letters”, 1811: 179) by continuing to publish in advanced age.<sup>21</sup>

Seward did not take long in offering a vehement and firm reply. In “Letter from Miss Seward in Answer to Mr. Boswell” (“Letter from Miss Seward”, 1793: 1099), Seward deems Boswell’s letter “too insidious not to require some comments” (“Letter from Miss Seward”: 1099). Not surprisingly, Seward takes offence at Boswell’s attack on her literary identity and skill and proclaims him “the foe of her whom he has so often called friend” (“Letter from Miss Seward”: 1099). She accuses him of being one of Johnson’s “blind idolaters who perceive not in its bitterness the disappointed ambition, and, consequently, envious spleen, of Johnson” (“Letter from Miss Seward”: 1100), and thus of being biased—her main argument in the very first letter—and incapable of presenting a fair, balanced, and accurate portrayal of Johnson. In other words, she asserts that he does not have the skill nor the moral character for literary criticism. She continues by saying that:

[i]t has been my lot to contend equally with Dr. Johnson’s enemies and with his worshippers. Against the prejudice or envy of those who call his admirable style

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<sup>21</sup> This will be further explored in Chapter 5.

florid, turgid, stiff, and pedantic, I have ever maintained that he is the finest prose-writer in our language; and, against the indiscriminate blazon of those who pronounce him equally *good* as *great*, I have protested, from ingenuous indignation at his injustice to *others* (“Letter from Miss Seward”, 1793: 1099).

In this remonstrance, she reminds her interlocutor that her criticism is primarily aimed at his moral character. Seward ends this epistle refusing to engage further “into paper-war with a man, who, after professing himself my friend, becomes causelessly my foe” (“Letter from Miss Seward”, 1793: 1101). She demands that Boswell does not reply to this letter, ending thus the dispute: “New instances of Mr. Boswell’s heroic attempts to injure a defenceless female, who has ever warmly vindicated *him* must ultimately redound more to his dishonours than her, and will, I trust, produce *no future* intrusion upon Mr. Urban’s publication” (“Letter from Miss Seward”: 1101). By describing herself as a “defenceless female,” Seward is signalling her awareness that her gender, class, and the necessary protection of her literary and social reputation prevent her from further engaging in her defence, and asks Boswell, who is similarly aware of it, to leave the matter. Nevertheless, Boswell replied. In “Mr Boswell’s Reply to Miss Seward’s Second Attack,” dated January 1794 (32-34), Boswell insists on the “malevolence with which that fair lady had presumed to attack the great and good Dr Johnson” (“Mr Boswell”, 1794: 32) using almost identical diction and argumentation to those of his previous letter. In this piece, Boswell makes constant mocking attacks to Seward in order to further discredit her criticism and her literary authority: “I am sorry to find that our poetess has made a second attack, at great length, and in such temper as must be very uneasy to a gentle bosom” (“Mr Boswell”: 32). Moreover, he refers to her using her family’s pet name, “*Miss Nancy Seward*,” alongside a sarcastic “*my old friend*” (“Mr Boswell”: 33), an overt reference to her age, which, together with “miss,” signal Seward’s status as a

singlewoman, which, in addition to her age, makes her an old maid<sup>22</sup>. He gets once again indecorously personal when he resorts to a veiled reference to Seward's rumoured improper relationship with her close friend John Saville: "My fair antagonist's fertile fancy has men and things enough to employ itself upon, without vainly aspiring to be the judge of JOHNSON" ("Mr Boswell": 35). Kairoff has argued that the rhetorical strategies Boswell used in his letters had a single objective which was to destroy Seward's critical authority (Kairoff, 2012: 250). With this in mind, Boswell's attitude in this letter is read as an "outright insult" and a "breach of manners," his "gross familiarity" intended to "reduc[e] her from a worthy to a trivial antagonist and their contest from a public debate to a private quarrel" (Kairoff: 253), and thus destroy her credibility before their audience, and by extent, to delegitimise her authority and lessen her contribution. Additionally, Boswell alerts Seward that "he might do her harm", by publicly humiliating her and attacking her carefully maintained reputation. Indeed, he knew about rumours spread about Seward in her youth from his visits to Lichfield and their early acquaintance, and he threatens to use this knowledge of her past and of her private life, "enabl[ing] him to address her in a manner that suggests little regard for her dignity" (Kairoff: 253).

Boswell knows that he can stoop low and resort to petty disqualifications in order to bring Seward down because his authority, unlike hers, will not be questioned or harmed in the process. He insists that she, a woman, cannot possibly be at his level: "why should I be my fair antagonist's foe? She never did me any harm, nor do I apprehend that she ever can" ("Mr Boswell", 1794: 33). He further claims that there is no conflict between the two, as Seward wrote, because that "is not what I wish to have with the ladies" ("Mr Boswell": 33). Ironically, given the time and effort he has invested in disqualifying

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<sup>22</sup> As will be further explored in Chapter 5, old maids in the eighteenth century were the object of mockery and contempt.



Seward as a writer and a critic, he insists on being above discussing such intellectual matters with a woman and references the Psalms: “She will permit me, in perfect good humour, to call to her recollection a verse in very ancient poetry: ‘I do not exercise myself in great matters, which are too high for me’” (“Mr Boswell”: 35). At this point, it is evident that Boswell’s rejection is gender-coded: “Boswell shifts from defence of Johnson’s personality to an attack based on gender. He questions the legitimacy of Seward’s very participation in the public literary debate [...] He [marks] a clear line between professional men of letters, such as himself and Johnson, and Seward” (Wood, 2010: 36).

Indeed, Boswell dismisses Seward’s literary authority by ridiculing and questioning her critical capacity, writing that she is unreliable and negligent: “Miss Seward would not boast of *all* her communications concerning Johnson, as ‘conveying strong internal evidence of their verity from characteristic turn of expression,’ nor would it be any disadvantage if she should sometimes distrust the accuracy of her *memory*” (“Mr Boswell”, 1794: 33). He recasts her critical authority as vanity, a woman’s vice, while slandering her with unfounded accusations of impropriety in her relationship with Saville, thus turning Seward’s defence of moral goodness against her. This letter marked the end of the public Boswell-Seward exchange. It was not answered by Seward, though she went on to receive the public support of some of her friends in the pages of the *GM*.

#### **2.2.4 The Afterword of the Debates**

Seward did not publicly reply to Boswell’s last letter, but she addressed it in her private correspondence, thus making her opinion known to her circle by using a venue that was within the limits of female decorum. In a reply to her friend Henry Cary, she thanks him for this “truly friendly and generous indignation you have felt and expressed” over Boswell’s epistle, which she characterises as “unprovoked and malicious insolence”

(Seward, 1811: 3: 346). As for her silence, she writes that “It would be contrary to the declared intention, expressed in my last letter to Urban, and certainly beneath me, to pursue this controversy farther” (Seward: 346). Similarly, she writes to Anna Rogers-Stokes saying that “all my friends unite in thinking it utterly beneath me to pursue a controversy with an ungrateful and impudent man” (Seward: 353). She also comments on the limited options her gender affords her to defend her own honour after Boswell’s attack: “Defenceless against such a being is every woman, who has neither father nor brother to awe the assailant” (Seward: 353). However, Seward refused to be quieted altogether by Boswell’s remarks, and found creative ways to manage the situation within the limits of what was proper for a woman of her class with a reputation to maintain.

Although she had no father and no brother to “awe the assailant,” Seward had a cousin, Henry White; even if Seward could not engage further in the public debate, he could. As explained in the preceding section, White, whom Seward once described as “my literary huntsman” (Seward, 1811: 4: 292), published pieces on at least two more occasions that were either about Seward (Seward’s “Biographical Sketch” in the *Monthly Mirror*) or conveniently echoing her principles—his letter on the Miltonic sonnet in the *GM* (1786) was later quoted in Seward’s preface to the *Original Sonnets* (1799). The two cousins’ closeness and similarity of opinions suggest that Seward might have composed the letter and White had signed it, or at least that they had discussed its contents prior to publication<sup>23</sup>. If this were the case, Seward would be shielding herself behind her cousin’s gender to continue the conversation and defend her arguments. White’s letter responds to an anonymous missive hinting that Seward’s motives behind the Benvolio letters were produced out of filial duty. This letter is entitled “Extract from Mr. Boswell” (1794: 814)

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<sup>23</sup> Further details and examples of the literary relationship between Seward and White are provided in section 2.1.1 of this chapter, and in Chapter 3.3.1.

and is signed by “Æ.V.” In it, the author claims the discovery of “a ruling cause of Miss Seward’s being so highly provoked against both Johnson and Boswell” (“Extract”: 814). Far from seeking this cause in the textual evidence provided by the letters and acknowledging Seward’s authority, he argues she was moved by filial duty to write them: “may it not with reason be attributed to the Doctor’s having, in language grossly contemptuous, exposed to his friend the failings and infirmities of the lady’s father, and to the Biographer’s having unwarrantably spread and perpetuated them?” (“Extract”: 815). The author continues with an appeal to the readers: “Must not the fine feelings of a dutiful and truly affectionate daughter have been tremblingly alive on the perusal of this display of the character of her father in a book that was generally read, and a prevailing topick of conversation?” (“Extract”: 815).

As well-intentioned as this letter might be, it disqualifies Seward’s arguments and invalidates her critical authority by the same means used by Boswell: by dismissing her reasoning because of her gender. In White’s letter, Seward wants to ensure the readership knows that her arguments are those of a literary critic, not of a wounded daughter:

Miss Seward requests me to assure your readers that, however friendly to her the paragraph might be in p.815 of your last magazine, it is a mistaken suggestion. *From no individual instance of false representation, from no wound of personal feelings, arose her conviction of Dr. Johnson’s propensity to defame; but from a countless number of imputations concerning the characters of others, groundless as that which Mr. Boswell has generously recorded concerning her father, at whose house he had been entertained with the most friendly hospitality [...].* The letters signed Benvolio, in the Gentleman’s Magazine for February and April 1786, and for August 1797, she has acknowledged, and they were written several years prior to the appearance of this stigma of her father. *They evince that her convictions were not the offspring of filial indignation, though she must have been lost to natural affection if it had not arisen over that accumulated proof of the justice of her opinions concerning Dr. Johnson.* (“Character of Mr Seward”, 1794: 876)<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> My emphasis.

In the letter, Seward does not relent in her accusations towards Johnson. Even after Boswell's retaliation, Seward stays true to her principles and manages to continue the conversation. In spite of having had her literary authority belittled, she replies within the limits of propriety, thus safeguarding her reputation. With this, Seward manages to have the last word.

All in all, the Benvolio debates are one of the most significant events in the expression and consolidation of Anna Seward's literary and critical identity. They served as a platform for Seward to assert her authority as a writer and a literary critic, firstly in exposing her opposition to Johnson's posthumous reception, and secondly in standing her ground against Boswell's abuse in response to this opposition. By disputing the adulation of a literary titan such as Samuel Johnson, Seward confronted writers and readers alike, as well as the notion of literary genius itself. She emphasised moral virtue and goodness as requisite character traits for an author to be held as a model of literary merit, and in doing so she both enacts and reinforces her role as a public voice and establishes her claim to critical authority. Seward's arguments at the heart of the Benvolio debates were regarded as representative of a female, amateur and outmoded literary criticism being rebutted by the male, professional and fashionable criticism Boswell represents. Nevertheless, throughout the debate Seward resists Boswell's dismissal, remaining cold-headed, objective and fair in her assessment, whereas Boswell's response is heated and insulting. Significantly, Boswell focuses his attack on Seward's gender and age. Although she was two years younger than him, her literary style and critical approach are dismissed as outdated and obsolete, and by extension, so is her career. However, the opposite is true; Seward published on four more occasions after the Benvolio debates: *Ode on Elliott's Return from Gibraltar* (1787), *Llangollen Vale* (1796), *Original Sonnets and Odes Paraphrased from Horace* (1799), and *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin* (1804). They

were generally well-received, with the exception of occasional reviews where the critique on Seward's so-called old-fashioned style persisted. The implication that the author was writing herself out of a reputation shows the close ties between reputation and age, which continued until her posthumous publications. However, these publications were successful. *Llangollen Vale* and the *Original Sonnets* underwent several editions, and Seward's career extended itself into her fifties and sixties, as we shall see in the next chapter.

## Chapter 3

### **“To muse and to recall the past”: Processing Ageing through Grief, Remembrance and Decay in the *Original Sonnets* (1799)**

#### **3.1. Introduction to the *Original Sonnets***

In 1799 Anna Seward published an anthology of sonnets attached to a selection of her paraphrases from Horace's odes. The poems included in this volume had been written throughout her adult life "as occasion presented the Idea, through a Course of more than twenty Years" (Seward, 1796: 43) and were presented to the public as *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects; and Odes Paraphrased from Horace* (*Original Sonnets* henceforth). The *Original Sonnets* were to be Seward's last published collection of poetry in her lifetime. After that, she only published her *Memoirs of the Life of Dr Darwin* (1804), a biography of her friend and neighbour Dr Darwin organised as a series of anecdotes in the style of Hester Thrale Piozzi's and James Boswell's biographical accounts of Samuel Johnson that brought to the fore the Lichfield of her youth.

Published five years apart and in the last decade of Seward's life, both the *Original Sonnets* and the *Memoirs* are found within the author's later career writings, which makes them invaluable pieces of evidence in the examination of the authors' self-presentation in old age. Seward was fifty-seven when the poetry volume was printed. She had lost her father nine years before and was the sole head of the Seward household. She enjoyed a comfortable wealth and its accompanying independence; she travelled visiting friends in England, was involved in local affairs, continued her remarkably vast epistolary relationships, suffered from various physical and psychological ailments, and took care of John Saville and his daughter. She was also in the midst of compiling her life-long correspondence and poetry for publication and of negotiating its copyright value with Archibald Constable. As chapter 5 will explore in depth, the will to see publish her compiled works and correspondence responds to Seward's wish to control her career and

the way in which she was presented to the world as a writer. It is safe to affirm, then, that the last decade of her life was to Seward a moment of reflection and preparation, a period of both looking back to her career and her life up until that point; and of looking forward to her eventual demise and to the legacy she wished to leave behind that would allow her to manage, or so she thought, her posthumous fame. Therefore, it is no wonder that both of Seward's later career writings (the *Original Sonnets* and the *Memoirs*) are essentially biographical and concerned with memory and remembrance, the loss of youth, friends, and family, with her physical and emotional decay and the inevitable closeness of her own death.

This is especially true of the *Original Sonnets*. While the *Memoirs* are a repository of anecdotes from her youth and maturity, bringing to life the Lichfield of the mid-eighteenth century and paying special attention to Dr Darwin's career; the sonnets' focus is Seward herself. Out of the centenary of sonnets compiled in this publication twenty-six are dated. The dated sonnets cover a span of two decades—between 1770 and 1790—and are organised chronologically, which suggests (but does not ensure) that the undated poems are similarly organised. No more than thirty-two of the sonnets were written in the 1770s, when Seward was in her early thirties, whilst the majority of the poems were written when she was in her forties; a large number of them in the 1780s and no more than four in 1790 (Appendix C). While they were composed in her maturity, they were compiled, edited and published in her old age, and therefore the self-portrayal of Seward that emerges from them was one sanctioned by the author in her old age. Indeed, in a letter to Constable, Seward defines the sonnets as forming “a sort of mirror, which reflects my poetical mind, and the impressions it received through a course of twenty-one years in which period filial attentions household and passing cares seldom allowed me leisure for compositions of length” (Constable: 22). Therefore, the sonnets can be read as an

accurate representation of her mature writing and of the style and themes that Seward considered were exemplary of her best writing and, indeed, of the exceptional kind of writing to which a great poet should aspire. They offer a multifaceted view of memory and maturity while also perfectly encapsulating Seward's literary ideas. I approach the *Original Sonnets* examined in this chapter, then, not only as an account of her literary principles (an overview of which will be outlined in the next pages) but more importantly, as an intimate portrayal of Seward's mature and old self. For this purpose, this chapter will first tackle Seward's neoclassical literary influences, which is of the utmost importance for our understanding of the *Original Sonnets*' and their significance in Seward's career, together with her "sonnet claim" and her role within the female-led eighteenth-century sonnet revival. In the second half of the chapter, a selection of sonnets will be analysed in their thematic and stylistic context in order to see how she expresses and reflects on the issue of loss from her maturity and old age.

The *Original Sonnets* and the *Memoirs* were the last works she published, but not the last ones she wrote. During the last decades of her life, once again looking back on her life and her career, she edited and compiled her letters, poems, and miscellaneous writings, an edited selection of which was posthumously published as *Poetical Works* (1810) and *Letters from Anna Seward* (1811). The collections, as I argue in Chapter 5, were intended by Seward to secure her posthumous fame. One of the texts she wished to have posthumously published was *Telemachus*, a paraphrase drawing from François Fénelon's 1699 epic *Télémaque* on which she started working in the late 1790s but was never finished or published. Interestingly, she considered this work "equal to anything [sic] I have written" (Seward, 1810: 1: xxxv) and was convinced that the text would give her "the best right to pre-eminence [...] on Delphic ground" (Seward, 1811: 5: 41). *Telemachus* focuses on the adventures of Odysseus' son, Telemachus, in his journey to



find his father, accompanied by Minerva, who acts as his mentor. Fénelon wrote the text for his student, the *petit dauphin* Louis, duke of Burgundy and grandson of Louis XIV in 1693 (Johns-Putra, 2006: 85; Riley, 2007:7 9). Fénelon's text emphasises the virtues of austerity, peace, and hard work in royal rule (lacking in Louis XIV's reign) that he meant to relay on his student to prepare him for his future role as king (Hanley, 2020: 170); a role he never fulfilled, as he died before his grandfather. When *Telemachus* was published in 1699 in an allegedly unauthorised manner, it was interpreted as an attack to Louis XIV, who saw himself in the character of Idomeneus, King of Crete, and Fénelon lost the King's support. He was stripped of his pension and dismissed from his post at court. While recent research has argued (Hanley, 202) that the text neither endorses nor contests the ideal of divine right of the monarchy, other scholars have defined Fénelon's aforementioned principles of austerity, simplicity, peace and labour as those of a "Republican monarchy" (Riley, 2007: 78), which have been assumed to be an attack to Louis XIV's absolutism and the principle of divine right of the monarchy,—which in turn sets Fénelon in opposition to his contemporary Bossuet, whose writings upheld Louis XIV's principle of divine right, and who contributed to his downfall.

By choosing to write an epic, Seward is proving her literary prowess and claiming lineage to the great Renaissance authors she upheld as the English literary models of excellency; an idea that will be further developed in the discussion of the sonnet revival below. To do so, she mirrors Pope's indebtedness to Homer's translations (Johns-Putra, 2006: 87), and she follows on the footsteps of Milton, the last major Epic writer, by proposing to do precisely what no other eighteenth-century author had done: composing a grand epic. In the 1980s, Griffin, drawing from critics such as Bloom and Bate, argued that Milton "deterred the great or "strong" poets and attracted only the second-rate or the "weak," who imitated him slavishly" (Griffin, 1982: 144), an argument based on the

evidence that there are no great finished epics by the canonical authors of that century (Pope's epic on Brutus, like *Telemachus*, was unfinished). Had Seward finished her epic, it is doubtful that Griffin would have listed her as a "strong poet", seeing how the nineteenth century was witness to Seward's critical disappearance. It is much more likely that he would have discarded her work as a second-rate attempt. After all, Walter Scott, who was bequeathed the manuscript, decided against publishing it. Scott justified his decision alleging limited space in an already lengthy collection, but as scholars have argued his reasons for not publishing it had more to do with its form, the epic, being considered a male form and therefore improper for a female pen (Barnard, 2009:5, 129), and with its outdated style (Johns-Putra, 2006: 96). Indeed, *Telemachus* destabilises the genre's principles by deploying Seward's "commitment to the tenets of sensibility" (Johns-Putra: 87). Johns-Putra has argued that the poem showed "particularly effusive and excessive" and "staggeringly ornate" descriptions (Johns-Putra: 90), with its "vivid, painterly" style intended to "awaken the senses of the reader, and presumably to set off the requisite nervous response". At the same time its feminisation of the main character, who is portrayed as a sentimental man—all of these elements of sentimental fiction—made it "untenable" and "unpublishable" by 1810 (Johns-Putra: 96), and consequently, it was excluded from the *Poetical Works*. Seward's faithful adherence to the principles of sensibility also transpires in her sonnet collection, and is a significant part of her claim to literary legitimacy through the adoption of the sonnet form, which she described as her "sonnet claim" and is now known as a women writers-led poetic movement starting in the late eighteenth and well into the nineteenth centuries: the sonnet revival.

### **3.2. The Sonnet Claim**

In the introductory chapter to the anthology *A Century of Sonnets: The Romantic Era Revival* (1999) Paula Feldman and Daniel Robinson trace the history of the English

sonnet, from the Italian and English Renaissance of Petrarch and Della Casa on the one hand and Wyatt, Sidney, Spencer and Shakespeare and Milton on the other, up to the Romantics and the Victorians. Feldman and Robinson pay special attention to the sonnet revival, a women-led movement in the 1780s and 1790s (Feldman, 1999: 10), championed by poets like Anna Seward, Mary Robinson, Helen Maria Williams, and Charlotte Smith, and later on by Ann Radcliffe, Mary F. Johnson, Felicia Hemans, and Frances Ann Kemble. These authors recovered the sonneteer tradition and restored its reputation after years of cultural distance from the “barbaric” Elizabethans (Curran, 1986: 29), with so much success that it became well-established as a respected and thriving poetic form well into the nineteenth century. The choice of the sonnet form was conditioned by the literary *zeitgeist* and the prevalence of the cult of Sensibility, with its “its heavy emphasis on feeling and mood, and with the need to find a poetic form that was both demanding and accessible, to convey thoughts and feelings in a more natural way than poets previously had attempted” (Feldman, 1999: 10). The sonnets were an ideal form to develop literary prowess for its “intensity of feeling”, “clarity of perception”, and “harmony of language” (Feldman: 4), and they also allowed for the discussion of social and political issues, although the poets who practised the latter were doomed to become outmoded, due to a preference, in later Romanticism, for sonnets that sought to highlight the author’s inner feelings and the poet as detached from society (Kairoff, 2011: 3). Sonnets became so popular in the nineteenth century that they could be found in a wide variety of formats, including books of poetry, periodicals, sonnet anthologies, annuals, gift books and inserted in novels (Feldman, 1999:3). Certainly, the subsequently popular Romantic sonnets became “something uniquely suited for a new age of poetry, full of innovation, while not wholly divorcing itself from its origins in the Renaissance poetry

of Italy and England.” (Feldman: 3), therefore bringing together the old, respected form and the new social, political and literary *zeitgeist*.

The importance of this gendered revival of the form cannot be overstated. Stuart Curran has argued that the eighteenth-century sonnet revival ran parallel to the consolidation of “a definable woman’s literary movement” (Curran, 1986: 30), that possessed “much of the fervour, aggressive creation and dismantling of conventions” (Curran: 31) that popularised the form in the onset of the Romantic movement. Curran qualifies the sonnet’s form and style as “no mere indulgence in raw nerves and emotional excess”, as it was often perceived by its detractors, at a moment in time when the trend of sensibility—especially when heralded by women—was seen in a negative light. On the other hand, Backscheider has argued that the success of the female-led revival was so great that male authors had to “reclaim” the form from female authors (Backscheider, 2005: 16). Necessarily, the male Romantics’ adoption of the sonnet form, famously done by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats in the nineteenth century, was greatly indebted to early Romantic women writers. In fact, Wordsworth and Coleridge were heavily influenced by the female-led sonnet revival, and have been described as the “successors of Miss Seward and her contemporaries” (Maclean, 1940: 135). For instance Wordsworth read, admired, and even imitated the sonnets of Helen Maria Williams, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and, before all of them, Anna Seward’s (Wagner, 1996: 13; Moore, 2016: xxviii), although he repeatedly failed to acknowledge his debt to these pioneer poets (Roberts, 2019: 117). For his part, Coleridge included some of Seward’s poems in his *Sonnets from Various Authors* (1796), a sixteen-page long pamphlet printed for private circulation (Mays, 2001: 1199) anthologising twenty-eight poems, prefaced by his views on the validity of Petrarchan rules for the English sonnet.

Feldman and Robinson claim that Romanticism was the first time in the history of English literature in which women poets publicly matched the skills of their male counterparts and they did so by following the sonnet's established strict rules and conventions in order to "assert their own legitimacy as poets" (Feldman, 1999: 13). Therefore, the adoption of the sonnet, with its clear structure and lexical and syntactic demands, served a purpose: "to assert [writers] as proficient in the art of lyric poetry" (Feldman: 4). This was especially true for women writers, who embraced the sonnet as a way to situate themselves within the literary canon by adhering to the posthumous authority of consecrated early modern authors such as Milton, in order to legitimise their own status as writers in a way that was not considered inappropriate (Kairoff, 2011: 8).

Poetic form was for these women a way to claim literary lineage to the greats and assert their own poetic prowess and legitimacy. For Seward, writing sonnets was an act of self-canonization (Robinson, 1997: 34) performed by means of the "Sonnet's claim". The Sewardian concept of "the Sonnet's claim" was first expressed in her poem "To Mr. Henry Cary, on the publication of his sonnets" (sonnet LXIV in the *Original Sonnets*), published in 1788 as a preface to her friend and correspondent Henry's *Sonnets and Odes* (1788). There are two existing versions of the poem. According to Robinson (1997: 32), the change from the original "Sonnet-claim", in the first version to "Sonnet's claim", in the final version, devalues the concept: "Sonnet-claim" is "an even stronger statement on the relation between sonnet writing and its claim to literary pre-eminence; it is also a further indication of the relevance of Seward's notion of the sonnet claim to the practice of writing and, moreover, to the collecting and anthologizing of sonnets, inherently an act of canonization" (Robinson: 32). While I agree with this statement, I consider that it is not detrimental to the conveyance of the idea, and that it simply modifies the way it is

conveyed. The change in meaning in the proposition caused by the shift from substantive to possessive is subtle but nonetheless significant:

Prais'd be the Poet, who the Sonnet-claim  
Severest of the Orders, that belong  
Distinct and separate to the Delphic Song,  
Shall reverence; nor it's [sic] appropriate name  
Lawless assume. (Van Remoortel, 2011:11)

Becomes:

Prais'd be the Poet, who the Sonnet's claim  
Severest of the orders that belong  
Distinct and separate to the Delphic Song,  
Shall venerate, nor its appropriate name  
Lawless assume. (Seward, *Original Sonnets*, 1799: 67)

In the first version, Seward writes that the poet respects the sonnet form “Prais’d be the Poet, who the Sonnet-claim (...) shall reverence”, and should be praised for it, whereas in the second, she contends that the poet is claimed by the sonnet form itself “Prais’d be the Poet, who the Sonnet’s claim (...) shall venerate”. The second version, then, plays with the mythologisation of the sonnet, its divinised status adding importance and grandeur to it and those who adopted its form. It is also more fluid and provides a simpler and more effective sound structure, which also makes more explicit the Miltonian influence, emphasising the ABBAC rhyme. Therefore, although both versions establish the concept of the sonnet claim, in the 1799 version Seward infuses the sonnet form with the capacity to claim its poets. And, naturally, the poets the sonnet will claim are exclusively those who, for Seward, have the talent and knowledge of the only legitimate form and structure, the Petrarchan: the “arduous model/ which alone deserve the name of sonnet” (Seward, 1799: 66), able to “convey/ a grandeur, grace, and spirit, all their own” (Seward: 66).

Consistent with this idea, in his biographical preface to Seward's collected works Walter Scott affirms that it was Seward's intention "to restore the strict rules of the legitimate sonnet" through the publication of her sonnets (Scott, 1810: xix).

Following the argument in Seward's poem, the first of the poets "who the sonnet's claim" (Seward: 66), is "our Greater Milton" (Seward: 66). By linking the legitimate sonnet to the figure of Milton, Seward is establishing a divine lineage and claiming her place in it. Seward, who regarded the sonnet as a "highly valuable species of Verse, the best vehicle for a single detached thought, an elevated, or a tender sentiment, and for a succinct description." (Seward, 1799: vi), was greatly influenced by Milton "if not so much in subject, certainly in style and attitude" (Feldman, 1999: 11). From an early age, she wished to be associated as a disciple of the great poet. Of the two portraits of her that survive, one was painted by Tilly Kettle in 1762, when she was twenty, and long before her career had begun. In this portrait, she appears posing with her hands on a volume of Milton's poetry, with one hand resting on top of the book, open on page 112, and the other holding page 114 so that the viewer can read the number (see Appendix D). The fact that Seward's library was sold and scattered (at her direction) after her death<sup>25</sup> implies that we cannot ascertain which copy she is showing us in the painting, and consequently, which pages she is pointing at and why. Leaving this mystery aside, the presence of the book and the foremost significance it is given by the author herself in the painting is indicative of Seward's veneration for Milton.

This evident admiration for the great Renaissance poets was instilled in her from a tender age through her education, guided by her father. Part of this education was the neoclassical idea that in order to produce great poetry one must have read the classics extensively and strive to imitate them in order to become one with that tradition and to

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<sup>25</sup> See footnote 5.

continue it (Barnard, 2009: 124). Seward's early education and influences were decisive in her poetic style and principles in the future, and led her to adopt "neoclassical values of Augustan rhetoric, which she combined with her strong expression of sensibility" (Barnard: 124). Similarly, Kairoff has convincingly argued that Seward assigned terms to her own poetry that corresponded with the way the intellectual male minds in her circle and her literary influences (Scott and Dryden, amongst others) referred to a man's poetry to highlight its excellence and prowess, such as "hard," "severe," and "dignified", against the contrasting adjectives "soft," "tender," and "graceful" which they used to refer to an inferior form of art by a female pen (Runge 1997, cited in Kairoff, 2011: 7). Consequently, Seward referred to Milton's poetry in these "manly" adjectives, such as "hardnesses" (Kairoff: 10) to highlight its superiority.

Seward's taste for Milton was largely based on the fact that reading him and writing after him was not a simple exercise and therefore it was circumscribed to an intellectual elite she believed she belonged to: "[Reading Spencer and Milton] required the guidance of trained scholars and professional critics" (Kairoff: 5). Reading them and imitating them required, then, a certain intellectual level and a literary talent that Seward believed she possessed. Indeed, these neoclassical principles are discussed at length in Seward's letters and prefaces. Pope and Milton were for Seward "benchmarks of critical comparison" (Moore, 2016: xxvi). She defends the principles upheld in the first half of the eighteenth century: a brisk, reactionary turn from the Renaissance that proclaimed a fixed and unified style, and a strict aesthetic code that made literature the office of an intellectual, gifted elite (Wesling, 1980). The writing is concise and elegant, there is a preoccupation with form, and Latin is held as the standard. Consequently, mastering the Miltonic form was a way to demonstrate poetic prowess and to set oneself apart as a writer, to claim lineage to the great. Seward was proud of her accomplishment, and



satisfied of the success of her claim, and wrote about the sonnets that they possessed “an inherent buoyancy, which give them the power of emerging in future. That expectation has often been ridiculed as the forlorn hope of the poet; but Spenser, Milton, Otway, Collins and Chatterton, are instances that it is not always found in vain” (Seward, 1811: 5: 230), casually, but assuredly, linking her claim to these poets’ authority.

In addition, Milton and Spenser’s recognition as national poets and markers of literary excellency by other poets was key for to the consolidation of a unified British national identity, as well as the solidification of the country’s print culture (Kairoff, 2011: 5). Seward considered Milton, along with Shakespeare, a patriotic symbol and emblem of English literary superiority: “Shakespeare and Milton are names that were never before divided, when an enlightened Englishman boasts, with patriotic exultation, of the poetic glory of his country” (Seward, 1811:5:303). Indeed, the poet as a patriotic spokesperson of the nation is another role Seward, following Milton’s steps; and as a recognised British muse and upholder of the nation’s values after the success of her *Elegy* and *Monody* in 1780, she extolled Milton not only as a champion of English liberty but also as their literary champion against continental challengers. Surely their choice of Milton’s style had an array of cultural inducements besides its literary pedigree.” (Kairoff, 2011: 5). In this sense, Griffin (1990) argued that Milton and Dryden exemplify the authorial modes that dominated the transition from a culture of patronage to the democratising printing world: amateur/professional/laureate. He suggested that the laureate (Milton) understands poetry as a God-given gift and a responsibility, and they make it their life’s vocation, devoting themselves to it and to serve the nation with it. On the other hand, Dryden offers a more modern vision mid-way through the laureate and the professional, and sees poets as members of a lineage, inheritors of a living tradition and with the responsibility to pass

it on. Seward mirrored her career to those of Milton and Dryden's, and saw herself as successor, disciple and heir of their tradition.

### **3.2.1. Sonnets on Poetic Matters**

Several of the sonnets included in the collection are concerned with poetic matters such as poetic lineage and literary criticism, and in them, the author publicises her literary principles. Some of them are commentaries on current events of literary significance, like LIII "Written in the Spring 1785 On the Death of the Poet Laureat"; on readings that moved her to write, such as LIV "From a prose translation in Sir William Jones' Essay on the Poetry of the Eastern Nations", XLVII "on Mr. Sargent's Dramatic Poem, The Mine", or LXXIV and LXXV, which recount a story from Milton's Italian journey inspired by an article in *the General Evening Post* in the Spring of 1789; while others deal with the nature and merit of poetry. While these are not included in my central analysis because they are not concerned with matters of personal loss and memory, they are nevertheless a significant part of Seward's self-portrayal, because they expose her poetic principles as much as her preface does. Seward's sonnets on poetry are concerned with the classical poets she holds in greatest admiration but also with contemporaries of hers (with the notable exception of William Hayley, so acclaimed in her letters).

One of these is sonnet XX, "On Reading a Description of Pope's Gardens at Twickenham". This poem is a commentary on the permanence of Pope's legacy. Seward considers Pope's home, Twickenham, the site that contains his memory. Indeed, attaching a location to the memory of a loved or admired person is a recurrent feature in Seward's poetry. Noting the connection with ecocriticism, Kairoff remarks on Lichfield becoming Seward's "seat of personal memories" (2012: 9), and her "unique site of attachment" to Honora (2012: 8), and argues that Seward's loco descriptive poetry invokes the memories of her muse, Honora, which are attached to a certain place, in this case Lichfield. In

accordance with Kairoff's assessment, I think that the power to evoke memories attached to a specific location can be extrapolated to other of Seward's poetic subjects of a similar degree of significance. In this case, Pope. Seward's description of the gardens in the octave evokes the memory of the poet in every corner. The poetic voice walks through these sites of remembrance, observing them "with reverential eye" (Seward, 1799: 22), remarking how they contain the memory of his presence and his touch: "beneath his willow" (Seward: 22), "whose roof his hand with ores and shells inlaid" (Seward: 22). The poetic voice wanders, quite literally, following his steps, touching what he touched, watching what he watched "the streams he oft survey'd" (Seward: 22). By inhabiting the space he inhabited, the poetic voice is signalling their reverential admiration for the long-gone poet, while at the same time asserting their own platonic and poetic relationship to him, or what is the same, their poetic lineage to him: here you stood, and here I stand. In the sestet, Seward's remarks on the immortality of the poet whose posthumous fame is secure "thro' ages yet to come". "This is the Poet's triumph, and it towers/O'er Life's pale ills", she writes (Seward: 22), adding that "his consciousness of powers/[...]lift his memory from Oblivion's gloom" (Seward: 22).

On the other hand, sonnet XVI, "Translated from Boileau", is a translation from Nicolas Boileau's "L'Art Poétique" ("The Art of Poetry", 1674), a treatise on the neoclassical principles of poetic excellence practised by the French poets, which celebrates the sonnet as the most elevated form. The poem, which Seward must have read from Dryden's translation (Kairoff, 2011: 11) highlights the intrinsic merit of sonnet writing due to its difficulty, and once again emphasises the poetic principles she had declared in the preface. The choice of translating Boileau is interesting, since the ideological principles that dominate the *Original Sonnets* upheld the virtues of the patriotic Miltonic sonnet and the adequacy and excellency of the English language,

“extolling Milton not only as a champion of English liberty but also as their literary champion against continental challengers” (Kairoff, 2011), such as Boileau. All in all, Seward’s poem is once again an assertion of poetical authority and a claim to literary lineage by practicing the elevated poetic form: “by tightening and elevating Boileau’s rather informal alexandrines and casting them into sonnet form, Seward demonstrates her worthiness of Apollo’s wreath” (Kairoff, 2012: 13). Seward, after Boileau, sets herself apart from “votaries, who for trite ideas thrown/Into loose verse” (Seward, 1799: 18) who undeservingly call themselves Poets; and remarks that the “rigorous”, “energetic”, and “strict” sonnet is meant as a challenge (“be the test of skill!”) for those “duteous bards” who attempt it, and only those are worthy of Apollo’s wreath.

Sonnets XXI and XXII are a two-sonnet rebuke to the critics and reviewers who, in her opinion, disparage the Neoclassical poets out of jealousy and malice. In her sonnet, she attacks the “moody censors” (Seward, 1799: 23), who, much like the Earl of Shaftsbury in his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions and Times* (1711), dismiss and rebuff her contemporaries<sup>26</sup>. In a footnote offered by the author for contextualisation, Seward denounces that “Of the Poets, who were contemporary with Lord Shaftsbury [...] in the Period which *this* Age styles Augustan”, mainly Dryden, Cowley, Pope, Prior, Congreve, Gay, and Addison, “his Lordship speaks with *sovereign scorn*” (Seward, 1799: 23). According to Seward, Shaftsbury shows that “that the jealousy People of literary fame often feel of each other” is responsible for “the foolish, and impolitic desire of decrying the general pretensions of the Age to Genius.” (Seward: 23), and indeed that his line of argumentation is nothing but a means to lead the “credulous many” (Seward: 23),

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<sup>26</sup> The philosopher suggests that for a person to be considered a poet, they must possess a profound knowledge of human nature and morality the moderns do not have. Shaftsbury argues the writers of old were tantamount to divinity, “authentick [*sic*] *Sages*, for dictating Rules of Life, and teaching Manners and good Sense”(Shaftsbury, 1711: 155), and that in comparison their modern counterparts are found lacking.

(the readership) to believe both that contemporary poetry is worthless and that their own (in this case, Shaftsbury's) is the exception (Seward: 23). This idea of the stagnation of contemporary poetry by way of comparison is the same one Seward condemned in the Weston debate, in which she appointed herself defender of her contemporaries. In the sonnet she calls herself "proud of our lyric Galaxy", hearing talk of "faded Genius" with "supreme disdain" (Seward: 23). She equates the critics to a "Miser bend insane/O'er his full coffers, and in accents drear/Deplore imagin'd want" (Seward: 23), referring to his criticism that none of his contemporaries are worthy of praise, whereas Seward considers that, contrastingly, poets of ability abounded in that period too. In sonnet XXII, "Subject Continued", Seward addresses the critics directly. She calls them "lightless minds whate'er of title proud" (Seward: 24), incapable of appreciating fine talent "whose dull spirits feel not the fine glow/Enthusiasm breathes" (Seward: 24); and blames them for being the cause that hinders the success of her admired contemporaries: "yours, yours is all the cloud,/Gems cannot sparkle in the midnight Gloom" (Seward: 24). In the footnote to sonnet XXI, Seward affirms that the critics' "narrow selfishness" leads them "to *betray* the common cause, which it is in their *true* interest to *support*" (Seward: 24). "Common cause" here is understood as the literary enterprise, possibly referring to the role literary merit plays in the consolidation of a national consciousness and national pride, something that is also present in the first-person plural of the first verse "proud of our lyric galaxy" (Seward: 23). Seward's argument, then, is both a literary and a patriotic one, both causes repeatedly interwoven in her consciousness.

This sonnet was supposedly composed between 1775 and 1780, ten years before the Weston debate began (1789), but it already reveals Seward's strong poetic ideals. The Weston debate confronted Seward with Joseph Weston, lasted for three years and it involved nineteen correspondents, mostly members of Seward's immediate circle, but

also critics from Edinburgh, Norfolk and Wales (Brewer, 2013: 482). The debate originated after the publication of the translation “The Woodmen of Arden” (1788), by Joseph Weston, after John Morfitt’s Latin poem “Philotoxi Ardenæ”. An adamant Dryden enthusiast, Weston prefaced the poem with an essay, “Essay on the Superiority of Dryden's Versification over that of Pope, and of the Moderns”, discussing the pre-eminence of Dryden over Pope and the inferiority of modern poetry compared to the classic literary icons. Seward, who held an epistolary relationship with Weston, was appalled by this. She set herself to the task to admonishing Weston, defending Pope, and, most importantly, endorsing who she considered were the most meritorious examples of praiseworthy poetic excellence in modern poetry. Hawkins has defined Seward’s contribution to the Weston debate as “a literary *tour-de-force* (...) a review of the literary marketplace overall” (Blackwell, 2011: 34). It is worth remarking that this was the first public criticism in which Seward eschewed the use of a pseudonym, after signing as “A.S” in the first letter and as “A Constant Reader” in the second letter in her 1786 attack on Clara Reeve; in the first exchange with Boswell, she signed as “Benvolio”. Ann Hawkins has argued that the use of a pseudonym in these instances responds to a will to present herself as a genderless critic (Blackwell: 34; Bailes, 2009: 125), just like she did in the Benvolio debates when she was dismissed because of her gender<sup>27</sup>. Accordingly, Hawkins defends that it was in the Weston debate that Seward managed to compel “readers to accept her both as a poet *and critic*” (Blackwell: 34). Consequently, the Weston debate signals when Seward, unveiled and vulnerable to attacks, first publicly established her critical authority. The fact that she did it through the sonnet shows the variety and versatility of genres in which she constructs this authority.

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<sup>27</sup> See Seward’s remonstrance on the genderless nature of criticism contextualized with Susan Wolfson’s theory in “Gendering the Souls” in Chapter 2.2.2.

Seward's drive to contest Weston was prompted by the latter's reference to her in the closing of his preface. Due to Weston's references to Seward, his essay could have appeared to readers as having her endorsement (Blackwell, 2011: 33). A public response was necessary. In a letter entitled "Strictures on the preface of the Woodmen of Arden", published in two parts in the April and May issue of the *GM*'s volume 59.1 of 1789, Seward complains that Weston's argument is "injurious, and demands public refutation" (Foster, 1989: 45). In letters 1a (April issue, 291-92) and 1b (May issue, 389-91), she champions the poetry of her contemporaries, listing names such as Hayley, Mason, Thomson, Collins, Akenside, Warton, Cowper, Jephson, Goldsmith, Johnson, Beattie, Whalley, Horace Walpole, Garrick, Murphy, De La Crusca, Cumberland, Swift, and Cunningham, amongst others. She adds two "rising poetic lights", Cary and Lister, to the list; as well as seven "celebrated Female poets": Barbauld, More, Williams, Piozzi, Carter, Cowley, and Smith; and five "unschooled sons of genius" (Williams, 2001: 150). Weston's crusade against modern poetry is at the centre of the period's debates on aesthetic taste (Williams: 150). The contemporary poets praised by Seward are the challengers of the preeminent aesthetic classicism of the period, and therefore at the core of the Romantic spirit of dissidence and progressiveness: "a challenge to a literature that had yoked itself to Enlightenment culture, and in consequence to a belief in the inevitability of progress (...) offered an alternative view of what poetry was, and whom it was for" (Williams: 153). Weston's position, then, is an "essentially reactionary position, against which Anna Seward and Francis Jeffrey<sup>28</sup> stand defined as modern progressives" (Williams: 152). On the other hand, Gretchen M. Foster, compiler of the Weston debate letters, contends that the discussion "reveals no general sense that poetry is exhausted or

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<sup>28</sup> Francis Jeffrey (1773-1850), literary critic and editor of the *Edinburgh Review* (1802-1929), an influential publication promoting the principles of Romanticism.

that a major revolution is in the making” (Foster, 1989: 10); however, it points at the writers’ concern with necessary changes in poetry. It acts as a preview of the questions revolving poetry, merits, and value that were to be formulated ten years later by Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads*—and two before that, by Joanna Baillie (Curran, 1988: 186)—and therefore, a preamble to the Romantic movement that would revolutionise poetry. For Foster, the debate tackles issues “asked by readers in every generation and answered in as many ways as there are literary periods”: the nature of poetry and what constitutes a poet (Foster, 1989: 10). Its extension and following denotes the concern of contemporary readers and poets about the issues raised in the debate. Kairoff has similarly addressed this, postulating that Seward’s corpus both defines the literary tradition she inherited and anticipates Romantic-era trends. (Kairoff, 2012: 3).

The subject of the presumed inadequacy of the critics is something Seward discusses at length in a variety of genres, especially in her letters, but also in her sonnets. Apart from the aforementioned, in Sonnet XLIX, “On the Use of New and Old Words in Poetry”, Seward once more rebukes the critics for deeming “new and old words” (possibly Latinisms) inappropriate. She accuses them of “false pride” and “narrow jealousy”, and of disparaging poets for the sake of it, with no arguments to support their criticism (Seward, 1799: 51). On the far side from the critics, she praises the figure of the poet, “with glad welcome” appreciating the new possibilities that newly introduced words afford them. She demands that these commentators, instead of criticising, “explain/their *cause* of censure” (Seward: 51) to the poets themselves, who, “in balance true” (Seward: 51) will consider their arguments and “smile at the objections vain/ of sickly Spirits, hating for they do!” (Seward: 51).

Still on the subject of the critics, three of the sonnets, LXXVI “The Critics of Dr Johnson’s School”, LXVII “On Dr Johnson’s Unjust Criticisms in His Lives of the



Poets”, and LXVIII “On the Posthumous Fame of Dr Johnson” express Seward’s dissatisfaction with the canonisation of her acquaintance and neighbour Samuel Johnson, something she made public during the Benvolio debates. In the three sonnets, Seward denounces Johnson’s “fallacious” literary judgements and “blended hypocrisy and malice” (Seward, 1799: 71) and in a footnote reminds the reader that he wrote that “the perusal of Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a *task*, and never a *pleasure*” (Seward: 71), that he celebrated Dryden’s “*absurd*” ode on the death of Mrs Anne Killebrew “is the *noblest* Ode in this knowledge” (Seward: 71), and dismissed Gray as lyric poet. The source of Johnson’s “injustice”, she writes, lies in the “envy of his temper” (Seward: 71)<sup>29</sup>.

Sonnets LXI “On Reading his Sonnets at Sixteen”, the previously analysed LXIV “On the Publication of his Sonnets”; and LXV “To the Same” are dedicated to, and about, Henry Cary. Cary is now known for his translation of *The Divine Comedy* (1814), published years after Seward’s death, but by the time this sonnet was composed he was a young *protégée* of Seward’s and had recently published *Sonnets and Odes* (1788), to which sonnet LXIV was included. She had met him when he was fifteen, and had detected signs of poetic prowess in him. Their relationship, as it is well recorded in her letters, only grew from there. It was not only one of literary appreciation and mentoring, but it also matured into a lasting friendship, to the point that Seward was godmother to one of Cary’s children. Furthermore, Cary’s poem “On Reading the Following Paraphrases” was attached to the preface of the *Original Sonnets* (1799). While, as aforementioned, LXIV deals with the Miltonic sonnet and gives name to Seward’s claim to legitimacy through the form “sonnet’s claim”; the other two sonnets are praises to Cary’s talent written in pastoral style, highlighting both his youth and his genius. She celebrates Cary as the “disciple of the bright Aonian Maid” and promises him that in spite of his youth (he was

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<sup>29</sup> For a further contextualisation of these poems, see Chapter 2.

sixteen at the time) “thou, in time, shalt gain/ like them, amid the letter’d World, *that* sway/Which makes encomium *fame*” (Seward, 1799: 67) and that “thy Genius shall display/The splendors promis’d” (Seward: 67) but, in order to attain that, she advises him not to let “Indolence, and Syren Pleasure” (Seward: 67) . The sonnet is designed as a message of advice to Cary, in which Seward takes on the role of mentor, and of experienced author. The poem makes repeated reference to Cary’s youth, a reminder that while his talents are abundant, he still needs to hone them—“extend, refine, and dignify” (Seward: 67) —and be patient, because he is too young yet for literary fame. His poetic ability at sixteen is described as “a shining morn” (Seward: 67) , while his envisioned future “high noon” (Seward: 67). More importantly, the poem depicts Seward as the object of Cary’s admiration, referring to herself in the first person singular: “since the ardors of my strain/ to thy young eyes and kindling fancy, gleam/with somewhat of the vivid hues, that stream/from Poesy’s bright orb” (Seward: 67), and “My verse Aonian” (Seward: 67) . She adds that every one of the aforementioned strains is “recompens’d at full” (Seward: 67), in spite of the critics’ unjust assessment of her writing: “each envious strain” shed by dull Critics”, she writes, followed by an alliteration that evokes Seward’s well-known animosity towards the reviewing press and seems to suggest viper—“venial, vex’d and vain” (Seward: 67) .

### **3.3. The *Original Sonnets* (1799)**

#### **3.3.1. Preface to the *Original Sonnets***

In the preface to the *Original Sonnets* Seward expands the ideas already developed in her particular “sonnet’s claim”, first exposed in “To Mr Henry Cary, on the publication of his sonnets”: the excellence and legitimacy of the Petrarchan sonnet and her adherence to its rules; the validity—and indeed, superiority—of the English language for sonnet writing; the difficulty and reward in crafting sonnets, requiring the highest skills, and therefore

testifying to the poet's prowess. However, apart from their form and length, the main difference between the sonnet and the preface is that in the latter Seward uses a second (male) voice to validate her assertions. In the preface, Seward quotes extensively from an essay published by her cousin Henry White<sup>30</sup> in the *GM* for 1786. White's poetic ideas are consistent with Seward's, and they might have discussed them at length with her before having them published in the *GM*. But why does Seward quote another person's ideas, when we know these are hers, and were first expressed by herself in the sonnet "To Mr. Henry Cary, on the publication of his sonnets"? Seward is aware that her claim to poetic authority, expressed in such resolute terms, might be considered immodest. After all, although the sonnet and the preface express the same idea, they do it in a different setting and with different purposes. The sonnet is introducing a selection of poems by another author, whilst the preface introduces her own. Throughout her career Seward does not shy away from firmly asserting her authority (critical, authorial or poetic) however, claiming her place in the canon as she does in the preface, arguing her poetic prowess, her lineage to Milton, and her adherence to the highest, Petrarchan form, could have been negatively interpreted by readers and critics alike.

As to the style and themes of the sonnet, White suggests in the preface that it "should be nervous, and, where the subject will with propriety bear elevation, sublime; with which, simplicity of language is by no means incompatible. If the subject is familiar and domestic, the style should, though affectionate, be nervous; though plain, be energetic." (Seward, 1799: iv). Seward deems the sonnet a "highly valuable species of Verse; the best vehicle for a single detached thought, an elevated, or a tender sentiment, and for a succinct description" (Seward: vi), in the style of Milton, who preferred sonnets

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<sup>30</sup> Henry White, Seward's cousin, often published on Seward's behalf. Some examples of their collaboration are White's letter to the *GM* during the Benvolio debates ("Character of Mr Seward", 1794: 876; see Chapter 2.2.4) and a reply to the criticism of *Llangollen Vale* ("Comment on Review", 1796: 556-559; see Chapter 2.1.1).

on a single theme; and describes her collection as having followed this same preference, saying that they “ensued from time to time, as various circumstances impressed the heart, or the imagination of the Author, and as the awful, or lovely scenes of Nature, arrested, or allured her eye” (Seward: vi).

In this preface, Seward establishes the rules of the Petrarchan, or Miltonic, sonnet, which she claims to follow exactly in her poems: “whatever other excellence may be wanting in the ensuing Poems, they are, with only nine exceptions out of the hundred, strictly Sonnets” (Seward: iii) with very few exceptions, and these she singles out and justifies (Seward: iii). As we saw before, Seward places great importance on the rules of the so-called “legitimate sonnet” (Seward: iii) in order to reinforce the merit of her creative effort and the legitimacy of her endeavour. Seward seeks to vindicate her poetic authority by demonstrating that the sonnet craft requires the highest poetic skills, skills she possesses. In his essay, White, concurring with Seward’s view of the sonnet as an example of the highest poetic achievement, defines the form as “the most difficult species of poetic composition; but difficulty, well subdued, is excellence” (Seward: v). In terms of its metric, White writes that the sonnet has “a particular and arbitrary construction; it partakes of the nature of Blank Verse (...) each line of the first eight, rhymes four times, and the order in which those rhymes should fall is decisive. For the ensuing fix there is more licence; they may, or may not, at pleasure, close with a couplet” (Seward: iv). Significantly, she declares the superiority of the Miltonic form, in a comment directed to Charlotte Smith: “I flatter myself the idea will vanish that our language is not capable of doing justice to the *regular* Sonnet” (Seward: iii). Smith deemed English an improper language for the Petrarchan sonnet, while at the same time it is once again indicative of her wish to adhere to the genealogy of English poets who wrote sonnets in their native language; namely, Milton; and also proof of her unyielding patriotism. In this sense,

Seward extols the existence of “great number of beautiful legitimate Sonnets, which adorn our National Poetry, not only by Milton, but by many of our *modern* Poets” (Seward: v), thus not only claiming her lineage to Milton and Petrarch but also affirming that there is a burgeoning poetic community of talented sonneteers similarly skilled—as she already did in the Weston Debate (1789-1791). In the *Critical Review*’s report on the *Original Sonnets*, the reviewer agrees with Seward’s endorsement of the English sonnets and quotes Coleridge’s similar commendation: “A sameness in the final sound of its words is the great and grievous defect of the Italian language (...) surely it is ridiculous to make the *defect* of a foreign language a reason for our not availing ourselves of one of the marked excellencies of our own” (“[Review of *Original Sonnets*]”, 1799: 33). As poet of the nation, like Milton before her, she feels endowed with the authority and the responsibility to not only represent her contemporaries but also to uphold their common literary mastery. Therefore, Seward’s claim is not her own, but the English language’s.

Then, Charlotte Smith’s assertion that the “legitimate” sonnet “suits not the nature or genius” of the English language (Seward, 1799: v), expressed in her preface to the *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784) is adamantly rejected by Seward who qualifies it of “fallacy” (Seward: v), arguing that its excellence has been demonstrated by many of her contemporaries as much as by Milton himself. Like Seward and many of their contemporaries, Charlotte Smith also attempted to assert her position within the literary Olympus by sonnet composition, but she forswore the Italian form, denouncing its constraints in the preface to the first and second editions of his collection: “I am told, and I read it as the opinion of very good judges, that the legitimate Sonnet is ill calculated for our language. [...] the difficulties of the attempt vanish before uncommon powers.” (Smith, 1786: iii.). Bakscheider considers Smith’s sonnets “reinvent[ed] the sonnet and extend[ed] its purposes” (Bakscheider, 2005: 317), anticipating the Romantic sonneteer

tradition in theme as well as form; indeed, Curran has claimed that Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* "established the mode of the new sonnet in pensive contemplation, mostly sorrowful, at times lachrymose" (Curran, 1986: 30). For these reasons, Smith is hailed as the mother of the sonnet tradition (Feldman, 1999: 3); while Seward has been relegated to a second place, albeit she was "the first woman sonneteer with substantial impact upon the tradition" (Feldman: 10), exerting her authority as such both as sonneteer and as critic.

Smith and Seward cannot be considered on the same terms because we read them from a post-Romantic stance and we inevitably consider them through a Romantic lens that values them according to how Romantic they were, or in what ways they paved the way for the Romantic generation instead of regarding them for themselves and in their appropriate context (Kairoff, 2011: 1). They wrote in different styles and for different purposes; while Smith anticipated certain Romantic principles, Seward stuck to the poetic principles of the neoclassical style of her youth: "Smith's self-referential emphasis, persistent melancholia, and vaunted uniqueness echo throughout Coleridge's and Wordsworth's poems and down through Byron's", while, contrastingly, Seward, "measured against Smith's proto-romantic qualities, is judged the lesser poet." (Kairoff: 1). As Roberts has argued, Seward and Smith co-exist in the same poetic space, and yet "Seward takes a different position within it" (2019: 17). While Seward continues a tradition, Smith "uses inherited themes to engage with different literary traditions" (Roberts: 29).

Accordingly, Seward considered herself and what she stood for in opposition to Smith. Curran attributes Seward's role as chief detractor (1986: 31) to "apparently no reason but a sense of professional threat to her eminence" (Curran: 31). Seward's expressed several complaints towards Smith's sonnets, which she qualified of "everlasting lamentables" (Seward, 1811: 3: 287). Firstly, as aforementioned, Seward adamantly

disagreed with Smith's consideration that the English language was unsuited for the Italian sonnet form. In fact, she conveyed in a letter to William Hayley that her 1788 sonnet to Henry Cary, "To Mr. Henry Cary, On the Publication of his Sonnets" had been intended to contest Smith's argument (Kairoff, 2011: 2). Secondly, she considered that by failing to acknowledge her sources, Smith was committing plagiarism (Kairoff, 2013: 8). This was addressed by Smith in her preface to the third and fourth editions of the *Elegiac Sonnets*: "As a few notes were necessary, I have added them at the end. I have there quoted such lines as I have borrowed; and even where I am conscious the ideas were not my own, I have restored them to the original possessors." (Smith, 1786: vi). Seward's accusations of plagiarism remain a very interesting account, for they illustrate not only Seward's talents and vocation as literary critic, but also her self-assurance in her role as woman of letters: "popular as have been her sonnets, they always appeared to me as a mere flow of melancholy and harmonious numbers, full of notorious plagiarisms, barren of original ideas and poetical imagery" (Seward, 1811: 5: 162). Melissa Bailes qualifies Smith's plagiarism as "deviations from originality" (2009: 106), and claims that Seward's insistence on this matter reinforces her authorial authority by clearly establishing her own style and identifying that of others. On the other hand, Kairoff suggests that Seward's antagonism towards Smith is due to the former's preference for social poetry and the latter's tendency to a more later Romantic focus on the self: "every sonnet illustrates Seward's preference for poetry than connects the self to others and to the surrounding world rather than for poetry that emphasises, as Smith does, the individual isolation" (Kairoff, 2012: 158).

### 3.3.2. Reception

The eventual collection of poems was printed by G. Sael in London and sold for six shillings and sixpence. The volume was also sold in Birmingham by Swinney, in Lichfield by Morgan, and it underwent three editions (Kelly 1999:xlii), all in 1799. It was reviewed by the *GM* and the *Critical Review* in December of the same year. The *GM* deigned to qualify the volume as of “undoubted merit” (“[Review of *Original Sonnets*]”, 1799: 1065) but praised only three of its sonnets, all of them having to do with the infirmity and death of her father and sister and therefore emphasising, exclusively, “filial piety” (“[Review of *Original Sonnets*]”: 1066). On the other hand, the *Critical Review*’s commentator was substantially more extensive and thorough, quoting Seward’s notes on the legitimacy of the sonnet. This preface, however, appeared to Seward as too obscure for the general public: “that laboured dissertation upon sonnets in general explaining their construction by Greek terms is not likely to catch the public attention”, she wrote, adding that “the general reader perceiving himself bewildered in a maze of scholastic technicisms will not proceed so far as to inform himself whether the strictures approve or condemn the work of which they treat” (Seward, 1811: 5: 263), she qualifies the essay as “superfluous” because “my preface contains Mr White's so much more comprehensible analysis the principles of which Mr C Loft does not combat” (Seward: 264). About the poems, the reviewer concludes that “in a collection so numerous inequality must be expected” (“[Review of *Original Sonnets*]”, 1799: 33) and deems their final lines “eminently beautiful” (“[Review of *Original Sonnets*]”: 34). Seward took the article and its criticism gracefully: “I consider his warm praise as highly honourable to my sonnets and take it thankfully” (Seward, 1811: 5: 264).

Moreover, Samuel Egerton Brydges, a self-proclaimed Romantic writer and critic, wrote of Seward’s corpus in his *Censura Literaria* that “Her first publications were her best; and indeed so much superior to her last, as to form a subject of rational wonder”



(Brydges, 1809: 409). In his biographical preface, Scott praised them as containing “some beautiful examples of that species of composition”, however, he castigated the *Translations from Horace* for “being rather paraphrases than translations” and therefore incapable “to gratify those whose early admiration has been turned to the original” (Scott, 1810: xix). In his private correspondence, nonetheless, Scott wrote that he found most of Seward’s poetry “absolutely execrable” (Lockhart, 1853: 254). *The Monthly Review* called it a “respectable quarto” in 1812 (“Scott’s *Poetical Works*”, 1812: 22). Moreover, seven of Seward’s sonnets were reprinted in George Henderson’s *Petrarca: A Selection of Sonnets from Various Authors* (1803), with her knowledge and permission (1803: xi). Five out of a total of sixteen authors featured in the anthology were women, and of the total of poems, thirteen were by Mary Robinson, seven by Smith, seven by Seward, and two by Helen Maria Williams and Jane West each; whereas few were from Petrarch or Milton: “from the labours of what are considered our early poets I have availed myself but parsimoniously. Few of their SONNETS could be found agreeable to modern taste” (Henderson: vii). This contemporary account of the poets relevancy is two-fold: first, it demonstrates the women writers’ pre-eminence as sonnet composers. Secondly, it illustrates the aforementioned rejection of the sonnets written during the Renaissance: In his anthology, Henderson characterises Milton’s sonnets as wanting “which all but critical readers will chiefly require, melody and softness of versification” (Henderson: xxiii), an idea corroborated in Seward’s preface to the *Original Sonnets*, where White cites as models Milton’s “To the Soldier to spare his Dwelling-place” and “To Mr Laurence”, while claiming that “out of eighteen English Sonnets, written by Milton, four are bad. The rest (...) have a pathos and greatness in their simplicity (...) They possess a characteristic grace, which can never belong to three elegiac stanzas, closing with a couplet” (Seward, 1799: v). Indeed, Henderson praises Seward’s sonnets as being “the

least deviating from the italian [sic] model" (1803: xxvii), and he qualifies Seward as an authority in the original, and, according to both, proper sonnet construction. Nathan Drake, cited by Henderson in the aforementioned volume, also commented on the worthiness of her sonnets in his *Literary Hours: Or, Sketches Critical and Narrative*, qualifying them as being "entitled to the appellations of sublime, pathetic and picturesque, and few are deficient, either in choice of diction, or harmony of versification" (Drake, 1800: 114).

### **3.3.3. Analysis**

There are at least two online copies available of Seward's *Original Sonnets*. One is a digitalisation by Google of the volume owned by Oxford University, bearing a stamp from the Bodleian Library dated from September 18th, 1926. This copy originally belonged to Henry Cary, as the inscription on the cover, in Seward's hand, "to the Rev. Henry F. Cary from the author", proves (Appendix E), and can be found at Archive.org and Google Books. However, the version used for this analysis is the digital copy from the *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO)* database, accessed through to the Huntington Library's website. This volume bears a British Library stamp, undated, and it is a first edition. This copy is missing some pages (the cover, "Original Sonnets, &c. by Anna Seward. Price six shillings & sixpence", and its back "entered at Stationer's Hall"; page 3, containing sonnet I), which I have consulted in the aforementioned Oxford University edition.

#### **3.3.3.1. Classification**

A very significant scholarly contribution to the study of Seward's sonnet corpus is Kairoff's, whose analysis is based on the idea of "corresponding poems", or what is the same, that the poems correspond to biographical events recorded in Seward's letters: "the

way Seward explored epistolary exchanges into sonnets reflecting not only her inner feelings but also the moral and critical and critical reflections occasioned by events chronicled in her letters” (2012: 179). While this classification is of no particular interest for the present analysis in itself, Kairoff’s research in connecting sonnets and biography still remains a hugely relevant contribution to the study of Seward’s textual corpus. My analysis is only partially concerned with bibliographical matters but hopes to go beyond that and provide an assessment of the sonnets that brings to the fore the portrayal of herself Seward prepared and published at the decline of her life and her career. And, while the chronological order of the sonnets proves helpful in identifying certain patterns, that too is only a marginal element in my assessment. My analysis then, seeks not to elucidate emotional aspects of Seward’s biography that emerge from the sonnets, but rather to analyse those in their context in order to identify larger patterns of self-reflection and self-portrayal that the poems in the collection reveal. For this purpose I have selected thirteen sonnets out of the hundred total that are paradigmatic of three major themes in the collection: grief, remembrance, and decay. These themes divide the sonnets that delve into the theme of loss (loss of loved ones, of youth, of health, and of life) are a majority within the centenary and they constitute a narrative intrinsically connected to Seward’s self-awareness of her old age and physical and emotional decline. The sonnets of Remembrance express Seward’s innermost feelings of grief, hope, discord, and solace in the face of her own ageing. This division, although not conclusive, allows for a productive assessment of the sonnets in each group that in turn highlights the importance these themes had in Seward’s poetic production and the role they played in her self-presentation. Inevitably, these three themes often overlap, and sonnets I have classified in one of the groups contain features significant in another group. This is to be expected and does not affect the usefulness of the classification.

The sonnets to Honora Sneyd have not been included in my analysis. This is due to two main reasons. Firstly, other scholars have examined Seward's poems to and about Sneyd at length (Faderman, 1981; Curran, 2001; Backscheider, 2010; Kairoff, 2012; Lanser, 2014; Brideoake, 2017) from the very compelling perspective of same-sex desire. Secondly, due to their large number within the collection and their immense impact in Seward's poetical production, they are beyond the scope of the present investigation. In her chapter "The Lost Honora", Kairoff analyses the sonnets to Sneyd as the means to fashioning Seward and Sneyd's relationship from the former's perspective and argues that this story of their relationship is shaped by the conventions of the sonnet form. Before Kairoff, Clarke similarly argued that Honora might have been a source of inspiration, a literary trope she used to emulate the classics: "[the] loss of the loved one offered the poetic subject of unattainability" (Clarke, 2005: 35). Other scholars, such as Backscheider, Lanser, or Brideoake, have interpreted the sonnets to Sneyd as an example of transgressive homoromantic poetry which has contributed to the study of Seward from the perspective of queer studies. They are prime examples of Seward's poetry of sensibility, evocative and melancholic, looking for an outlet to her own inner turmoil in the despair of her feelings and for an emotional response from the reader: "the level of anxiety expressed in the Sneyd poems is extraordinary" (Rounce, 2013: 126). They are, in sum, both deeply personal and emotive and conventional in their use of the sonnet form. And their abundance (at least seventeen out of the hundred are directly or indirectly either to or about Sneyd) indicates that the topic was of great concern to Seward throughout her life. In this sense, Kairoff argues that Seward's condition as a single woman put her in an intricate position in choosing the object of her mourning in her sonnets drawing on traditional sonnet themes such as erotic or platonic love and loss. Unlike Smith, who was a married woman with children, Seward could not write from the

perspective of a lover (had she experienced it, she was barred from it by decorum), or from maternal attachment. She negotiated this difficulty by writing of her devotion to both her father, as we shall see in the analysis; and to Honora Sneyd.

The sonnets in this analysis are concerned, as aforementioned, with the classical theme of loss. From the 1780s onwards, melancholia became gendered and set into a binary dichotomy. In men, it came to signify rational ability, transforming grief and the experience of loss into a masculine cultural power (Dolan, 2008: 22), which led to the consolidation of the figure of the melancholy man, a man of great feeling with an increased capacity “for the Lockean brand of rational thought that leads to moral reflection” (Dolan: 24) that would be consolidated by the second generation of Romantics. On the other hand, the sentimental woman was regarded as one that has allowed the excess of feelings to dominate her rational ability (which would be redefined as hysteria), rendering her inarticulate (Dolan: 23). Before the 1780s, however, melancholia and sensibility went hand in hand. Heavily influenced by Pope’s *An Essay on Man* (1733-34), which heralded the correspondence between great feeling and a rational mind, and the writings of Rousseau; the early eighteenth century saw “a discernible and lasting shift in the perception, valorisation and expression of sentiment, sensibility and emotion as markers of a certain refinement of, and the capacity for, feeling” (Baker, 2016: n.p.). Seward was familiar with this tradition, read about it, and embedded her own poetry in it.

It is worth noting that some of Seward’s sonnets, especially those classified within sonnets of grief are reminiscent of the graveyard’s poems of Parnell, Blair, Young, and Gray that popularised the Lockean communion between intense feeling and a rational mind (Dolan, 2008: 24). These sonnets share some characteristics with graveyard poetry: the poem is concerned with the experience of loss itself and how it is physically and

emotionally experienced by the narrator; it contains a highly conscious narrator and a compelling scene that strikes their sensibility (Essick and Paley 1982, cited in Baker, 2016: n.p.). Furthermore, while in Seward's sonnets the narrator rarely wanders a literal grave, they show a preoccupation with the death of others, which often prompts a grim reflection on the narrator's own demise. In fact, as Parisot has more recently argued, graveyard poetry used to group poems dealing with the inevitability of death and the passage of time at large rather than poems that are specifically located in the physical graveyard before Draper established the specific elements of "graveyard poetry" in 1929. This pre-Draper definition is useful to read Seward's sonnets of Grief as sharing certain particularities with graveyard poetry, as we shall see. The sonnets examined in this first section show a progression in the depiction of grief, from the early 1770s to 1790 that is inevitably tied to Seward's own maturity and experience of illness, death and, significantly, ageing.

### 3.3.3.2. Sonnets of Grief (II, LXII, LXXVII, LXXX, XCVII, and XCVIII)

Sonnet II was written in the first half of 1770 and is situated in the first quarter of the collection:

The Future, and its gifts, alone we prize,  
 Few joys the Present brings, and those alloy'd;  
 Th' expected fulness leaves an aching void;  
 But Hope stands by, and lifts her sunny eyes  
 That gild the days to come.—She still relies  
 The Phantom Happiness not thus shall glide  
*Always* from life.—Alas!—yet ill betide  
 Austere Experience, when she coldly tries  
 In distant roses to discern the thorn!  
 Ah! is it wise to anticipate our pain?  
*Arriv'd*, it then is soon enough to mourn.  
 Nor call the dear Consoler false and vain,  
 When yet again, shining through april-tears,  
 Those fair enlight'ning eyes beam on advancing Years. (Seward 1799:4)

This sonnet draws on the classical themes of *tempus fugit* and *carpe diem* and ponders on the idea of grief in a philosophical manner: “The Future, and its gifts, alone we prize,/ Few joys the Present brings” (Seward, 1799: 4), the poetic voice claims, adding that we are left discontent when our present does not live up to our expectations: “th’ expected fulness leaves an aching void” (Seward: 4); but that, in spite of our awareness of it, and our experience, this happens again and again. The poem brings together grief and reflections of age “april-tears” are the sorrows of youth, and “austere experience” and “advancing years” make reference to maturity and old age (Seward: 4). The latter do not afford solace or knowledge, but rather the anticipation of grief “ill betide Austere Experience,/ when she coldly tries/ In distant roses to discern the torn!” and the poetic voice rhetorically wonders “is it wise to anticipate our pain?”, concluding that when it is better to grieve when comes in the future, rather than live in fear or it (“it then is soon enough to mourn”) and trust God’s will. Indeed, the voice adds that living in anticipation and attempting, in vain, to be prepared for any sorrowful eventuality is to “call the dear Consoler false and vain” (Seward: 4), because God will afford the solace the voice needs when the moment comes. The poem offers a general and universal reflection rather than a personal one, as the use of the first-person plural on the first line demonstrates. It is traditional in style and theme, and it lacks the subjectivity and vitality of her later poetry.

The following sonnets were written between the late 1780s and early 1790. Thomas Seward suffered the first in a series of debilitating strokes after the death of his wife in 1780 that took a toll on his and his daughter’s life and health. Too sick to leave the Bishop’s palace and with the shadow of new strokes hovering over the family, he required Seward to nurse him during the last decade of his life, until his death in 1790. At least four of the sonnets grouped under the sonnets of Grief deal with the death of Thomas Seward: LXII, XCVII, and XCVIII.

Sonnet LXII was written in 1787, three years before Thomas' death, as its footnote informs us. It describes Thomas' illness and his assumed imminent death, and it is imbued by the fear and anxiety the loss of her father produces in her:

Dim grows the vital flame in his dear breast  
From whom my life I drew;—and thrice has Spring  
Bloom'd; and fierce Winter thrice, on darken'd wing,  
Howl'd o'er the grey, waste fields, since he possess'd  
Or strength of frame, or intellect.—Now bring  
Nor Morn, nor Eve, his cheerful steps, that press'd  
Thy pavement, Lichfield, in the spirit bless'd  
Of social gladness. They have fail'd, and cling  
Feebly to the fix'd chair, no more to rise  
Elastic!—Ah! my heart forebodes that soon  
The FULL OF DAYS shall sleep;—nor Spring's soft sighs,  
Nor Winter's blast awaken him!—Begun  
The twilight!—Night is long!—but o'er his eyes  
Life-weary slumbers weigh the pale lids down! (Seward, 1799: 64)

Anticipating her grief, Seward writes: “my heart forebodes that soon/ the FULL OF DAYS shall sleep”, exclaiming “Begun/ The twilight!” and “Night is long!” (Seward, 1799: 64). While in line 2 and 5 the caesura is used to frame the chronological detail, in the sestet there is a pause, marked by a long dash, in every verse except for the first and the last. The quick sequence of pauses gives the poem a sense of urgency and spontaneity that is reinforced by the exclamation mark that precedes the long dash: “no more to rise. Elastic!” (Seward: 64), “nor Winter's blast awaken him!” (Seward: 64), “Begun the twilight!” (Seward: 64), “Night is long!” (Seward: 64), “weigh the pale lids down!” (Seward: 64).

There is a marked fixation on Thomas' decaying physical frame. Seward remarks on the three years since “he possess'd or strength of frame, or intellect.” (Seward: 64), and on his inability to walk around town with his “cheerful steps” (Seward: 64). His body has “fail'd” and she writes that it has to “cling/Feebly to the fix'd chair, no more to rise” (Seward: 64). His eyes are “life-weary” and his “pale lids” weighted down (Seward: 64).



It is a poem marked by the effusion of feelings, both in theme and style, evoking in the reader the same sense of nervousness, almost despair, as the poetic voice feels. The language contributes to these feelings as well, with the use of simple, direct words, and punctuation that reflects the poetic voice's inner turmoil. Overall, Seward's portrayal of her grief is subjective and dark, there is neither solace for Thomas nor for the poetic voice.

Sonnet LXXVII has been identified by Kairoff as belonging to the poems to Honora, describing it as a "plaintive expression of regret for lost friendship" (Kairoff, 2012: 209). While I do not necessarily disagree with Kairoff's assessment, I offer an alternative interpretation. The poem is organised in the Shakespearean style as three quatrains and a conclusive couplet. In the first quatrain, the "vernal Morning bright/ Gem" (Seward, 1799: 79) tinges the "green fields" (Seward: 79) of her youth with "amber hues" (Seward: 79); while in the second quatrain the "dull Clouds" (Seward: 79) of emotional distress after loss and illness appear to "shed untimely night" (Seward: 79) until they manage to turn the youthful landscape into an uninviting "faint, and colourless" (Seward: 79) scene. This grief is symbolised by "the pall Friends" (Seward: 79), in reference both to the cloth spread over a coffin and the metaphorical dark clouds, and it can be attributed to the loss of her mother, sister, and Sneyd. Her overwhelming grief, then, turns the landscape, a source of joy and solace, and a recipient of memories of youth, inhospitable. The transition between a landscape that is first light, green and joyful into a faded, colourless, cloudy version of itself evidently personalises the familiar scene to express her grief: "Like sonnets by Smith or the later Romantics, Seward finds in the landscape an image of her state of mind" (Kairoff, 2012: 223). Unlike the Romantics, Kairoff remarks, and indeed unlike several of her sonnets dealing with a similar theme, this poem closes with a consolatory, if not hopeful, note: "Yet let me hope, that on my darken'd days/ Science, and pious Trust, may shed pervading rays." (Seward, 1799: 79). This

conclusion is a turning point in Seward's sonnets of Grief, "the gesture of a woman long used to finding [sic] comfort in nature but recognizing, at last, that nature is as likely to perpetuate her grief as to lighten it" (Kairoff, 2012: 224) and looking for alternative forms of solace in science and religion. Furthermore, it shows Seward seeking consolation in reason and faith instead of delving in her melancholy, balancing emotion and rationality, in a soon to be outmoded conception of Lockean sensibility.

I consider this sonnet a deeply personal one, not just because of its obvious bibliographical parallelisms, but because of the mature image of the author that it portrays. The sonnet's structure reveals a conversation between the poetic voice and the reader in which Seward shares her story in an almost confessional manner and from a position of maturity. The sonnets open with an appeal to the reader: "hast thou seen a vernal Morning bright", the voice asks before proceeding to describe it, and indeed the both first quatrains are framed as a question: "changing the leaden streams to lines of light?" and "... the glistening gaze of joy". Additionally, the last verses of the question-quatrains (the first describing the happy landscape of youth, the second the gloomy turn into a cold, faded scene) form a parallelism playing with the image of light and water. In the last verse of the first quatrain, "changing the leaden streams to lines of light?", the light plays tricks on the narrator's sight by making the river appear like a line of light; whereas in the last verse of the second quatrain "glistening gaze" similarly makes allusion to sight. Furthermore, the adjective "glistening", here used as a symbol of youthful joy, is reminiscent of the effect of the light playing on the water on the riverbank. Thus both quatrains, so dissimilar in their opposite emotional quality, are united as two sides of the same coin containing the joy and grief of the same individual, instead of being represented as the loss of the former and the manifestation of the latter. Both, the memory of one and the acceptance of the other, must be negotiated at the same time. The questions are then

answered, still in a tale-telling style: “’Twas emblem just/Of my youth’s sun, on which deep shadows fell” (Seward, 1799: 79), the voice says, suddenly transporting the reader in time to years later, changing from the present tense used in the first two quatrains to the past tense of “t’was”, “fell”. Here the narrator confides to the reader what she has learnt through her experience: this happened in my youth, where loss and grief overwhelmed me, she seems to say, and in this context, her hope that “science, and pious Trust” will bring solace to her “darken’d days” (Seward: 79) almost reads like a piece of advice. Written between 1789 and 1790, Seward’s mature outlook contrasts with her earlier poems of loss. In this sonnet, Seward’s grief is not desperate anymore but reposed, overcome, a thing of the past that she is able to regard in the perception that maturity affords. Sonnet LXXX offers a similar perspective, and strengthens this same idea. The poem is written in the present tense. The reader finds themselves in the poetic voice’s old age, evoked by the line “Life’s now faded scene” (Seward: 82). In this life stage, depicted as “gloom” and “faded” (Seward: 82), the memories of youth offer solace, as it is in them where “the dear image of those days serene”, “the days that rose [...] soft as the morn” (Seward: 82) shines. It is indeed the memory of these happy days that consoles the voice, who admits that while their youth was not without grief, the passage of time has calmed its intensity: “if they had clouds, in Time’s alembic clear/ they vanish’d all” (Seward: 82). These memories become dearer the farther they are: “their gay vision glows/ In brightness unobscur’d/ and now they wear a more than pristine sunniness” (Seward: 82) and they offer consolation to “care, loss of lov’d Friends, and all the train of Woes” (Seward: 82). This sonnet has distinct elements that connect it to the sonnets of Remembrance analysed in the next section.

Sonnet XCVII, “to a coffin-lid” is an elegiac sonnet. It was written in March 1790, after Thomas Seward’s passing. The poem is framed by an enveloping verse: “Thou silent

door of our eternal sleep” and “Thou silent Door of everlasting Rest” (Seward, 1799: 99), which is reminiscent of a corpse in a coffin. The “silent door” is, of course, the coffin-lid of the title. Like in the other poems about her father’s illness, it regrets the “dire train of ills Existence knows” (Seward: 99): “sickness, and pain, debility, and woes” (Seward: 99), but it represents death as a relief. All of those straining struggles, she writes, the coffin-lid “shuttest out FOR EVER” (Seward: 99). And so, the poetic voice argues, “Why then weep” (Seward: 99), if eternal rest has ended with the dead one’s—and her own—suffering. Death itself is portrayed as “sleep”, “rest”, long and deep “fix’d tranquilliy” (Seward: 99), in contrast to the “no energy”, “many a tedious year” and “languid deprivation” (Seward: 99) of the long illness. The poetic voice herself professes to be “calm” and asks the object she is appealing to “let me yield to thee a joyless Frame” (Seward: 99), in a gesture of acceptance and gratitude to the relief death afforded her father. There are both sadness and grateful relief in the sonnet, and the poetic voice’s grief is portrayed as heartfelt and recent, the urgency of the poetic voice’s remonstrances emphasised by the exclamation marks and capital letters: “shuttest out FOR EVER!”, “so long!”, “so deep!”; and by the rhetorical question “in a dear Father’s clay-cold form?” (Seward: 99).

Sonnet XCVIII follows chronologically on sonnet XCVII in the aftermath of Thomas Seward’s death and expands on this same idea of calmness and relief, here further increased by both the theme and the form: there are no exclamation marks, a common recourse in her previous poems that enhanced the expression of the poetic voice’s distress. The first quatrain indicates that the poetic voice is still recovering from the shock. However, the voice is not distressed anymore but rather accepting and hopeful. While “the weight of filial woe” and “the deep distress/of life-long separation” that often “throb along these fever’d veins” (Seward, 1799: 100), the voice tells us, her “griev’d mind some

energy regains” from her daily “industrious habits” (Seward: 100). Nevertheless, the voice regrets her loss, and remarks that “my rest has lost its balm”, evoking the memory of the soothing presence of her father before and after nighttime: “the fond caress/ wont the dear aged forehead to impress/ at midnight, as he slept” (Seward: 100) nor “joy to the morning/ when its dawn had brought some health to that weak frame” (Seward: 100). The sonnet closes with a couplet: “Time, and the Hope that robs the mortal Dart/ Of its fell sting, shall cheer me—as they ought” (Seward: 100) which expresses a similar idea to that of sonnet LXXVII, in that “Science, and pious Trust, may shed pervading rays” (Seward: 79); their similarities further enhanced by the sonnets’ identical structure. The grief expressed in sonnet XCVIII is serene, and it is one the poetic voice has had time to process and come to terms with, a grief she now finds solace not in hope as it was before (first hope of recovery, and then hope of relief in passing away) but in remembrance. Whereas sonnet XCVII “To a Coffin-Lid”, mourned the sad memory of Thomas’ illness, this sonnet focuses on the tender and loving reminiscences of her father’s love.

There is a sustained evolution in the expression of grief in this sonnet sequence, as there is one as well in the sonnets grouped together in this section. Sonnet II expresses an abstract idea of grief, heavily imbued by classical modes; while in LXII, XCVII and XCVIII sorrow is expressed from a personal perspective, drawing from a much more intimate source, and articulated in a more direct, less ornamental and performative manner. This progression can be explained examining the sonnets in chronological order, as I have done. This implies that Seward’s personal events, expressed in the content of the sonnets, conditioned the poem’s form to better suit her moods and needs; but it also suggests a natural progression from deeply sentimental poetry which is abstract in its grief towards a more Romantic subjectivity. More importantly, they show a mature Seward

whose poetry evolves with her experience, and whose style is moulded to her different needs as time passes.

### **3.3.3.3. Sonnets of Remembrance (VII, XXVI, and XCVI)**

Susan Stabile has written about the importance of memory in women's intellectual life in the eighteenth century, arguing that at the time, "a women's knowledge and her memory were considered undistinguishable" (2018: 16). Indeed, memory was "a kind of associational thinking", and "a specifically feminine way of knowing" (Stabile: 16). On the other hand, connecting memory and mourning, Mark Sandy contends that writing in the aftermath of a traumatic event of loss helps process both the event itself and the inevitability of the death of the author (2016: 2). Although Sandy's examination is restricted to Romantic poetry, there are echoes of this process in Seward's sonnets of Remembrance. Seward's sonnets of Remembrance, examined in this section, reflect on the nature of loss and grief through memory, evoked in an act of remembrance and from the perspective and experience of old age. These sonnets are not imagined scenarios in which the emotional distress of loss is intellectually considered or performed, but rather they are the means to process grief itself, because, as Seward's contemporary Edmund Burke proclaimed, "it is the nature of grief to keep its object perpetually in its eye, to present it in its most pleasurable views, to repeat all circumstances that attend it" (Burke, 1872: 1: 73). Reflecting on grief and loss (loss of youth, loss of health, loss of loved ones) inevitably evokes the memory of the lost object, in a process in which the author regards her sonnet as "a sort of mirror, which reflects [...] the impressions" her mind "received" (Constable, 1873: 21). Hence, for Seward the finished object of the writing process (the sonnet) is a mirror reflecting her past mind's impressions, or in other words, a site of memory. And, while memory is traditionally regarded as the "presentation and evocation of impressions stored in one's own memory" (Stabile, 2018: 14), in the act of reminiscing,

women are “renewing forgotten or effaced impressions of an absent other” (Stabile: 14). Tellingly, Stabile argues that the act of reminiscing “depends on a nostalgic rift between the past and the present, it exemplifies the temporal, spatial, and emotional remove from which one mourns” (Stabile: 185), and consequently is necessarily dependent on the perspective of time (and age) to function.

The sonnets examined in this section are VII, XXVI, and XCVI. Sonnet VII belongs to the first section of the collection, which means that it was written during Seward’s youth in the 1770s. It offers a marked contrast with her later sonnets of Remembrance and it is analysed here to show the author’s variations of the same theme when she grows older. The sonnet’s content is structurally divided in an opposition between the octave and the sestet. In the octave the poetic voice takes us to Seward’s childhood scenes in Derbyshire, where she lived before turning ten years old. Written in the first person, Seward revisits these scenes of childhood “by Derwent’s rapid stream as oft I stray’d/ With Infancy’s light step” (Seward, 1799: 9) that are inevitably evocative of Wordsworth’s poetry inspired by his native Lake District. The nature Seward portrays is “wild”, “vast”, “steepy” and “Romantic” (Seward: 9); far from the pastoral descriptions of the landscape often found in her juvenilia. These verses are personal, direct, and honest, evoking the memory of the landscape she associates with her childhood striped of the conventionality of her earlier poetry. The memory of this childhood landscape in the sestet turning from the past to the present tense, still manages to “fire me” (Seward: 9). It is unclear whether this scene is recollected from memory or if she physically revisited it, thus prompting the memory. If that were the case, the poetic voice would be celebrating the immortality or Nature’s grandness and her own ability to, having grown out of childhood, still be marvelled by simple beauty. By way of contrast, if it is recollected from memory, the voice is evoking the memory of the landscape and remarking that

recollected after all these years, the image still retains all its power and vivacity. This is a vivid, positive memory, straight-forward: reminiscing the object (the childhood landscape) brings it back in all its splendour. And, although childhood is over, there is no sense whatsoever of grief over its loss in the poem. Indeed, “rather than loss, she experiences gain as a result of maturity” (Kairoff, 2012: 193). This is an early appreciation of remembrance, from youth, that would evolve in Seward’s poetry with her age, as the following sonnets will demonstrate.

Sonnet XXVI was supposedly written some years later, by the end of the 1770s. In it, remembrance is portrayed as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it brings solace to the poetic voice in a moment of need, but on the other, it shows that the present affords no joys in itself, and recovering those joyful memories from the voice’s past is the only way to feel happiness; a second-hand happiness that appears reflected in the mirror of memory. Memory, however, is deceptive, and distorts the original images: it is described as “partial” and makes these reminiscences appear “sublime” and “in more than pristine beauty”, helping to forget “all the transient tears and sighs” that are, nonetheless, “but reflected” (Seward, 1799: 28). On the other hand, the poetic voice mourns the loss of her youth, the “Years that fled too fast”, and “our fresh, gay morn of Youth”, but it is not her physical youth that she grieves over, it is the joyful memories she associates with it: all the “pleasures past” (Seward: 28) that she enjoyed in the company of friends and family now gone (such as Sarah, Honora Sneyd, or her mother)—Seward writes in the first person plural “our”, when referring to the “gay morn of Youth” (Seward: 28). It is relevant that the poetic voice expresses their emotional distress in the sestet as affecting mind “the gloom’d and disappointed Mind” and body “Youth and health, in the chill’d grasp of Time/ Shudder and fade” (Seward: 28). This is a body that is old, and while it is not yet decaying, it is struggling. Here, Seward reflects on her ageing body, and connects



it to her depressed spirits, even though the poem belongs to the first section of the collection and therefore, to her youth.

Contrastingly, sonnet XCVI was supposedly written years later, in the early 1790s. In it, the poetic voice celebrates “sacred Remembrance”. The poem is divided into an octave and a sestet and celebrates Nature as a source of solace. Fittingly, like in sonnet XXVI, the joy that Nature affords comes from the memories it evokes in the poetic voice. It is written in the first person singular, “my dejected sense” (Seward: 98), “my bosom shields”, “I ween”, “my youthful days” (Seward: 98). The octave presents a morning scene in which the poetic voice looks at the landscape, the beauty of which “a sweet, unutterable pleasure yields” (Seward: 98), to her “dejected sense”. The contrast here is between the voice’s present depressed spirits (an expression of the inner self) and the landscape (the outer self), and both selves are connected through memory via the senses. The inner self, “dejected”, “silent mourn[s]/ the Heart’s dear comforts lost”, but remembrance “shields” the self and hinders the success of the “light joys” of “Dissipation” (Seward: 98) in offering solace. These light joys are not strong enough and are rejected in favour of the memory of past, more intense joys, which quashes them. All that is lost causes grief and pain, but it is retrievable through remembrance, and this is what the sestet tells us. In the poem, nature is the place of memory. In the sestet the voice tells us that nature is, “resistless still”, unmovable, a beacon of hope and a consolation, and “yet”, the voice contrasts, the power of its beauty “thy present balmy gales, and vernal blow” has on the voice is tied to the memories it evokes: “To Memory owe the magic of their scene” (Seward: 98). Remembrance, then, infuses the landscape of its emotional component, and Nature simply reflects it back to the poetic voice. Besides, these memories are not specific images but rather a feeling of all that has been lost in the passing of time: “with such fragrant breath, such orient rays,/ shone the soft mornings of my

youthful days” (Seward: 98). Nature is thus subject to remembrance to elicit any feeling in the poetic voice. The contrast is very compelling: remembrance is here the true reality, and nature and the physical world are empty of meaning. This implies that the poetic voice exists now in the past, in their memories, whereas in sonnet XXVI memory was deceptive, and the voice was aware of it. Here the voice has embraced this deceptiveness as their new reality and as an escape from grief.

Although sonnets XXVI and XCVI were written at least ten years apart, they present a comparable perception of remembrance. While they engage with a similar issue—the present state of depression of the poetic voice and the celebration of memory as the only possible resource left to experience any happiness, and an incomplete, mirrored one at that—their tone is different. The attitude of the poetic voice in sonnet XCVI is temperate, accepting, even grateful that Remembrance affords solace. Contrastingly, in sonnet XXVI the poetic voice appears agitated, and even exultant; a sense conveyed by the line breaks rapidly succeeding each other in lines 6, 7, 8 “gay morn of youth”, “Friendship”, “unutter’d Love”; and 12 “Shudder and fade”; and the exclamation marks in lines 1 “O partial Memory!” and 4 “dimm’d their brightness!”. Their variation, not in theme but in expression and tone underpinned by the temporal distance of ten years, recovers Stabile’s argument that reminiscing is dependent on a temporal and emotional distancing from the object of loss—youth, and the happiness and community Seward associates with it—(Stabile, 2018: 185). Age, and the experience that comes with it, affords Seward insight and serenity, and a marked sense of comfort that is missing in her earlier poetry. On the other hand, sonnet VII strikingly lacks any reflection on loss over the time past. For Seward, memory, in youth, is strong and effusive, and it simply returns the self to the innocent stage of childhood, whereas in maturity it becomes associated to the losses that accompany the passage of time. The concept of remembrance,

then, evolves in Seward's poetry in parallel to her ageing process, and its conceptual variations are tied to the author's own internal reflections, in turn conditioned by the external events of loss and consequent grief and mourning.

#### **3.3.3.4. Sonnets of Decay (XVII, XCI, and XCII)**

In the later period of her life Seward was afflicted with various maladies, both physical and psychological, the latter possibly accounting for mismanaged grief and anxiety over her father's health. In "Writing Pain: Sensibility and Suffering in the late letters of Anna Seward and Mary Robinson", Ashley Cross recovers Seward's physical complaints as expressed in her *Letters* and argues that Seward "sought to validate their corporal pain as highly productive a source of writing" (2014: 89) in which the increase of physical pain became a source of inspiration and led to an increase in her writing at the end of her career. Seward had a limp ever since she injured her knee in 1768, aged 26. In addition, she suffered from chronic rheumatism from her teenage years and had high blood pressure which occasioned nose bleeds and dropsy (Barnard, 2009: 103). In March 1794 she bruised her breast (Seward, 1811: 3: 355), and believed that the injury might cause breast cancer. In the weeks previous to that accident, she suffered a fleeting episode of blindness: "a stubborn and feverish cough, which brought on my long existing disorder, impeded respiration, succeeded a violent inflammation in my eyes. I endured it a fortnight" (Seward: 354). As she got older, her physical complaints increased, but not as acutely as her emotional ones. The episodes of emotional distress after tragic events like the deaths of her mother and Honora Sneyd in 1780, or the death of her father in 1790, as we have seen in the analysis of the poems of grief, are of the utmost importance for this analysis. And, while Cross' article refers to Seward's epistolary record, I argue that emotional and physical decay is explored in its innermost complexity in the sonnets. Through them, and making use of the evocative and compelling language of sensibility, Seward expresses a

myriad of emotions attached to her reflections on the passing of time and its manifold consequences for the physical self. In this section, I shall analyse a selection of the sonnets that I have categorised under the common theme of “decay” in order to examine the ways in which Seward portrays her emotional and physical decay, due to age and illness, and what reactions to it she expresses in them. These sonnets are XVII, XCI, and XCII.

Sonnet XVII is especially compelling. It opens with a protest directed to her own poetic voice, in the first person singular: “Ah! Why have I indulg’d my dazzled sight/With scenes in Hope’s delusive mirror shown?” (Seward, 1799: 19). The voice appears frustrated, with no hope of consolation, blaming themselves for having wished for things “that too seldom human Life has known/In kind accomplishment” (Seward, 1799: 19): Fame and its “immortal shrine” (Seward: 19); and Love, “soft and tender” (Seward: 19). The time to achieve those, the voice informs us, is long gone with youth, and they mourn ever having hoped, in vain. Against the Hope that conjured Fame and Love to no avail, Fate, or the inevitability of time, “draws the sable veil/ o’er the frail glass!”, shattering all Hope. This is especially striking when the reader realises that this is the hour of the poetic voice’s death. The sonnet is organised in an octave written in the past tense “have I indulg’d”, “has known”, “gilded”, “be won”; and a sestet written in the present tense, “draws”, “turns”, “drops”, “quench”, “mourns”, “tolls”; opening with “Now” to alert the reader of the change in scene. The octave narrates the regrets and frustrations of the subject while the scene in the sestet is that of their death. Although this idea is fairly conventional and part of the classical tradition Seward draws inspiration from, what is most striking are the references to the physical form of the poetic voice. While “frail glass” (Seward, 1799: 19) might refer to Hope itself, I suggest that it is here in fact referring to the body. And with the phrase “frail glass”, Seward plays with a tautology that pretends to emphasise the fragility of the corporeal form, a body that is not only

feeble or decaying, but that can become so at any given moment, even in health. A body whose very existence is fragile and therefore fleeting. It is not, however, the only allusion to the physical form: both “dazzled sight”, “frail glass”, and “heavy and pale” refer to the body as well; and portray it as debilitated and ailing, a body that is at death’s door. Indeed the sestet ends with an ominous wind that “mourns” along the “gloomy” vale, the pathetic fallacy further reinforced by the “rain-pouring clouds” (Seward: 19). The rain that falls manages to “quench” “all the darts of day” (Seward: 19), in a verse where “day” stands for a life that is being extinguished, because the scene closes with the overwhelming sound of the “Death-bell”, resonating in the mourning wind—the “pausing gale” (Seward: 19).

While the above-analysed sonnet XVII was written in 1774, the following (sonnets XCI and XCII) were written between 1789-90, in the later part of her life and career, when she was fifty years old and in the last years of her father’s illness.

Sonnet XCI was written between 1789-90. It brings together three subjects: the natural world, youthful in the coming spring, described in the first quatrain; herself, unhappy and melancholy; and her father, stuck in his illness and with no hopes of survival. The natural world is described in opposition to the two human figures, and while the landscape renews itself, the human subjects do not. On the one hand, Seward is emotionally impaired because of her grief, cannot recall the joys of her youth or participate in the gaiety of the new season, and she grows sadder the happier the vale looks: “the joys, that once were mine, Spring leads not back; and those that yet remain/ Fade while she blooms” (Seward, 1799: 93). It is a typical Miltonic sonnet in the sense that the rhyme is abba abbba cdc dcd and its lines run together using enjambment between the second and third lines “the tall young grass/ no foot hath bruis’d” and in the eighth and ninth lines “impending woes/ Weigh on my heart” (Seward: 93). This creates a

parallelism between the two verses: while her heart is full of sorrow, as if trampled by suffering, the grass is new and untouched. Her feelings of grief are at the centre of the poem, interrupting the octave in its seventh line with a caesura that brusquely breaks the hopeful and positive landscape description: “Now is the Year’s soft youth;—yet me, alas!/ Cheers not as wont” because “impending woes/ *Weigh* on my heart” (Seward: 93). On the other hand, her father is at death’s doors and will literally cease to exist in his corporeal form while the seasons continue to come and go: “but ah with pale, and waning firers, decline/ those eyes, whose light my filial hopes sustain” (Seward: 93), she complains. With this structure, Seward remarks on the immortality of the natural world in marked opposition with her and her father. The two contrasting feelings are the gaiety and hopefulness of the first’s “soft Youth”, portrayed in an optimistic, cheerful way: “amber radiance”, “clear morning”, “the pure gale”, “blossom blows”, “summit glows”, “lovely shine”, “floral train” (Seward: 93); against the oppressive, stuck, melancholia of the second: “impending woes” (Seward: 93). Seward walks in this landscape and sees all that she has lost reflected in it. She depersonalises the landscape and rather than using it to express her own inner feelings, explores the contrast between the two. In addition, and more compellingly, when she describes her father, in opposition to nature, “pale”, “waning”, “deline” (Seward: 93), are direct allusions to the human form, a decaying physical body that will die and not return, as nature shall.

Sonnet XCII offers an even more dismal point of view, and returns to the idea of the cycle of life, this time personalising a natural element, a tree. Significantly, unlike in the majority of poems analysed, in this sonnet Seward eschews the first person singular, referring exclusively instead to “that tree” and “vain man” (1799: 94) in the third person plural. Thus, the sonnet achieves a less personal tone, and the poetic voice itself appears detached as she moves from an intimate perspective to a more universal outlook that is

also more deeply imbued by a classical tradition as Seward reflects about the imminence and inevitability of death. In this sonnet, a lone tree in an autumnal scene serves as a metaphor for humanity (“emblem, alas! Too just, of Humankind!”), and indeed the “Autumn’s dim decay” (Seward: 94) of the first verse makes reference to the cyclical nature of life, and corresponds to the period of maturity to old age. The poem is divided in an octave and a sestet. In the quatrain the tree is described at the mercy of the inclement autumnal weather “stript with frequent, chill, and eddying Wind”, and populated with a few “yellow, lonely leaves”, left “lingering and trembling” (Seward: 94). The quatrain ends with an accusation that deems of “vain” and unwise the wish to extend our lives on earth: “Vain Man expects longevity, design’d/ for few indeed; and their protracted day” and asks “What is it worth that Wisdom does not scorn?” (Seward: 94). The sestet turns from the metaphorical tree to the afflictions of old age and eventual death. Seward lists the appalling “blasts of Sickness, Care, and Grief” (Seward: 94) that will eventually lead all of us to the grave as it did before when it “laid the Friends in dust, whose natal morn/ Rose near their own” (Seward: 94). What is more, not only is the death of others gone before us as warning of our own demise, but their deaths contribute to the “care, and grief” that we experience in losing them. This sonnet regards death as inevitable and awe inspiring—“solemn is the call” (Seward: 94)—, which shows that there is a religious component present in the verses, albeit not explicitly. Men are vain and faithless for “cling[ing] to life, and fear to fall!” (Seward: 94) to live more than God designs.

As aforementioned, this sonnet was written between 1789 and 1790, when Seward was in the latter period of her life, and its choice of theme inevitably correlates with her own feelings on mortality and old age. It might also refer to Thomas Seward, in the brink of death, and at the care of his daughter at the time. Seward rarely left the Bishop’s Palace for fear of leaving her sick father alone, and her filial cares occupied most of her time:

she attended to his needs and watched over him as he declined after a series of debilitating strokes. While the deaths of her sister Sarah, her mother Elizabeth, and her sister Honora had a significant impact on Seward's life, all of them took place either quickly and suddenly (Sarah and Elizabeth), or away from her (Honora), whereas his father's illness lasted for a decade and was accompanied by uncertainty and suffering. In consequence, although it is true that the tree represents humanity and their fear of death, it also portrays something that Seward has very much present at the time: the ageing body: a decaying, feeble, "lingering and trembling" (Seward, 1799: 94) body, like the leaves on the tree, striped of its youthful vigour and colour. Like the leaves, this physical form is "lonely", "alone, deserted" and "forlorn", left "lingering and trembling" (Seward: 94), patiently awaiting the release of death. Indeed, in a footnote to sonnet LXII, Seward explains that her father had "languished three years beneath repeated paralytic strokes, which had greatly enfeebled his limbs, and impaired his understanding." (Seward: 64). Both "languished" and "enfeebled" are reminiscent of the description of the tree, and refer both to Thomas and to the eventual process of decay that all human bodies will experience, not in dying, which can be swift and unexpected, in one's birth or prime; but in growing old. Seward's reflection, then, is not on death, but on ageing.

The sonnets of Decay reflect an ageing Seward who has become all too aware of the progressive decay of the physical body. However, she never alludes to her own body directly, and the depictions of the ill, feeble physical form are projected on her father and on the allegorical tree. In the poems in this category, nature is seen both as in opposition to human life and as a useful metaphor for it. Nature is cyclical, human life ends but does not return in this physical plane, and nature does. Seward, a staunch believer, shows no interest in the spirit or in divine consolation in these poems, and is rather fixated on the



human frame and its inexorable deterioration into nothingness. When religion is alluded, it is as a reminder of the inevitability of the physical death being God's will.

### **3.4. Conclusions**

This chapter has analysed Seward's self-portrayal as an ageing and aged woman in her collection of sonnets published in the later part of her career by 1799 as *Original Sonnets and Odes Paraphrased from Horace* but composed throughout her youth and maturity (1770-1790). In the collection, Seward positions herself as part of the lineage of English authors acclaimed for their literary prowess as national heroes by writing in the Miltonic sonnet form. Embedded in the sonnet revival movement as one of its pioneers, Seward's sonnet claim vindicates her own legitimacy and talent as a writer by complying with the strict rules and style of the sonnet, in a show of mastery that seeks to reinforce her literary authority. Furthermore, in this chapter I have analysed a selection of Seward's sonnets in order to identify how Seward's self-presentation and the author's own perceptions of age and ageing interact and what is the portrayal of the mature and ageing self that emerges from them. Following Milton's model, Seward's sonnets focus on a specific commonplace topic instead of functioning as a collection. They deal with topics such as poetic matters, political issues, social and historical events, or intellectual themes. From the hundred sonnets I have identified a particularly compelling theme in a large number of them: the experience of loss, which is the focus of this analysis. Loss of friends and family, of health, of hope, and of life. I have classified this selection as sonnets of Grief, of Remembrance, and of Decay.

Firstly, the sonnets of Grief reveal a self-understanding and processing of the feeling of loss from the perspective of maturity that evolves from a more traditional perspective in which she entertains the concept abstractly, to a deeply personal assessment of her own inner turmoil that concludes in finding solace in the balance of

reason and emotion and in a direct and non-performative manner. On the other hand, in the sonnets of Remembrance Seward's experience as a mature woman affords her the emotional distance to find refuge in her memories and to ponder on the act of remembrance in itself. For her, remembrance is intimately bound with loss and grief, and the idea of memory matures with her age. Finally, in the sonnets of Decay, Seward comes to terms with the progressive deterioration of the human form and the inevitability of death with sadness but also with the composure that comes with experience. More importantly, this category reveals that in her poetry Seward contemplates ageing and illness rather than death itself.

In conclusion, the selection of sonnets analysed here shows the importance of age and ageing in the reflection and expression of Seward's grief, as an experience in itself and as something sonnet writing allows her to process and explore. In all three categories, Seward's later poems offer a contrast with her earlier ones and show an evolution in her own age—both her maturity and in some cases, her old age—and in the way she expresses the same ideas, in terms of tone, language, and meaning. Age and ageing, then, interact with the sonnet composition as subject—such as the knowledge of physical decay and death, or the solace that only memory affords in transporting the self to its youth— and as outlook—more sober, and perceptive. Additionally, this mature outlook influences her style, bringing together neoclassical mode and form, early eighteenth-century sensibility, and Romantic themes and language. From this selection of poems from the *Original Sonnets* emerges an intimate self-portrayal of Seward as a woman both preoccupied with and convinced of her legitimacy as a poet, whose later poems show as evolving in style and themes with her age and contributing to intellectual reflections of timeless importance from a subjective and personal experience.

## Chapter 4

### **“To your mature consideration and superior judgement I submit my scruples”: Mentoring Southey in the Seward-Southey Correspondence (1807-09)**

In 1807, Robert Southey, future poet laureate and now a young author in his twenties, wrote to an elderly Anna Seward:

No man can be more indifferent to the censure of his contemporaries, nor more sensible to their praise; – the one I set down to the score of ignorance is <or> malevolence, the other I take as earnest of what posterity will give me, & if this be not the most impartial way of considering the case, it is certainly the most convenient (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1338).

This was his letter of introduction to Seward, and it inaugurated a relationship that lasted for two years, until Seward’s death. Lynda Pratt, who has devoted a large part of her career to research the male poet, affirms that “Southey writes to Seward as an equal, a fellow poet whose opinion he both respects and courts” (2011: 28). Their letters “did not just comment on poetic rivals, they also detailed his own writing life” (Pratt: 28) adding that he used Seward “as a confidante” (Pratt: 29). On the other hand, Kairoff holds that Seward “became not only Southey’s friend but an enthusiastic mentor” (2012: 108). Indeed, she lists Southey as one of Seward’s “protégés”, among names such as Helen Maria Williams, Samuel T. Coleridge or Walter Scott (Kairoff: 15), an epithet that indicates a mentoring relationship, but that I suggest does not accurately portray her relationship to the other names listed, because none of them were as receptive to Seward’s counsel as Southey was.

This chapter examines the friendship between Seward and Southey, which reveals, as I suggest, an unexplored mentoring exchange, where Seward acted as mentor, providing literary advice and support. Mentoring was not an exceptional occurrence at a time when a “significant amount of cross-generational fertilization” (Looser, 2008: 108)

was taking place, with an important number of elderly women writers forging mutually beneficial friendships with members of the next generation, both men and women. To investigate the intricacies of Seward's relationship with Southey, this chapter's critical frameworks are mentoring criticism and age studies. The first attends to the relationship between two authors in which one gives advice to the other and, more importantly, examines how their literary production is shaped, or influenced, by their relationship (Lee, 2011: 7). The intersection between the two will prove a very fruitful one. Firstly, it will make us reconsider the traditionally assigned categories to elderly men and women in terms of repositories of knowledge, destabilising the conception of the dichotomy or the archetypal wise old man against the garrulous old woman. More compellingly, it suggests reconsidering the argument that elderly women authors were dismissed by the public because of their age. It challenges the idea that older women writers simply retired from the bothersome literary market. They did not retire, they simply took on other roles. Or perhaps, they did retire, affected by the criticism and social pressure, but they did not disappear completely from the literary map. In the case of Seward and Southey's relationship specifically, it enriches the paradigm of literary collaboration across literary movements and generations, hence blurring the lines between those. It also shows how women with years of practice in the literary market transferred this experience while also influencing it through their teaching of the younger generation of writers that came after them. This analysis will inevitably bring to the fore Seward's relationship with the early Romantic movement, which challenges the notion that Seward's production exists in stylistic isolation, disregarded for its attachment to outdated literary modes and structures. By highlighting Seward's active critical involvement in the consolidation of Southey's careers, I seek to suggest that there is a further line of research in Seward's intellectual contribution to the Romantic ethos. On the other hand, this analysis informs our

knowledge of mentoring from elderly women towards younger men, it shows that women shared their knowledge and experience as teachers and experts—and that young men sought it and benefitted from it. In addition, Southey actively seeking Seward realigns Seward's reputation with her literary status and reinforces the argument of her authority as an author, even more so since her mentoring of Southey was developed in the latter years of her life, which at the same time puts into question the arguments about age and reputation discussed in the previous chapters. Finally, it prompts us to consider Seward's public literary criticism not only as a strategy to assert her reputation, as has been argued in the previous chapters, but also as a way to interact and pass on her knowledge to both readers and contemporaries.

Seward and Southey's relationship is analysed using two different sources: first I examine Seward's literary reviews of Southey's works, and then I focus on their correspondence (1807-1809). Seward published a commentary on *Joan of Arc* (1796) entitled "Philippic on a Modern Epic" in *The European Magazine* for 1797. In 1801, Seward reviewed *Thalaba the destroyer* (1801), to which she devoted eleven pages in *The Poetical Register* (1802: 475-486); she also reviewed *Madoc* (1805) shortly after its publication in a letter she would later publish in the *GM* for 1808 (1808: 577-581). By examining these items together, the ongoing conversation from the reviews and the letters reveals the details of a fruitful relationship. Seward's comments to Southey, first public and unsolicited (in the reviews) and then desired and actively sought after (in the correspondence) disclose a collaboration between the two authors. The collaborative nature of their relationship is further clarified when examined from the perspective of mentoring criticism.

#### 4.1 Introduction to Mentoring in the Eighteenth Century

Mentoring criticism, when applied to literary studies, “examines authors not as autonomous agents, but as members of a larger structure of influential relationships” (Lee, 2011: 6). Accordingly, the interest placed on the Seward-Southey correspondence in this chapter is concerned not with their personal relationship but with the intricacies and implications of their professional, literary collaboration. Anthony Lee has argued that while mentoring relationships can take on different forms, the basis of their existence is the dynamic of authority and influence (Lee, 2013: 3). Simplified to the basics, the mentor’s experience and knowledge confer them with authority, and influence is the mechanism that transfers this authority (first to the mentor, and then to the *protégée*). What we would now describe as a mentoring relationship was not unheard of in the long eighteenth century, and indeed literary history is ripe with examples, both in one-on-one and in a group setting, such as literary clubs: The London Literary Club, founded by Joshua Reynolds and Samuel Johnson and Elizabeth Montagu and Elizabeth Carter’s Bluestockings are the obvious examples, but Lady Miller’s Bath-Easton assemblies would similarly reproduce their structure and purpose. This structure was the assembly of authors, often heterogeneous in terms of experience, and its purpose the benefit from the mutual exchange of ideas and influence, and in many cases, collaboration. On the other hand, we have also many examples of well-known mentoring pairs; Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, William Wordsworth and Samuel T. Coleridge, Hannah More and Ann Yearsley, Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays, or Leigh Hunt and John Keats.

Although it is not a prerequisite for a mentoring relationship, the age difference between some of these literary pairs is interesting. Johnson was thirty-two years older than Boswell; Keats was eleven years younger than Hunt. Robert Southey was thirty-two years younger than Seward, sixty-five at the time of their acquaintance. Indeed, mentorship has often been associated with intergenerationality: “the passage of

knowledge, method, character, and affirmation, from one generation to the next” (Simmons, 2010: 45). This is also true of Seward. Throughout her life, the author entertained close friendships with several writers younger than herself, with whom she established a relationship of mutual support and literary and intellectual discussion. Seward may be even described as a mentor, as it happened in the case of Thomas Lister and Henry Francis Cary (thirty-one and thirty years younger), with whom she became acquainted when they were fifteen (Seward, 1810: 2: 95) and whose careers she followed and supported earnestly.

Wollstonecraft and Hays’ partnership serves to illustrate the practical nature of the mentoring exchange. In this case, Wollstonecraft used the knowledge conferred by her experience to give Hays specific practical advice to help her achieve her goals. The nature of this advice (how to navigate a male professional literary context) was far from exclusively literary:

Wollstonecraft provided Hays with opportunities for literary work, gave her practical suggestions for improving her literary criticism, and helped her refine her public textual presentation of herself as a woman writer. She pointed out the pitfalls that Hays would face on account of her sex, and offered her strategies to present herself as intellectually credible (Waters, 2013: 423).

What the Wollstonecraft-Hays mentoring relationship shows is that mentoring in the long eighteenth century goes beyond theoretical aspects of literary creation, and is often based on more practical needs. Even when the relationship between the two writers is exclusively concerned with literary matters, there is a mutual interest in what will sell, how it will be received, and how it interacts with other texts in the market. Acknowledging both sides of a mentoring relationship helps us understand its nuances and intricacies. There is one significant particularity in Seward and Southey’s case:

gender, which complicates assumptions of power dynamics and challenges prejudices against elderly women.

#### **4.2. A Mentoring Case Study: Anna Seward and Robert Southey**

Before moving further into the analysis, a clarification on the terminology used throughout this chapter is needed. We have established the theoretical source and historical significance of mentoring, and the term has been and will continue being used in describing Southey and Seward's relationship in lieu of a more adequate one. However, other terms will also be used when referring to their literary relationship, such as collaboration, in an attempt to clarify the exact nature of their relationship while avoiding falling into oversimplifications. Collaboration avoids the troublesome fixated hierarchical structure (*mentor-protégée*) ingrained in mentoring, which a priori might seem problematic. Collaboration suggests a partnership of equals towards a common goal that benefits both writers. In literary studies, a collaborative work is one which has been written in conjunction. Similarly to mentorship, collaboration was a widespread phenomenon in the long eighteenth century, in line with the type of manuscript culture of their sixteenth and seventeenth century counterparts Ezell has coined as "social authorship" (1999: 39). Indeed, in the eighteenth century, writers would assist in the composition process as reviewers and editors, making comments, suggesting changes and raising questions (Griffin: 55), and their finished works can be read as a "conversation with contemporaries" (Griffin, 2014: 57), which accurately represents a significant part of what Seward's exchanges with Southey. Griffin has provided a taxonomy of collaboration, and one of its categories is especially illuminating: "revision of a one writer's manuscript by a writer or writers with more authority or more access to booksellers" (Griffin: 52); "authority" and "access" being the keywords here. As my



analysis will demonstrate, Southey benefitted from Seward's connections and influence in the reviewing press, which in turn Southey hoped would help his sales. However, using "mentoring" as key concept instead of "collaboration" allows for the intersection of age and gender and provides a framework for a more fitting case than collaboration does in the context of this thesis. Another option would be what Harold Love has coined a "revisionary authorship". Revisionary authorship refers to a process of joint revision and editing of a literary work carried out by individuals who are not its author (Love, 2002: 46), which both complicates and fine-tunes the notion of authorship. However, my analysis of Seward-Southey's relationship does not suggest a collaboration of this sort, and any consideration of Seward's hand in Southey's final publication is well beyond the scope of this thesis. Seward and Southey's exchange was fluid and partially involved all of the above, but fits more adequately with mentoring. Deconstructing the intricacies of their relationship and answering these questions to define it more accurately is one of the goals of this chapter.

The correspondence between the two writers was initiated by Southey in the summer of 1807, as a footnote in Seward's published *Letters* indicates: "the author's correspondence with Mr Southey commenced in the middle of the present summer with a letter with which he honoured her" (Seward, 1811: 6: 358). Their epistolary exchange reveals that Southey actively sought Seward's counsel, acknowledging the older woman's experience and authority in literary matters. On the one hand, their correspondence lacks the agonism Lee considers part of a mentoring relationship (Lee, 2011: 7). There is no anxiety of influence (by way of reference to the concept coined by Harold Bloom, 1973) in this relationship, Southey is not being modelled by Seward, and consequently there is no push for independence on his part. It is a productive, beneficial exchange that shows how nurture and collaboration are ingrained in the very essence of mentoring. On the

other hand, it is not collaborative either in a strictly literary sense. The reciprocity was anecdotal: Seward advised Southey, fulfilling her role as experienced writer, but Southey did not provide advice in reference to any of her works, although there is an exception to this: Southey recommends that she compiles her works for publication herself (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1452), however this suggestion cannot be described as collaboration. It is a one-sided, seemingly altruistic exchange between the two. Nevertheless, I suggest that although the writing advice was one-sided, the relationship between Seward and Southey benefitted the older woman in at least two significant ways. First, Seward exerted and maintained her influence in the literary market. Secondly, by forging ties with a promising younger writer such as Southey, she was reinforcing and strengthening her fame and reputation while at the same time working towards her posthumous legacy. In other words, friendship with younger authors was a strategy for older ones “to extend their own authorial powers and reputations” (Looser, 2008: 20). Looser refers to Piozzi as seeking to find, in her old age, younger friends and collaborators who would ensure her posthumous fame (Looser: 108). This also rings true of Seward, among whose younger correspondents in her old age also was Walter Scott (Seward was twenty-nine years his senior), the man to whom she bequeathed her collected works for posthumous publication. Instead of relying on her relatives or lesser-known authors, Seward chose Scott because by the time she was preparing her compiled works, Scott was already a consolidated name in the literary landscape of the time. This decision did not sit well with Southey, who expressed his regret that Seward had not trusted him with her posthumous works: “she might have left me a set of her works, or some piece of plate, and I should have shown such a token with pleasure.” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1628).

#### 4.2.1. Seward and the “savage boy of genius”

Robert Southey (1774-1843) became poet laureate in 1813 as per recommendation of Walter Scott. At the moment of his appointment, his reputation had been well established ever since 1801 (Carnall, 2011: n.p). His publications —*Joan of Arc* (1796), *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Spain and Portugal* (1797), *Thalaba* (1801), *Letters from England* (1807), *Madoc* (1805), and *The Curse of Kehama* (1810)—had been positively received and afforded him a certain renown. Apart from his career as a poet, he also worked as a reviewer for the *Quarterly Review* and a translator. Additionally, he enjoyed a close relationship with the first generation of Romantic poets. He had co-authored a poem, *The Fall of Robespierre* (1794) with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and was close to William Wordsworth, both of whom were his neighbours during his stay in the Lake District. Years later, although he had been admired by the young Romantics (especially Percy B. Shelley) for his poetical works and early republicanism, his subsequent allegiance to the Tory government and his increasingly reactionary politics earned the younger men’s enmity. His literary reputation suffered greatly after Byron brutally attacked him in *The Vision of Judgement* (1822).

Seward was first introduced to Southey through the Ladies of Llangollen, who sent her a volume of *Joan of Arc* with their recommendation. Although Seward objected to the poem’s political undertone and greatly resented Southey’s attack to “the memory of our gallant Henry V”, claiming that the poem “defames the English character in general, stigmatizes our constitution, and deifies the Moloch spirit of that of France” (Seward, 1811: 4: 290), she praised the author’s “genius”: “This is the age of miracles. A great one has lately arisen in the poetical world—the most extraordinary that ever appeared, as to juvenile powers, except that of ill-starred Chatterton:—Southey’s Joan of Arc, an epic poem of strength and beauty, by a youth of twenty.” (Seward: 290). Two years later, in a letter from 1798 to Mrs Jackson of Turville-Court, she wrote of “the rising

splendours of Coleridge and Southey's muse" and asked, "you, who can discern, and delight in poetic excellence, are you deep in Coleridge and Southey? how has this age teemed, how does it continue to teem with lyric genius, while those idiots, the critics, shut their eyes on the golden harvest, and call it barrenness." (Seward, 1811: 5: 49).

In the same letter to the Ladies, Seward insists on defending that Southey's "poetic powers (...) are very far indeed beyond my expectation, from the youth of the author, and the disgusting arrogance of his well-written preface" (Seward, 1811: 4: 294) and adds that she is taking her time savouring the poem, "slow I always make it over a composition of real genius" (Seward: 294). Indeed, she manages, once again, to turn a letter of acknowledgement into a well-researched, clearly structured and compellingly argued piece of literary criticism. Seward continues his commentary commending Southey's style, which she associates with that of Milton and Cowper: "the style of the first book seems to waver in its choice of a model between Milton and Cowper. In the greatly superior second, it becomes wholly Miltonic. The ardour of imitation is very apt to mislead the judgement" (Seward: 295). She celebrates the author's originality: "the ideas are frequently of unborrowed greatness and beauty, though sometimes obscure and confused." (Seward: 296). Furthermore, Seward finds several similarities between *Joan of Arc* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In fact, Seward claims that Southey even "transcends the original" (Seward: 296) in some instances. She also detects the influence of Coleridge in the poem: "I find, that the martyr-dooming apparition, the death-boding music, and the sweet convalescent, representing insecure peace, are Mr Coleridge's." (Seward: 297). In another letter to the same addressee, written a month later, Seward insists on the poem's superiority: "its poetic beauties are so numberless, so intrinsic, that its poetic defects, however conspicuous, are as dust in the balance." (Seward: 302). She praises Southey as "a born poet, and one of the very highest class—an extensive knowledge of history and

science, and of all his English predecessors and contemporaries in poetic composition, support, illustrate, and adorn the creative powers of his fancy” (Seward: 302). However, she regrets that his literary taste “equals not his genius” (Seward: 302): in this line, she objects to his use of punctuation and to his emulating of Milton’s “least agreeable phraseology” (Seward: 4: 302). Besides Milton, she also identifies influences by Rousseau, Collins, Akenside (Seward: 303), and Hayley (Seward: 304) and qualifies the young writer as “an arch-chymist as to sublimity; he not only creates it at will, but he extracts it from all he has read.” (Seward: 305).

#### **4.2.2. Seward’s Criticism of Southey in the Press**

##### **4.2.2.1. Seward’s Critique of *Joan of Arc* (1796): “Philippic on a Modern Epic” (1797)**

After having discussed it at length in her correspondence, in 1797 Seward published a commentary on Southey’s *Joan of Arc* entitled “Philippic on a Modern Epic” in *The European Magazine* and the *Morning Chronicle* for 1797. The composition is written in verse, and was eventually published in Seward’s posthumous collected works (Seward, 1810: 3: 67-9).

*Joan of Arc* put Southey on the map. Years later, the author himself would remember it as the work by which he “first became known to the public, and acquired (...) a notoriety which has never been lessened” (Southey, cited in Pratt, 2020: 1: n.p). It was a publication meant to attract attention (Pratt: n.p), and it did, earning Southey the title of Jacobin poet (Raimond, 1989: 182) It relates the eponymous heroine’s journey to lead the French against the British invaders, ending with the French Dauphin being crowned king. The poem draws on the radical politics of Southey’s youth and his support of the principles behind the French Revolution (Pratt, 2020: 1: n.p). In *Joan of Arc* Southey makes “a radical departure” from his juvenilia, “rejecting the male, royal, British heroes

of his earliest productions in favour of a female, labouring class, and above all, French subject” (Pratt: n.p). Indeed, in the Preface to the poem he claimed that “to engage the unprejudiced, there must be more of human feelings that is generally to be found in the character of Warriors” (Southey, 1796: vi). Southey has been credited as being the first author to depict Joan of Arc as a “symbol of secular liberation” (Sexsmith, 1990: 126). Representing “national liberation, youthful optimism, and liberal intent” (Sexsmith: 126), the maid of Orléans was very well suited to embody the anti-establishment principles a young Southey sought to be associated with. He admits the poem’s controversial political stance: “it has been established as a necessary rule for the Epic, that the subject be national. To this rule I have acted in direct opposition, and chosen for the subject of my poem the defeat of my country”. He adds a warning to the reviewers “if among my readers there be one who can wish success to injustice, because his countrymen supported it, I desire not that man’s approbation.” (Southey, 1796: vii). Similarly, he told a friend that his aim was to “allot the Genius of Liberty to defend the French from Ambition-Hatred-Slaughter and England” (Southey in Pratt, 2020: 1: n.p). Years later, in 1807, he admitted to Seward in a letter that “the subject was not chosen for its political bearing, but certainly when I felt how easily it could be <done> I caught with delight the opportunity of pouring out sentiments favourable to what was then the cause of liberty.” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1346). Seward’s “Philippic” (Seward, 1810: 3: 67-69) can be divided into two sections: the first (l.1-22) is a patriotic celebration of the British victory at Agincourt in 1415 in which she boosts British morale by reminiscing a heroic deed against the same foe that England is currently fighting and that Southey is glorifying in his poem: “what time upon the broken spears of France,/ And prostate helms, immortal glory stood” (l.19-20). The conclusion is an address to Southey in which Seward exposes his pro-revolutionary stance and condemns him for it.

In the poem, Seward seeks to reconcile her admiration for Southey with the poem's anti-patriotic theme. This struggle is best described in the first lines, when she denounces that "base is the purport of this epic song,/ Baneful its powers;" (Seward, 1810: 3: 67) and contrasts it with "but O! the poesy! (...) Wraps in reluctant ecstasy the soul/ Where poesy is felt" (Seward: 67). Southey wrote to Seward in July 1807 letting her know that he read the "Philippic" shortly after its publication. In the letter, Southey admits having been "well pleased to be so censured for the sake of being so praised" (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1346). Seward elevates Southey to the status of "sun-born genius" (Seward: 67) but denounces that in the composition, Southey "defames the English character in general, stigmatizes our constitution, and deifies the Moloch spirit of that of the French" (Seward, 1810: 4: 290). Indeed, Seward's poem is concerned with criticising Southey's "condemnation of kings and its support for the French in their war against the English invaders" (Pratt 2020: 1: n.p). Furthermore, Seward shows an awareness of the social and political moment (the French Revolutionary Wars) that Southey, at this stage and in her opinion, seems to lack. The "Philippic" is reminiscent of Seward's public rebuke of the French Revolution in 1793 ("Original Letter", 1793: 108-110) in which she positions herself as Britain's spokeswoman and reinforces her position as a defender of Britain's political order by taking on a staunch counter-revolutionary position. The title of the poem itself points towards this direction. The term "Philippic" refers to a tirade or speech, designed to firmly condemn its receiver upon their political stance. It is associated with the great ancient Greek and Roman orators, especially Cicero and Demosthenes, whose speeches against Philip of Macedon coined the word. Here Seward is taking on Demosthenes' role by antagonising Southey's political position, which she deems dangerous and threatening a very fragile social and political moment. Seward published the "Philippic" because "as an older poet still celebrated for her patriotic verse" she

wished to “both to acknowledge the emergence of a new talent and to caution the public” about its political message (Kairoff, 2012: 108). Indeed, Seward feared that *Joan of Arc* would impact negatively the British population’s morale at a delicate time when the fear of invasion was a reality. Kairoff explains that Seward had planned for the “Philippic” to be originally published in the *Morning Chronicle* in early 1797 but in light of the peace talks between France and Britain, she postponed it (Kairoff: 108). Indeed, Seward confessed herself reluctant to publish the poem at such a time, and wrote that she was “unwilling, beneath the pending pacific negotiation, in which I trust our hot-brained government is at last sincere to say anything with my pen, which might feed the general hatred of this country towards its too-successful foes” (Seward 1811: 4: 369), which shows Seward paid careful attention to her timing.

In the final section of the poem, Seward refers to Southey as an “unnatural boy” and a “beardless parricide” (Seward, 1810: 3: 68), in which both “boy” and “beardless” are compelling references to his youth and immaturity. Southey began working on the poem in 1793, when he was only eighteenth, and his inexperience and immaturity are something Seward fixates on in her commentary in order to justify, to herself and to the readers, Southey’s politics. Seward addresses Southey directly in the last lines “quit, for shame,/ Quit each insidious pretence to virtue,/ To Christian Faith, and pity!—Dry thy tears/ For age-pass’d woes, they are the crocodile’s” (Seward: 68-69) and emphatically condemns him for metaphorically having “dip thy young hands in her o’er-flowing chalice” (Seward: 68-69) —again, a direct reference to his age— of the “gore of age, infants, and beauty” sacrificed in the French Revolution that he is now standing for. Indeed, Seward’s intentions behind the Philippic were to warn a very young—and in her eyes, immature, both in age and experience—Southey not to commit a mistake that would condemn him to public rebuke (Kairoff, 2012: 108). This concern, materialized in the



poetic review, is indicative of Seward's sense of responsibility towards Southey, a willingness to mentor him and advise and supply him with her mature experience, even before the two writers met. It also shows a mature Seward who is inserting herself in the contemporary literary discourse once again, this time from the last decade of her life. Eventually, in 1807 she would add a footnote to the poem to be included with it upon its posthumous publication in the *Poetical Works*. Looking back from a more experienced perspective, Seward takes back her criticism on Southey's political views: "Cooler reflection, and a long experience of the mischiefs resulting from the sanguinary system which this government has unwarned [sic] pursued through the last 14 years, have justified this Poet's representation of Henry the Fifth's conduct in invading France" (Seward, 1810: 3: 69).

#### **4.2.2.2. Seward's Critique of *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) in *The Poetical Register*, and *Repository for Fugitive Poetry***

In 1801, Seward reviewed *Thalaba the destroyer* (1801) in a letter to the editor, to which she devoted eleven pages in *The Poetical Register* (1802: 475-486). Her review, after that of *Joan of Arc*, demonstrates, once again, that Seward was up to date with the latest publications, read and considered the early production of the first Romantic generation, and engaged with it, participating as a critic in its development. By listing Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and *Arabian Nights's Entertainments* as Southey's influences for *Thalaba*, Seward shows an intimate knowledge of the current literary landscape.

The editor of the *Poetical Register* included in a footnote on the first page of Seward's critique declaring that while it was not the magazine's custom to include criticism, they made an exception because of "the importance of the subject" and "the merit of the writer" (Seward, 1802: 475), acknowledging Seward's reputation while at the same time alerting the reader that the author of the piece is so deserving that they

would bend the magazine's rules to accommodate her. Interestingly, however, the editor also warns that the *Poetical Register* is not to be "a vehicle for controversy" (Seward: 475), in a clear reference to the Benvolio debate, which took place in the *GM* in 1786-87 and 1793-94 (see Chapter 2). By mentioning the Benvolio debate, the editor is letting the readers know that the author of this critique is the same writer who antagonised Boswell, hence stirring their interest. In either case, the footnote indicates that Seward's reputation precedes her, and it is welcome.

In the preface to *Thalaba*, Southey rejects traditional poetic models such as the heroic couplet and explains that he has written the poem in the metre of the *Arabian Tales* because he feels it suits better the subject matter. The poem, composed of twelve books, is in fact written in unrhymed verse and irregular stanzas. With this position, Southey is siding with Coleridge and Wordsworth and the principles they exposed in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Indeed, the *Edinburgh Review* identified Southey's innovative metre as a trend championed by what they would later describe as the Lake school (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, amongst others in their circle). By taking the baton from Wordsworth and Coleridge, Southey was using his poetry as a "challenge to the social and political hierarchy" (Pratt, 2020: 3: n.p.), a bold move and a double-edged sword: Southey's metric choice was criticised by his contemporaries and dismissed as a failure by the critic. The *Monthly Mirror* disparaged its metre, attributing his choice to his lack of experience: "among the sins of our youth, we, like him, have traded in desultory versification, but have long been brought back to lyrical *rhyme*, and heroic *blank verse*" ("[Review of *Thalaba*]", 1801: 244). The *British Critic* was ruthless, referring to it as a "monument of vile and depraved taste", its metre absurd "were not the lines divided by the printer, no living creature would suspect [them] to be intended for verse" (*British Critic* 1801, cited in Pratt 2020: 3: n.p.). On the other hand, Southey's challenge also set the bases for the

English Romantic movement and attracted young writers like Shelley, Byron and Scott, who similarly wished to defy the status quo, for whom *Thalaba* became “a seminal text” (Pratt: 3: n.p).

In line with the reviews, Seward is concerned with Southey’s claim to “abolish all the established orders of verse” (Seward, 1802: 409). She remarks that, contrary to Southey’s intention, *Thalaba* does not make a convincing case but rather highlights the “mischiefs” (Seward: 475) of his plan. Seward supports her argument saying her opinion is shared by “all the people of letters who have spoken to me of THALABA”, making herself appear, to the eyes of the reader, as the spokeswoman of a group of authors and intellectuals. Seward acknowledges Southey’s merit and calls him a Lucifer (an ironic epithet directed to the man who would later on coin the phrase “Satanic school” to refer to Byron, Percy Shelley, and Keats), and *Thalaba* the “jacobinism of verse” (Seward: 477). She says that his “compleat [sic] poetic reform” possesses “flashes of genius” (Seward: 477) but that he, at the same time, pollutes “his brightness with rebellious sin” (Seward: 477). In other words, Seward recognises talent and extraordinary ability in Southey’s poetry, but she deems his (and the young Romantics’) attack to the status quo via poetic innovations as diminishing its merit, and accuses him of arrogance (Seward: 480). Seward launches a defence on the different established modes of verse and their genealogy to justify her position: “the *classes* of Verse are sufficiently numerous, to produce every eligible, every graceful variety. All are good, and, in the hands of a genuine Poet, almost *equally* good, provided his choice of them be adapted to the nature of his subject” (Seward: 477). Seward cites the ode and its architects, Horace, Pindar, Dryden, Gray, Milton, Lord Lyttelton, Cowley, Johnson, and Burns, and praises Coleridge’s and Southey’s poems in this form. She affirms that taste “cannot applaud this young poet (...) for casting off all regulations of metre” (Seward: 480). She adds that “if the Muse chuses

to emancipate herself from all the restraints of harmonic numbers (...) prove that she may appear in that form, with all her pathos, in all her grandeur”, criticising *Thalaba*’s “‘skimble scamble’ shape” (Seward: 481). In sum, Seward concedes that “Southey is a genuine Poet; as such we shou’d hail, esteem, and respect him;” but not “adopt his capricious systems” (Seward: 481).

Having said that, Seward then attacks the reviewing press, calling them “periodical dictators” and “modern censors” (Seward: 481-482), and accusing them of “critical despotism” and “tasteless prudery” (Seward: 481-483). The reviewing press are the upholders of the status quo, but she deems them as dogmatic and in a “contrary extreme” (Seward: 481), warning them that “the dogmas of periodical criticism on Poetry, should take care that they are not confuted by the contrary practice of our best Poets” (Seward: 486). She argues that the particularities of the English language in terms of vowel sounds make the use of imperfect rhymes adequate and harmonious, and gives examples of such rhyming from poems by the above-mentioned writers that are considered a paradigm of excellence. With this tirade, Seward displays her knowledge and literary authority, and condemns both Southey and the press who are vilifying him, and positions herself as authority in the matter.

#### **4.2.2.3. Defence of *Madoc* (1805) in the *GM* (1808)**

The *GM* published in July 1808 “A Letter written by Anna Seward to one of her Literary Friends, Feb. 15, 1806, on the subject of Mr. Southey’s ‘*Madoc*’ and before she had any acquaintance, personal or by pen, with that gentleman”, which is not among those epistles published in the *Letters* (1811). Seward had read *Madoc* shortly after its publication, between March and April 1805. She had a very positive opinion of the work, as she told her friend Henry Cary, on 8 August 1805: “*Madoc* bears a master-key to every bosom where but good common sense, and anything resembling a human heart, inhabit”, she

wrote, adding that “all its interests are British” and that the poem had “more for the understanding of the heart than any compositions without the pale of Shakespeare and Richardson.” (Seward, 1811: 6: 228), which places Southey among the greats, but more importantly, deems the poem both excellent in quality and accessible to all readers. Comparing it to *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, she affirms that “only the lovers of poetry taste” the first, whereas “all taste and feel” *Madoc* (Seward: 228). For Seward, *Madoc* is far superior to *Joan of Arc*. Years later, in another letter, this time to Southey himself, she declared *Madoc* “amongst the first poetry the world has produced” (Seward: 359) and congratulated herself on having “foretold, felt, and confidently asserted the future glory” (Seward: 360) of the poem.

In the letter to the *GM*, Seward expands on her commentary to Cary writing that she shall not “wait the tardy universality of praise” in celebrating Southey and praises the author, who in her view is deserving of “instant patronage and celebrity in the nation” (“A Letter Written”, 1808: 577). On the other hand, Seward condemns the “tasteless, self-contradicting, and unjust criticisms on *Madoc*” (“A Letter Written”: 577), citing the review from *Critical Review* for January 1806. This violently negative review was written by an unknown hand (Woof, 2001: 171), although Southey thought it had been written by Charles Valentine Le Grice out of animosity towards Coleridge and his friends<sup>31</sup>. *Madoc* was in fact widely celebrated in its reviews, with the exception of the *Monthly Review* and the *Edinburgh Review* (Pratt, 2020: 2: n.p.). The former called it mediocre and lacking in “elevation of thought and language” (“Southey’s *Madoc*”, *Monthly Review*, 1805: 117) which makes it “unsuitable to heroic poetry” (“Southey’s *Madoc*”, *Monthly Review*: 115) while the latter described Southey as an “undisciplined and revolutionary character” aiming to “[dethrone] the old dynasty of genius, in [sic] behalf

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<sup>31</sup> According to Southey in a letter to Seward in 1807 (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1374).

of an unaccredited generation” (“Southey’s *Madoc*”, *Monthly Review*: 1). Both reviews date from October 1805, which indicates that Seward might have been referencing them.

Seward responds to this unknown reviewer’s accusations with “an impartial analization [sic] of its claims” (“A Letter”, 1808: 577), unbiased because at this point she did not know Southey personally, whom she describes as “rising and exalted Genius” (“A Letter”: 577). Seward takes it upon herself to defend the poem against accusations of inaccuracy and plagiarism. Seward refutes the first critique offering proof against each of the accusations. On the charge of plagiarism, she argues that “History is the poet’s happiest basis [...] his superstructures never rise fairer than from that foundation” (“A Letter”: 579), and, she adds that *Madoc* is in fact more original and interesting than *Paradise Lost*, although both these works draw on a well-known story. Stylistically, Seward affirms that any prejudices against *Madoc* on this account must be attributed to lacking both “ear [and] taste” (“A Letter”: 579). To her, the poem is “harmonious in its construction as original in its character”, “luminously perspicuous, dignified though simple, and never attenuated, never verbose” (“A Letter”: 579). In terms of structure, Seward contradicts the *Monthly Review*’s commentary on *Madoc* lacking the traits of an epic, considering that it ticks all the boxes for such, and she lists them in detail. All in all, she deems *Madoc* “unimitative” and charming, simple and sublime (“A Letter”: 579), capable of “fill[ing] the eye of sensibility with those tears which it is luxury to shed” (“A Letter”: 580). She adds that the piece contains “a noble strain of pious morality” (“A Letter”: 580).

This review was not the only piece of criticism Seward set down about *Madoc*. Written in 1805, “Verses written in the Blank Leaves of Southey’s *Madoc*”, was published by *The Poetical Register* for 1809 (235-36), with Southey’s full knowledge (both the letter and the poem were sent to the printers with knowledge from the author).

The poem exalts Southey as a “Genius” (“Verses”, 1809: 235) and bids the readers to “welcome the noblest effort of the NINE” (“Verses”: 235) —referring to the nine muses— into the pantheon of English poets. Southey is eulogized for his use of the Epic, which Seward celebrates as a patriotic form to honour English history, the “imperishable song” (“Verses”: 235) impelled by “sacred rage” (“Verses”: 235) that will faithfully and gloriously depict “living landscapes” that “glow in every page” (“Verses”: 235), characters “in nature’s force display’d” and “our green vales and silver shores along” (“Verses”: 235). Seward appeals to the readers: “if thy heart throb to see thy native land” (“Verses”: 236) and “if thy spirit o’er such glorious lays/ wait not for tardy precedents to praise” (“Verses”: 236), then *Madoc* will satisfy their need for a national epic and strengthen their “patriotic pride” (“Verses”: 236). She also assures Southey that *Madoc* will conduct him to immortal fame: “[...]Imagination, when she soars/ From common Talent’s flat and glimmering shores,/ Her lamp to illumine at that orbit prime/ Whose fires are quenchless by the floods of time” (“Verses”: 235). The poem, Seward promises, will remain “buoyant on the tide of years” (“Verses”: 236). Seward celebrates *Madoc* as the peak of Southey’s writing up to that moment, and as a prime and welcome example of patriotic Epic poetry that restores the latter’s reputation after *Joan of Arc* and *Thalaba* had earned him being criticised for his anti-patriotism and rebelliousness. Southey was grateful for the commendatory poem, which he regarded as very welcome publicity. In a letter to Seward, after being advised of the upcoming publication of the poem, he wrote that her interjection would certainly boost the sale of *Madoc* (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1452). Most importantly, it was her (flattering) opinion of *Madoc* that convinced Southey to write to Seward for the first time in the summer 1807. After he had “heard from many quarters” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1338) of Seward’s encomiums.

#### 4.2.3. Mentorship in the Seward-Southey Correspondence (1807-09)

On June 30, 1807, when he was thirty-three years old, Robert Southey wrote to Anna Seward, who at sixty-five was thirty-two years his senior. “It is not without much pride as well as much pleasure that I have heard from many quarters Miss Seward’s [sic] opinion of *Madoc*” he wrote. This first letter was received and replied by Seward within the month, inaugurating the two author’s epistolary relationship, which would last until Seward’s death in March 1809. In the recovered letters—twelve Southey’s, only three Seward’s— they discuss political, personal and more importantly, literary, matters. Both authors were “the products of flourishing provincial societies”, “ambitious and successful” (Pratt, 2011: 26). Their epistolary relationship reveals a friendship between two writers from different generations and at completely different stages of their lives: one, Seward, already consolidated and in the last years of her life and career; and the other, Southey, six years away from becoming the nation’s Poet Laureate.

Years later, in the preface to *Madoc*, he would gratefully credit the poem as “the means of making me personally acquainted with Miss Seward. Her encomiastic opinion of it was communicated to me through Charles Lloyd, in a way which required some courteous acknowledgement.” (Southey, 1838: 5: xiv). This letter from Seward to Lloyd Southey makes reference to remains untracked. Three letters from Seward to Lloyd are in my knowledge: 30d September 1807, 25th November 1807, and 11th April 1808, all of them published in *Charles Lamb & the Lloyds* in 1899 (Lucas, 1899: 196-216), but none of the correspondence between Seward and Lloyd was published in the *Letters* (1811). Although in the last one Seward mentions *Madoc*, the date indicates that it is a later epistle than the one Southey references in his letter.

Seward had been writing publicly about his work ever since 1797, and followed his career from the very beginning. As her critical reviews of *Joan of Arc* (1796), *Thalaba* (1801) and *Madoc* (1808) have shown, Seward greatly admired Southey from the very



start of his career, and also from the very start, she took upon herself to advise the younger author, passing on her accumulated experience to him. In fact, their conversation begins right where her review to *Madoc* left off, which implies that the conversation in fact began with Seward's first review, published in 1797, even if Southey reply until ten years later. Indeed, the letters offer evidence that Southey had read her reviews: "the lines which you addressed to me upon Joan of Arc were sent to me in Portugal immediately as they appeared. Need it be said that I was well pleased to be so censured for the sake of being so praised!" (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1346) he wrote in 1807. He was also made aware of her private comments on *Madoc*, a year before they were published in the *GM*, and acknowledged them in his first letter: "the applause which you give me is more than I deserve" (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1338). Southey's awareness of Seward's reviews on his works is also found in his private correspondence as early as 1802, a few months after *The Poetical Register* published Seward's appraisal of *Thalaba* (Seward, 1802). In a letter from June 1802, he writes to his friend W.W. Wynn that "Miss Anna Seward's [sic] criticism I had not heard of till from you", and he rapidly assumes Seward's criticism is due to a personal resentment against Coleridge and him on the receiving end because of his acquaintance with the lake poet: "I suspect she resents upon me some remarks made by Coleridge on her sonnets". He remarks that her critique of *Joan of Arc* had been "qualified with abundant praise", and refers to the ambivalence of Seward's review as a "queer mixture" of "sugar & gall", "so sweet—& so damn bitter" (*CLRS*, Part 2, letter 683). A month later he repeats the same allegory, this time with oil and vinegar, "praise & censure equally extravagant—sugared vile" (*CLRS*, Part 2, letter 692). Southey claims that he has not seen her criticism yet but admits admiring Seward for being so forward: "I like her for honestly signing it, & am more pleased by her frankness than I can be offended by her censure" (*CLRS*, Part 2, letter 693). A month after, Southey has read

Seward's criticism and his immediate reaction is to antagonise Seward and accuse her of wishing only to self-publicise, and of literary ignorance: "its main drift seems to be a wish to vindicate the versification of her own sonnets", he claims, adding that "my versification she does not understand & [she] has not learning enough to know that as far as precedent be good for anything upon such subjects, it is justified by Greek—German & Italian authority" (*CLRS*, Part 2, letter 699). These earlier letters demonstrate that Southey did not seek Seward's acquaintance and correspondence until he received praise from her. Although he expresses admiration for her willingness to sign her reviews instead of hiding behind a pseudonym, he shows no interest in her unrequited advice, and much less in furthering their relationship.

Bestowing critical reviews and advice to her contemporaries was not exceptional in Seward, who was accustomed to comment on published works to their authors in correspondence—notable examples of this are her correspondence to Helen Maria Williams and to Walter Scott, which they received with lukewarm response—, what is key in this instance is that Southey not only replied but actively requested more of this advice: "You know now as much of my poetical dreams as I do (...) myself, & could I talk them over with you, it is very possible that your advice might determine me in favour of one subject or the other, & stimulate me to begin" (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1338). This exchange reveals Southey acknowledging Seward's role as authority figure and consummate author. Indeed, the letters show how "Southey writes to Seward as an equal, a fellow poet whose opinion he both respects and courts. [...] Southey's use of Seward as a confidante" (Pratt, 2011: 26).

Southey would eventually visit Seward at the Bishop's Palace between March and April 1807 (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1444) and between February and March of 1808 (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1438), a few months before her death. In 1838, in retrospect, he wrote: "Miss

Seward was not so much over-rated at one time as she has since been unduly depreciated” adding that “she was so considerable a person when her reputation was at its height” (Southey, 1838: 5: xvii). In terms of literary prowess, he affirmed that she “set, rather than followed”, and qualified her letters and poems as “unquestionable proofs of extraordinary talents and great ability” (Southey: 5: xviii). Finally, he wrote that “the more she was known, the more she would have been esteemed and admired, I bear a willing testimony to her accomplishments and her genius, to her generous disposition, her frankness, her sincerity and warmth of hearth” (Southey: 5: xviii). These words are a testimony to the personal and literary bond that united the two writers.

An analysis of their recovered correspondence will clarify the intricacies of Seward and Southey’s literary relationship, revealing the extent to their collaboration and of the older author’s mentorship.

#### **4.2.3.1. Reconstructing an Epistolary Relationship**

The first step in order to assess the correspondence between Seward and Southey was to assemble the existing letters that passes between the two. For this, I am indebted to Lynda Pratt’s *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey (CLRS henceforth)*<sup>32</sup> project for their work in compiling, transcribing, digitizing and contextualising Southey’s correspondence. To the best of my knowledge, and at the time of composition of this thesis, Lynda Pratt’s “Southey Letters Project” is aware of eleven letters from Southey to Seward, between the years 1807 and 1809, the year of her death. On the other hand, we have two letters from Seward to Southey in the sixth volume of *Letters of Anna Seward* (1811), edited by Constable—which, again, we cannot know for certain to what an extent these were twisted out of shape by Constable and Scott—. I have also found a third letter from

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<sup>32</sup> A major part of the primary sources used in this chapter come from this project. *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey* is an ongoing interdisciplinary and international project that aims to produce a digital, open-access twelve-volume edition of 7500 letters penned by Southey.

Seward to Southey in Harvard University's Amy Lowell Autograph Collection, dating from June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1808 (*Houghton*, Seward to Southey, 17 June 1808), which is included here as Appendix F of this thesis. This makes a current total of fifteen letters, of which twelve are from Southey to Seward and three from Seward to Southey.

Since the vast majority of the missing letters are Seward's replies to Southey, an analysis of the correspondence implies having to reconstruct what Seward wrote to Southey from Southey's responses to her letters. There are two exceptions, one is a series of consecutive letters from July-December 1807 and again, if briefer, in May-July 1808. These have been highlighted in bold in the figure below. I have attempted to set the letters in order to form a chronology that will give them a narrative structure as well as highlight the gaps in the correspondence. All letters are sourced from Pratt's Southey Letters Project unless otherwise stated.

1. Southey to Seward. 30 June 1807. (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1338)
2. [Missing letter: Seward to Southey]
3. Southey to Seward. 25th July 1807. (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1346)
4. Seward to Southey. August 15th 1809 (Seward, 1811: 358).
5. Southey to Seward. 25th October 1807. (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1374)
6. [Missing letter: Seward to Southey].
7. [Missing letter: Southey to Seward].
8. Seward to Southey. October 28th, 1807 (Seward, 1811: 374).
9. Southey to Seward. 10th December 1807. (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1394)
10. [Missing letter: Seward to Southey].
11. [Missing letter: Southey to Seward].
12. [Missing letter: Seward to Southey].
13. Southey to Seward. 13th February 1808. (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1428)
14. [Missing letter: Seward to Southey].
15. Southey to Seward. 18th April 1808. (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1444)
16. [Missing letter: Seward to Southey].
17. Southey to Seward. 29th April 1808. (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1452)
18. [Missing letter: Seward to Southey].
19. Southey to Seward. 28th May 1808. (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1461)
20. Seward to Southey. (Seward to Southey, 17 June 1808; *MS Lowell Autograph File*, 238).
21. Southey to Seward. 4th July 1808. (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1475)
22. [Missing letter: Seward to Southey].
23. Southey to Seward. Late August/early September 1808. (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1499)

24. [Missing letter: Seward to Southey].
25. Southey to Seward. 29th December 1808. (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1559)
26. [Missing letter: Seward to Southey].
27. Southey to Seward. 18th February 1809. (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1583)
28. [Missing letter: Seward to Southey].

It must be noted that the issues of unreliability of Seward's posthumously edited and published correspondence (see Chapter 5) also permeate into this analysis. Therefore, the two epistles published in Seward's *Letters* (1811) must be considered as untrustworthy, both in terms of content and of dating. There is evidence of, at the very least (and the conversation suggests there were more) eleven missing letters from Seward to Southey. Why were they not included in the collected *Letters*? It seems unlikely that Seward, a writer proud of her literary friendships and even more so of her critical acumen displayed in her letters to them, would not wish her complete correspondence with Southey to see the light. All evidence points to the contrary, as she was interested in associating her name to that of the Romantics, starting with Walter Scott, to whom she bequeathed the manuscripts. After the publication of the volume in 1811, Southey argued in private conversation that her letters to him were deleted from the publication because of Archibald Constable's relationship with Francis Jeffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh Review* and well-known enemy of Southey. According to Southey, Constable feared the *Letters* would be badly received by the *Edinburgh Review* because of Seward's association to Southey and that they would receive a poor reception and therefore attain him no profit. Moreover, Scott also feared that Seward's letters to him would reveal his derogatory comments against the powerful Jeffrey, and he wanted them deleted. Seward had no involvement with the Edinburgh publishing world and therefore felt free to accuse him of ignorance and envy (Barnard, 2009: 164). She was not afraid, as her peers were, of Jeffrey's power over their careers, and she even challenged him publicly by responding to his negative review of *Marmion* with a highly positive one in the *Critical Review* of

her good friend Robert Fellowes (Barnard, 2009: 164). For that purpose, Southey writes, Constable allowed Francis Jeffrey's brother-in-law, Mr Morehead, to censor any passages uncomfortable for Jeffrey: "indeed special care has been taken to keep in all that could injure me, & omit as much as possible of what might serve me" (*CLRS*, Part 4, letter 1980). Indeed, there are letters missing, but the two that were published are full of contradictions. Following the conversation with Southey's letters reveals inconsistencies and missing passages on Seward's side of the correspondence.

One of these inconsistencies is found in Seward's letter to Southey from 28th October 1807, the second of the two epistles published in the *Letters*. In this letter Seward discusses Mary Wortley Montagu's correspondence and Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella's exploits in a way that makes it look like she is replying to Southey's July letter. The contents suggest that this letter should have been sent before she received Southey's October 25th. In the latter, however, Southey comments on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: "of Lady Wortley's letters I can only speak upon recollections three years old" (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1374). He also makes reference to sending Seward his *Letters from England, by Don Manuel Espriella* (1807) published under a pseudonym. In addition, in this letter Southey thanks Seward for "the passage concerning Madocs voyage" (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1374), which he could not have read, because the passage is included in the following letter (October 28th), and not in the preceding one. These incongruences suggests different things. On the one hand, Seward's letter might have been wrongly dated, or it could have been originally one that was divided into two in the *Letters*. Seward's second letter dates from 28th October 1807, only three days after Southey's was penned (we do not know when he sent it), a suspiciously short time that suggests the date is indeed wrong. Another possibility is that there are letters missing between the two. There are inconsistencies in other instances of their correspondence. In Southey's letter from 10th

December 1807, he replies to Seward's comments on Wordsworth, Horace Walpole and William Cowper. However, in her previous epistle (October 28th) Seward discusses Walpole and Cowper's letters, but she does not mention Wordsworth, which suggests that the passage was edited out before being published.

#### **4.2.3.2. *MS Lowell Autograph File, 238***

Only one of the letters from Seward to Southey included in this analysis escapes these issues of unreliability. This is the letter dating from June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1808, *MS Lowell Autograph File, 238* that is located in Harvard University's Houghton Library. The evidence provided here comes from my transcription of the original manuscript, previously unpublished (Appendix F). The letter is longer than the other two, sourced from the *Letters*, once again suggesting cuts in the latter: the manuscript is 1310 words long upon transcription; versus 825 and 1102 words in the published letters. Another notable difference is the tone of the epistle, much less ornamented and much freer and spirited, a unique, untouched testimony of Seward's epistolary writing style.

In the manuscript, Seward replies to Southey's letter from May 28. She celebrates that Southey has finally received her "A Letter written by Anna Seward to one of her Literary Friends, Feb. 15, 1806, on the subject of Mr. Southey's 'Madoc' and before she had any acquaintance, personal or by pen, with that gentleman" that would be published in the *GM* a month later. She tells Southey she hopes "Nichols [the editor of the *GM*] will not mutilate the strictures" (Seward fol. 1r). She also comments on her abhorrence for the *anti-Jacobin Review*, saying that she detests "their principles on every subject & never look at their work" (Seward fol. 1r) and that they are ill-equipped to judge the beauties of *Madoc*. Showing evidence of her admiration for the poem, Seward recounts how she read it aloud to visiting friends for an entire week, "we declined evening parties that we might

enjoy, without interruption, that banquet for the imagination & the heart” (Seward fol. 1r).

In the epistle, Seward thanks Southey for his comments on her much-admired *Marmion* (1808): “have the honour to think with you on many points of your criticism” (Seward fol. 1v), she writes. Additionally, Seward concedes that reading *Marmion* “unveiled” for her the meaning of Southey’s claim, indirectly quoted, that “the power of rhyme had never been ^put forth to its best-possible effect” (Seward fol. 1v) and following the same thread she celebrates Scott’s rhymes as “pour[ing] on the ear with torrent force, & compared to the great masters of the heroic couplet, Dryden & Pope, are as the falls of Niagara to the more ever, more beautiful & grandeur course the Ganges” (Seward fol. 1v) as having accomplished what “even the bold verse of Dryden did not attain, at least in equal degree” (Seward fol. 1v). Seward also comments on their mutual friend Charles Lloyd’s translation of the 24th book of the *Iliad*. She compares a passage of his text to the same lines translated by Cowper and Pope. She deems Pope’s version superior, and applauds his “condensing art” (Seward fol. 2r). Seward then compares its merit to two lines from her own poem, *Louisa*. She also encourages Southey to take care of his health and celebrates his working on a new unnamed poem. Besides, Seward discusses about the *Poetical Register* and its editor, Davenport, and tells Southey that he has “coaxed me out of a great number of trifles of my own, amounting to at least two thousand lines” (Seward fol. 2v). She acknowledges that she has often “remonstrated with him about admitting loads of trash from the Poetasters” (Seward fol. 2v) as contributions to the magazine. On the other hand, she celebrates Davenport for including poems by Southey and Coleridge in his pages.



#### 4.2.3.3. The Conversation

In her five-volume *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793–1810*, Lynda Pratt recovers different manuscript and published editions of each one of the author’s works. She also discusses the collaborative nature of these editions, citing Southey’s schoolfellow and life-long friend Grosvenor Charles Bedford as one of these collaborators to whom he sent early drafts of *Kehama* (as he did with Seward). Pratt suggests that Southey sent Bedford the material “for support and encouragement” (2020: 4: n.p.) after the negative reviews *Thalaba* had received, an argument that might also apply as to why he sent it to Seward. Furthermore, Pratt deems Bedford as playing a “highly instrumental” part in the development of *Kehama*, although she qualifies his feedback as “carping and unsympathetic” (Pratt: 4: n.p.). Southey had other collaborators and advisors—Bedford, Southey’s brother Thomas, William Taylor, Charles Wynn, Robert Lovell, Thomas Beddoes, Humphry Davis, Samuel T. Coleridge, to name a few (Pratt: 2: n.p.)—, to which he added Seward. The letters from Southey to Bedford containing an early draft from *Kehama* date from 1802 (Pratt: 4: n.p.) while the ones to Seward are from 1808—if only because the two writers had not met before 1807—, and are truncated due to Seward’s passing. This indicates that Southey was not unaccustomed to requesting epistolary advice like the one he received from Seward. Nevertheless, although she discusses Bedford’s notes and involvement and claims that Southey used Seward “as a sounding-board about his complex feelings about and possible resolutions for the problems raised by *Madoc*” (Pratt: 2: n.p.), Pratt only mentions Seward’s anecdotally and does not include her letters in her compilation. I contend that, although it is beyond the scope of this chapter, the partial reconstruction of Southey and Seward’s correspondence indicates that such a task might be accomplished.

On 25th July 1807, discussing *Madoc*, Southey asks Seward for her counsel: “let me consult you concerning an alteration of this part” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1346). He then

brainstorms two scenes, and asks Seward what she thinks “these are the only alterations which seem practicable: do you think them good?” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1346). In this instance Southey’s request for advice has less to do with technical literary issues than with content, and he is appealing to Seward the reader as much as Seward the writer. This letter is succeeded by a reply dating from August 15, 1807 (Seward, 1811: 6: 358-362). In their epistolary relationship, Seward simultaneously embodies the roles of reader and of literary expert. The former, when she gives her subjective opinion, expressed in emotional terms: “I am honoured by your condescending to consult me respecting some material alterations in the poem of my idolatry” (Seward: 358); and the latter when she supports these with objective arguments and the knowledge that her years of experience as an author have conferred on to her: “Madoc appears to me a work too beautiful and great to stand in the smallest need of any alteration—yet the finale might receive spirit and interest by your new plan for it. If this poem had not passed the press, I should have urged the execution of that design” (Seward: 359). In this instance, she argues that she fears altering these passages would in fact be counterproductive and give further arguments to Southey’s detractors: “a change so considerable may give triumph to the envious foes of its speedy celebrity” (Seward: 359). These arguments are based on her own experience with the reviewing press, and in passing them on to Southey, Seward is enacting her role as mentor. In the same letter Seward gives Southey further arguments not to go forth with the alterations he suggested: “successive editions of a great work may safely receive any merely verbal alterations which the author chooses to give them. I doubt the policy of such as respect the action or characters, even should they be improvements” (Seward: 360). However, she adds, “My opinion asked, I hold it a duty of friendship to give it freely; yet to your mature consideration and superior judgement I submit my scruples” (Seward: 360). Seward bestows her advice, or opinion, to use her

words, as a friend, in terms that are very dissimilar to the way she previously expressed herself in the critical commentaries of his poems. In addition, she appeals to Southey's "mature consideration and superior judgement" (Seward: 360), both encouraging—or even flattering—Southey and complimenting him and disengaging from the problem. In both these instances, Seward is careful not to overstep.

In Southey's next letter, from 25th October 1807, he thanks her for "the passage concerning Madoc's voyage", which included "a great mass of evidence to prove the existence of Welsh-Indians in America" and tells her that "whenever I can afford the time I will collect it to be prefixed in some future edition of the poem" (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1374). Nevertheless, the manuscripts and editions of *Madoc* consulted by Lynda Pratt reveal that in fact, he did not include them (Pratt, 2020: 2: n.p.). This passage from Seward's is located in the last half of her letter from October 28th. In it, she copies some notes from *Wharton's Almanack* (1662) containing a list of forty-one Welsh monarchs dating from Constantine to Llwelin ap Gruffyth ap Llwelin ap Jerwerth, the last prince of Wales and descendant of Madoc's brother: "In his time (said this record,) Madoc, his brother, discovered part of the West Indies" (Seward, 1811: 6: 378). Seward tells Southey that the *Almanack*, then, "stamps your poem with reality of basis (...) as a known fact" (Seward: 378). These would later be included in the *Critical Review* as justification for *Madoc's* factual basis.

Seward's next epistle briefly comments on Southey's *Letters from England, by Don Manuel Espriella* (1807), which she applauds, saying that she perused them "with infinite amusement and interest" (Seward: 374), highlighting that "the purity and ease of the language" has the "raciness of originality, not the lees of translation" (Seward: 374). Her comments on this publication show how Southey relied on Seward not only for specific advice but also for more general support and encouragement. The *Letters from*

*England* trigger a discussion on letter writing, in which Seward criticises Montagu's for possessing "an utter death of sensibility, and a considerable death of the charms of fancy" (Seward: 375). For Seward, Montagu's epistles are full of "shrewd sense", "caustic spleen", "jealousy of contemporary genius; no affection and little felicity of description" (Seward: 375). On the other hand, Seward informs Southey of Gray's and Walpole's superiority, to which Southey replies "Horace Walpole's letters I have never seen. Cowpers [sic] are very delightful" (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1394). Although this literary discussion does not qualify as mentoring, it does show the familiarity with which two authors of different generations exchange their literary principles and referents in an honest discussion about merit, talent, and beauty. The letters are full of instances of literary debate, which allowed Seward to share with whom she considered was a talented and deserving writer her thoughts on literary merit, the same thoughts she deemed important enough to engage in a public debate over with Boswell (the Benvolio debate) or have printed for posterity after her death (the *Letters*). They embody a persona Seward considered inherently tied to her identity as a writer: Seward the critic, Seward the knowledgeable woman of letters. They are intended not only to assert her literary authority, as discussed in previous chapters, but these letters to Southey also suggest that she envisioned them as didactic, meant to be taught and learnt. Seward's literary discussions create a dynamic of master (the older Seward) and student (the younger Southey). By engaging with the elderly author, Southey is also reinforcing his knowledge of literature, demonstrating that he too is well read and that he has the command and the ability to keep a one-to-one discussion with a writer who, if only because of her age, is more experienced, has read and written more, and has had more time to think about these matters and discuss them with her large and impressive literary circle. In another instance, Southey celebrates that Seward speaks "of Wordsworths [sic] poems as I should expect,

fairly appreciating its defects & excellencies” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1394), and asks for her opinion “Will [MS torn] agree with me in holding Mrs Hutchinson to be the best of all female writers?” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1394). They also review *Marmion* (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1452), Southey agrees with Seward’s intimation that the poem has “a want of taste, & of propriety, which (...) amounts to a want of feeling” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1452), but he contends that, notwithstanding its faults, “the sum total of beauty and of delight” make its defects “not worth mentioning in the general estimate” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1452). Although they generally coincide, sometimes they disagree. Southey’s reverence for Landor’s *Gebir* “the only contemporary poem to which I am, as a poet, in the slightest degree indebted” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1452) is not shared by Seward, who deems it “quizzical” [sic] (Seward fl. 2r). Seward objects to Southey’s profound admiration for Landor, saying that “I will not again dispute your fancied obligations to a Poet so inferior to yourself”. She claims that that Southey possesses, in greater degree than Landor, the capacity “of producing a picture by a single word, of wh *Gebir* certainly exhibits a few instances; but they abound in poetry of yours wh preceded the appearance of Landers” (Seward fl. 2r) he so admires in the poet. Seward’s letter containing her review of *Gebir* has been lost. Another example of a playful disagreement is in reference to the Spanish epic *Chronicle of the Cid*, which Southey was translating at the time: “it would be in vain to argue with you about the Cid,—you are as insensible to the beauties of that stile [sic] of history, as I am to the charms of music” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1559). Southey held Walter Savage Landor in great esteem. Landor had offered to fund his poetry after *Thalaba*. Telling Seward about this exchange, he affirms that this has motivated him to continue writing poetry, “if only to show him how highly I value the ~~applause~~ <opinion> of a man, (...) who is authorized to pass an opinion upon me as one of my peers. I am a proud man and do not allow that authority to many” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1444). The

letters are evidence that he allowed this authority to Seward, and his interest in corresponding with her and asking her opinion suggests that he also greatly valued her perspective and her applause.

In March 1808 Southey sent Seward a new edition of *Joan of Arc*. He said that “as you have only seen the quarto edition with all its imperfections on its head, great part of it as it now stands will be new to you”, adding that “the beginning is, in my judgment, among the best things I have produced” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1444). In a different letter, Southey responded to Seward’s comments on *Joan of Arc*, seemingly not about the new version he had sent her but about the original work she read and reviewed in *Philippic on a Modern Epic* (1797). Seward’s letter, to which Southey was replying, has regrettably been lost. In his reply, Southey admitted that the poem “will always impede my national reputation”, while he also claimed that at the same time it will “gain for me the more desirable applause of those whose morality is not confined within geographical limits” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1475). He attributes certain faults Seward points out, in the lost letter that preceded this one, to the “sins of my youth” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1475). In this same letter Southey anticipates Seward’s reaction to reading *Kehama*: “you will I think see new modes of rhyming, in which the ear only, & not the eye has been consulted” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1475). To make his point, Southey attaches some verses from book 8 (lines 143-147 and 27-49 of the final published work). He tells Seward: “I have merely copied it to show you what a noise one may make with these bells when it is proper to chime them:— you may judge what an uproar there will be when Kehama drives his brazen chariot” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1475). In December 1808 Southey sent Seward a more substantial excerpt from the poem, which survives in manuscript form in the *JBM* of Seward’s native Lichfield (*JBM*, Southey to Seward, 29 Dec. 1808). The four-page manuscript, fairly well preserved, shows a draft of an early version of the first section of *Kehama* in Southey’s

small and neat hand. The draft had already received a lot of revisions “written between seven & eight years ago (...) it has since been thrown into rhyme” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1559) and had been read by Southey’s friends and collaborators as early as 1802 (the date of Bedford receiving a copy of the manuscript according to Pratt, 2020: 4: n.p), which might suggest he wished to show Seward a more or less finished version, whereas he reserved the rough drafts for a more familiar audience. This in turn seems to indicate that Southey was aware of the importance of Seward’s opinion and of her influence in the reviewing press, which consequently could influence the success of the poem. This is especially true after Seward’s public encomiums for his previous poems, and more specifically, to the power she exerted in the *Critical Review*, something that will be further explored below.

Details of the variations between this version and the final first edition of *Kehama* can be found in the fourth volume of Lynda Pratt’s *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793–1810* (2020). It is the most significant, and obvious, example of Southey asking Seward for her advice on a text, this time before publication, whereas up to then his consultations had been more anecdotal. In the letter, he entreats Seward to reply with her thoughts in the piece, and asks her to especially look for the issues that need work: “if you will find out the faults here half as keenly as you have found out the beauties of Madoc, I will send section after section, as leisure & opportunity may serve” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1579). Sadly, this project was interrupted by Seward’s death less than three months later. Southey’s last surviving letter to Seward dates from February 18<sup>th</sup>, 1809, and it is not known whether Seward ever replied to it, although it might well have been the case: Seward was still corresponding with Walter Scott in March 16<sup>th</sup>, days before her stroke and eventual demise. Southey makes reference to “her farewell letter to me” in an epistle

to Mary Barker on the 13th of May 1809, two months after her passing, which might have been a reply to his February letter.

In this last epistle, Southey thanks Seward for sending him *The Fall of Needwood*, where she had contributed a poem several years before and “the two elegies” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1583), presumably *Elegy on Captain Cook* and *Monody on Major André*. In the same letter Southey tells Seward that his next letter will contain the second section of *Kehama*. This letter is of special significance because it offers proof that Seward sent a commentary on the first section, and that Southey indeed read and considered her advice: “one of the passages to which you object I have altered thus” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1583), he writes: “And thou O Moon thine ineffectual ray!” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1583). The version of the line to which Seward objected was “And thou O Queen of Night/ Thine ineffectual ray.” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1559). The final version of the line was not significantly changed: “Pourest, O moon, an ineffectual ray!” (Southey, 1818: 2). Southey also replied to some other of Seward’s comments, having to do with alliteration in a specific line “I aimed at a noisy monotony” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1583), and with the meaning of the line “for who could know—what aggravated wrong— provoked the desperate blow” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1583).

#### **4.2.3.4. An Enduring Influence: Seward’s Role in the Financial Success of *Madoc***

Seward’s influence in Southey’s career was not limited to her advice on his writings. It also extended to issues of reception and the reviewing press, which had a direct effect on the sales of these works. When the two authors began corresponding, Seward had already released all the publications in her career—with the exception, obviously, of her posthumously published *Poetical Works* and *Letters*—. She possessed an incalculable



experience and know-how about the publishing market , and was well-known, and generally well-regarded. Southey unequivocally benefited from this.

Southey expressed his preoccupation with the sales of his books very often in his letters: “Half my Ways & Means must be raised from the Booksellers, and half my time is employed in raising them” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1338), he wrote to Seward, adding that “tho’ time employed in writing for money is unworthily employed, yet as man must live & that not by bread alone, there is no other way by which I could have lived so congruous too my own inclinations and pursuits” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1338). Southey was always keen on saying that history paid better: “Why do you not write more poetry, has been the question every where, & my answer has everywhere been because I cannot afford it” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1444). Indeed he affirms that he has “no leisure for poetry, for that it is not a marketable article” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1338), an idea that he remarks upon several times in his letters. According to his letters, many of his correspondents were insistent on his poetic talents, and expressed their frustration at a lack of published poetry. Furthermore, he adds that if he is to continue writing poetry, he will first “previously secure the fair price of the manual labour” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1475). Southey refers to his concern about financial hardship very often, together with a self-assurance of his poetic talents. Both ideas are encapsulated in this telling quote, where the author protests that the posthumous fame he is certain to possess will do nothing for his current financial strains: “Poor I was born, & poor I shall die (...) but as soon as I am dead, then it will be like the man in the spectator, I shall be made with gold. <I shall then be> be-wept, be-rhymed, be-biographized, be-monumented,—whereas I man now be-starved” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1499).

Interestingly, Southey’s correspondence reveals one of the ways in which he was actively benefiting from his relationship with Seward: her connections in the English

reviewing press. One of these was the reverend Robert Fellowes, who became editor of the *Critical Review* in 1807. Southey expressed to Seward his worries about the future sales of *Madoc*: “I cannot subsist with the profits of my pen & in consequence of the total failure of *Madoc*” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1475). Bad press means to Southey, then, not only an attack to his reputation and but more importantly a dent on his means of subsistence: “this mischief a reviewer can do me [...] the book-buying world (who are a different world from the book-reading one)” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1338). In January 1806 the *Critical Review* had published a scalding commentary on Southey’s *Madoc*. He expressed the frustration this first review caused him to a correspondent: “I am abused because one reviewer hates Coleridge & now am to be praised because another is a friend of Miss Seward’s!—She however is a good friend of mine, & I am very much obliged to her.” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1327). Seward made sure that the *Critical Review* would retract their first critique. In April 1806 he wrote that Fellowes had visited him and he celebrates Seward’s intervention: “it seems Miss Seward corresponds with him & has written him an enormously long letter full of praise for *Madoc*” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1172). Southey appears hopeful for a review of the periodical’s first appraisal, writing to a friend: “I am however promised ‘ample justice’ for the future, for a reason equally valid. Fellowes is become a joint editor of that review, & he will praise me to gratify Miss Seward, with whom I am in actual correspondence!” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1386). This letter from Seward to Fellowes was not included in the published *Letters*, but its contents are revealed in the magazine’s article. In November 1807, Fellowes published the following apologetic retraction, in which *Madoc*’s originality is brought to the fore as one of the poem’s greatest assets, especially when compared to other contemporary works, which tended to emulate their predecessors and each other:

Whatever real, or fancied defect our former review of Mr Southey's *Madoc*, given early on its publication, might point out (and no bard of any period ever produced a work of that length in which, perhaps, more defects that can be found in *Madoc* might not be remarked) we cannot, now we are on the subject of poetic plagiarism, refrain from doing its author the justice to acknowledge; that of all poets, ancient or modern, he imitates the seldomest and is the most original. (...) Mr. Southey disdains to deck his muse in borrowed gems (“[Review of *The Mountain Bard*]”, 1807: 238).

In a footnote, they add “Since our remarks on the *Mountain Bard* were written, information has been sent us which, united to the testimonies of the Welch Historians, and that of various travellers, establishes the verity of circumstance on which the poem *Madoc* is built” and they admit that “we are free to confess it the noblest subject for epic song that could have been drawn from the stores of antiquity” (“[Review of *The Mountain Bard*]”, 1807: 238). Notes from her own hand are included in the new version. These are the same included in her letter to Southey from October 1807 (Seward, 1811: 6: 374) in which she transcribed evidence of a Briton settlement in America occupied by *Madoc* from the *Wharton's Almanack*<sup>33</sup>. Southey appears immensely grateful to Seward's generous gesture: “I am very much indebted to you for what you have done with the *Critical Review*” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1374). Seward intersected once more in the defence of a younger author she felt had been mistreated by the press in 1808, when she wrote to Fellowes in defence of Scott's *Marmion*: “I told [Fellowes] my *full mind* concerning the malicious and stupid attack in that work upon your last noble poem”, she wrote. In this letter, she included details that have been lost in Southey's case “I fought the criticism every inch of its ground and made the lists 12 pages in extent, quoting a number of the beautiful and sublime passages” (Seward in Barnard, 2009: 20).

Seward's intersection filled Southey with hope. Tellingly, he told Seward “Your verses & your criticism will, beyond a doubt, assist the sale of *Madoc*.” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1452). To a friend, he wrote: “the *Critical Review* had gone out of its way to do me

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<sup>33</sup> “Whatlon's” [*sic*] in the *Critical Review* (“[Review of *The Mountain Bard*]”, 1807: 239).

justice” adding that “the booksellers too have advertised *Madoc*,—doubtless in consequence of this article” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1394). In a letter to his brother from August 1808 he explained that Seward made a point to tell everybody who would listen about her devotion for *Madoc*. This, which could be regarded as flattering and a sign of her admiration, was highlighted by Southey as a marketing strategy: “[Miss Seward] reads *Madoc* to all her acquaintance, & must be the means of selling several copies.” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1496). Furthermore, on 28 May 1808 he wrote about Seward’s published poem “Verses Written in the Blank Leaves of Southey’s *Madoc*” saying that “twenty thousand persons therefore will see that *Madoc* has received the praise of one whose praise is of sterling as well as current value” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1461). His comments acknowledge Seward’s authority and reputation, while they show that she was still regarded as an authority in literary merit in her old age, not only by Southey himself, but also by the audience he wished to reach: “the work will become more respectable in his hands,—he will leaven it with something of a liberal & of a christian spirit, & will give me fair play there for the future” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1374).

#### **4.2.3.5 Age and Ageing in the Seward-Southey Correspondence**

Comments on family and friends and wishes of good health appear in almost every letter, but they increase in length, detail, and familiarity as Seward and Southey’s relationship progresses. After having visited Seward in Lichfield, Southey always asks to be remembered to her cousin, Henry White, and her live-in companion, Elizabeth Fern. He writes to Seward about Fern: “Miss Ferns reading would show me the faults in my own poetry, because it is a touchstone which nothing but gold can bear” and says that her reading aloud “brings every thing [sic] into so strong a light, that no blemish can escape unseen”, adding that he is “ready to admit that there is a charm in such an enunciation which conveys a very high degree of pleasure, totally distinct from that which <what>

the words themselves excite” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1452). He also talks about his family, referring fondly to his children and his domestic routines. Another recurrent theme in the letters is Seward’s health. Although most of Seward’s side of the correspondence is lost, Southey’s letters show a preoccupation beyond courtesy for the elderly writer’s well-being, and her frequent maladies. Knowing that illness was a recurrent theme in Seward’s letter writing, especially in her old age, it is no wonder to imagine the older woman informing Southey about her ailments. Interestingly, the responses to these complaints are articulated in a way that brings issues of old age and ageing to the fore.

In one instance, Southey gives well-meaning advice to a bed-ridden Seward. Southey talks about a friend of his who recovered after suffering an “abscess of the liver” and sends his best to Seward saying that “where the heart and spirit are so young as they are in you, the power of life will also be strong” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1346). In another letter, he expresses his sadness for Seward’s poor health and recommends she follows the advice of the physician and poet Thomas Lovell Beddoes. He also advises her against drinking distilled water: “am certain that water distilled in any metallic vessel must be far more impure than <from a> common spring ~~w~~e or pump” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1374).

All through their correspondence, Southey’s mentions of Seward’s youth and vigour are recurrent, and often meant as encouraging against her protestations of declining health and low spirits. Given the fact that Seward was in her late sixties at the time, these effusions were not to be taken literally: rather, they are to be understood as an endorsement of Seward’s intellectual powers, which Southey equates with youth. In the letter from February 13th, 1808, he writes “yet I shall find <you> with a young heart, & an intellect to which time has only given strength; with all that is immortal about you fresh & vigorous – the oracle still what it was, – whatever be the state of the shrine –” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1428). Southey uses “strength” to refer to Seward’s intellect,

signalling that maturity has only deepened and furthered her mental capacity. He also writes “all that is immortal about you fresh and vigorous” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1428), meaning that her literary and critical prowess, her knowledge and intellect are perennial and are not affected by her physical and emotional decay. He compares her to an oracle, saying that an oracle is still an oracle, no matter the state of its vessel. Southey’s words speak of his admiration for Seward, and his kindness, of the cordiality that reigns in their correspondence. On December 29th 1808, he repeats this same idea, offering Seward a word of encouragement three months before her death, when she expresses her fears that her end will be soon: “That mind of yours is so vigorous & that heart so young, – so beyond the reach of time & infirmity, that I would fain persuade myself the system is yet sound, notwithstanding the attacks which it has sustained.” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1559). Once again Southey refers to Seward’s intellectual power, calling her mind “vigorous”, and once again, immortal “so beyond the reach of time & infirmity”. Southey’s allusions to the intellectual immortality of Seward might be argued to coincide with the latter’s own perceptions of her literary prowess, a self-assurance in the legitimacy of her claim for a place in literary history that she advocated, in her later years, through her assertion of critical authority (see Chapter 2) and the preparation of her posthumous legacy (see Chapter 5).

In the letters, Southey also reflects on his first publications. In these retrospective exercises, he blames his failings to his own youth and inexperience: “when my first poem was published, I had too much confidence, & too little knowledge, to feel any distrust or diffidence of its merit” and adds that he saw *Joan of Arc* and *Thalaba* as “preludes to this greater work [Madoc], as exercises which were to strengthen & prepare me for this serious effort”, an effort towards what he considers his *magnum opus* “the monument which was to perpetuate my memory” (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1338). It stands to reason that

a man so self-aware of his errors of youth would seek the support and advice of an elderly author with years of experience such as Seward.

Another significant reference to age and ageing is their discussion of *Madoc*'s need for a romantic interest in the poem. This conversation transpires two contemporary conceptions of age, one from an elderly woman, and the other from a younger man. Southey claims that he could not give his main character a wife, for he is "past the age at which love is necessary for a hero" (*CLRS*, Part 3, letter 1346), adding that the reader would take for granted he had already been in love. To this, Seward replies expressing surprise and briefly reflects on youth and age: "the epithet *young* fixes Madoc in the reader's mind some years under thirty" (Seward, 1811: 6: 361). After a quick calculation based on Madoc's travels, Seward reaches the conclusion that the hero must be thirty-one, which was, coincidentally, Southey's age at the time of publication of the poem: "is it that age, at life's high noon, that men lose the propensity to love and marriage?", she asks, and answers "I thought it the season at which men feel and inspire ardent passion" (Seward: 361).

### **4.3. Conclusions**

In conclusion, the examination of the correspondence between Seward and Southey reveals a fruitful collaborative intergenerational relationship that goes beyond the personal and concentrates on the professional; Seward fulfils her role of mentor and Southey, thirty-two years younger, that of *protégée*. Southey actively requests Seward's advice in a number of occasions, most notably when working on a revised edition of *Madoc* and when finishing the first of *Kehama*. Their epistolary exchange shows Southey acknowledging Seward's role as a figure of authority and consummate author and benefitting from the experience, connections, and influence that her age had conferred on

to her; it shows that by the very end of her life, and after her publishing career was over, Seward's reputation and sway were still enduring. In their correspondence, Seward's letters and counsel can be read as didactic pieces, much like her public criticism, intended to assert her literary authority. The letters seem to be, however, less of a proof of her authority than an exercise in passing her knowledge and sharing her resources with the younger Southey, creating a dynamic of master and student between the two. In turn, Southey benefits from Seward not only in terms of her counsel and teaching but also in a more tangible, financial and reputational way. By positioning herself as mentor of a rising star, Seward is refuting the idea that elderly women writers were not sought after and revered for their knowledge, experience, and power of influence in the publishing business, a role often bestowed by the critics upon elderly consolidated male authors. Besides, by forming close ties with a writer who was associated with the upcoming, and controversial, first generation of Romantic poets, Seward was validating the strength of her influence and showing her admiration for the poetry of the Lake Poets. She is not, as it has been suggested, stuck in the Neoclassical style with whom many identify her.



## Chapter 5

### “To leave my name in life’s visit”: Seward’s Project for Posthumous Reputation

Seward was fifty-five years old when she began assembling and revising her extensive correspondence for publication. Her decision to embark on such a project came in the last stage of her publishing career, after having established her reputation with the international successes of her *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780), and *Monody on Major André* (1781). The 1780s were an enormously prolific period for Seward in which she also published an elegiac poem to the Bath-Easton hostess Anne Miller, *To the Memory of Lady Miller* (1782), experimented with poetic form in the epistolary novel in heroic couplets *Louisa* (1784), and dedicated *Ode to General Elliott* (1787) to the army officer who defended Gibraltar against Spanish and French attack. In the next decade she sent to the press the anthology of miscellaneous poetry *Llangollen Vale* (1796), and *Original Sonnets* (1799). The *Original Sonnets*, a selection of one hundred sonnets written throughout her life, hint at the author’s desire to both recall her life and writing, and to consider her legacy. The collection shows a preoccupation with loss, memory and remembrance (as previously explored in Chapter 3), in which the verses seem to offer the writer solace in her old age. It is no coincidence, then, that the sonnets were assembled while Seward was reading through a lifetime of correspondence. By collecting the letters for publication, the author intended to provide her readers with an authorised biographical account that would “faithfully reflect the unimportant events of my life” (Seward, 1811: 5: 362). In reality, perusing the published *Letters* reveals them as a record of Seward’s reflections on topics ranging from scientific discovery and technological progress to history and politics, and literary criticism. The *Letters* conveyed to the next generation an image of Seward as being a well-connected, passionate, knowledgeable writer and literary

critic. In such an epistolary exchange, she expresses her interest in a variety of issues, from literature to history, education, medicine, botany, and technology. The letters perpetuate “her political viewpoint and her philosophical, scientific, theological and cultural ideals” (Barnard, 2009: 7); and reveal Seward “as an author with a wide and varied interest in the world and not as a recorder of exclusively female experience” (Barnard: 7). She also appears to be in command of her publishing engagements, negotiating and keeping an eye on her editors and on the reviewers.

Through her compiled works and correspondence, Seward connects Samuel Johnson’s generation to Walter Scott’s, acting as a bridge between two literary movements. In the *Letters*, Seward covers a large number of discussions on literary matters with other authors, many of whom are younger versions of future writers of renown such as Henry Cary or Robert Southey. As we have seen in the previous chapter she acted as literary mentor to them, especially in her old age. She constantly asserts her authority as a “long-lived woman writer” to “provide a retrospective survey of the age” (Culley, 2017: 83) similar in this respect to Mary Berry (Culley: 88). Indeed Amy Culley’s assertion that Berry offers “a gift to literary posterity in the accuracy and intimacy of her view of writers of a previous generation” (88) also rings true for Seward, whose letters are a testament to her lifelong experience and a constant reminder to friends and acquaintances of this authority, especially in her old age. Furthermore, the letters prove that Seward wishes her mentoring vocation not to cease with her life, but rather to survive her in the published volumes, and to continue offering the younger generation her knowledge and experience. At the same time, by doing so Seward asserts her authority and strengthens her legacy. Regretfully, the portrait of Seward that emerges from the *Letters* is a distorted one, and yet that is the image of Seward that has been accepted through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This has only recently been challenged,

when knowledge of the censorship the manuscripts suffered motivated the scholarship of Barnard, Kairoff, and Moore to retrieve a more trustworthy portrait of the author from unedited manuscript items. Regrettably, the editorial process the letters went through after Seward's death makes it impossible to ascertain what ideas about herself the author intended her letters to portray.

In addition to her correspondence, Seward also prepared a compilation of her published and unpublished poetry that comprised her entire career, from her juvenilia to her old age. Both anthologies were withheld from the press in her lifetime and eventually published as *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward* (1810) and *Letters of Anna Seward Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807* (1811), although Seward's initial intention was to withhold the letters for posthumous publication and see the *Poetical Works* published in her lifetime (Constable, 1873: 21). The collections were designed to ensure Seward's reputation after her passing, and were a means of retaining control over her posthumous career, fulfilling what years later William Hazlitt would aptly describe:

We do not like to perish wholly, and wish to bequeath our names, at least, to posterity. As long as we can make our cherished thoughts and nearest interests live in the minds of others, we do not appear to have retired altogether from the stage. We still occupy the breast of others, and exert an influence and power over them, and it is only our bodies that are reduced to dust and powder. (Hazlitt, 1836:263)

Exerting "influence and power" beyond the grave, if not in the larger literary landscape at least over her own legacy, is precisely the underlying motive in Seward's design. To that purpose, she assembled, re-read and edited her correspondence, updating the manuscripts to render them "in some degree interesting, from being animated by the present-time sentiments and feelings of my heart" (Seward, 1811: 4: 362). Seward's word-choice "animated by the present-time sentiments" indicates the role of age, ageing, and authorial and personal maturity in the editing process of the *Letters*. The collections

are, then, a record of her thoughts and opinions—put to paper in her youth—and of her life-long achievements. They emerge from the author’s desire to look back and reflect on her life from the vantage point of her sixty years of experience. Indeed, “the critical transition [to being socially considered old] for female aging was often tied to middle, rather than old age; to the loss of youth, rather than to the onset of decrepitude” (Ottaway, 2004: 41), which shows why Seward would have been perceived as old at a much earlier time than some of her married contemporaries with similar literary careers. This socially conditioned perception of her own age, and of her own mortality, might have been a factor in her decision to begin curating her writing material in her fifties and to consider her career, her legacy and her public image with an eye to posterity. By modifying the letters to better fit her mature self (Kairoff, 2012: 169), Seward is reconstructing her memories to convey not the author she was in her youth, but the author she was at the end of her career; or, rather, the one she wished to be remembered as. The compilations, then, are intended to consolidate Seward’s public image, a public image she is redesigning in retrospect. In having her works and correspondence published after her death, Seward challenges societal and literary expectations. She asserts the value of her own production and, by extension, that of her literary career at the end of her life.

This chapter expands on the claim that Seward’s anthologies were intended as “a lasting memorial” (Barnard, 2009: 2) to “consolidate her literary reputation into posterity” (Barnard, 2017: 1), and to “conduct her writing career from the grave” (Looser, 2008: 173). It seeks to clarify in which ways gender and old age played in the dismissal of Seward’s act of self-canonisation through an examination of the reception of Seward’s posthumously published *Letters* and *Poetical Works*. This places age and ageing centre stage, and allows for an analysis of how contemporary social perceptions of age and ageing—and more precisely, Seward’s triple-layered intersection of age, gender and

marital status: “old maidism”—conditioned her posthumous reception. To this end, firstly, I examine two texts, Frances Brooke’s periodical *The Old Maid* (1755) and William Hayley’s three-volume essay *Essay on Old Maids* (1785), and how Seward responded to the latter. Secondly, I analyse the reviews to Seward’s *Letters* and *Poetical Works* in three widely distributed periodicals of the time: *The Critical Review*, *The British Review and London Critical Journal*, and *The Monthly Review*. Additionally, the textual analysis also includes: Her last will and testament and the instructions she left for her editors concerning the publication of the material, which provided accurate detail about what, how, and when the collected works should be published. As I contend, this document should be considered as a complementary piece to Seward’s legacy project, and not as a marginal item. For this purpose, I will investigate how Walter Scott and Archibald Constable—to whom she bequeathed the collections—managed Seward’s textual legacy, to establish how their actions affected its reception, and by extension, Seward’s attempt at self-canonisation.

### **5.1. The Old Maid: Intersecting Gender, Age, and Singlehood**

Seward continued to “keep her letter books in good order” as far as 1808 (Barnard, 2017: 145), until the very end of her physical and mental faculties and in spite of her declining health. In a letter composed nine days before her death, she noted how her physical ailments were affecting her intellectual activity: “much writing is forbid me, indeed its effect is sufficiently forewarning since the moment I begin to think intensely, the pen falls from my hand, a lethargic sensation creeps over me, I doze” (Barnard, 2009: 2). Before illness took over her mind and body, she had mused that “it is early, at sixty-six, when the bodily strength has suffered so little diminution, to see the lights of intellect begin perceivably to pale” (Seward in Whalley, 1863: 94). When discussing issues of ageing, Seward and her contemporaries often alluded to the disconnection between physical

ageing and intellectual ageing. As Penelope Pennington wrote at seventy: “I do not find my mind get older in proportion to my body. I have as keen a relish for intellectual enjoyments as ever I had” (Pennington in Whalley: 487). Similarly, Elizabeth Carter, who lived until the age of eighty-eight, is said to have had her physical strength “much impaired” while still being in full possession of her “mental powers” (Carter, 1806: 15). Seward, Pennington, and Carter were past their sixties when they remarked upon the disassociation between their numerical age and their sense of their own age. Socially, however, they had been considered old for a while, because as women, their ageing process was socially determined by questions of marriageability and procreation (Ottaway, 2004: 41). Additionally, while Pennington was a wife, Seward and Carter never married or had children, and as singlewomen past the age of thirty, they were considered “old maids”, a concept that brings together the identity markers of age, gender, and marital status.

Seward referred to herself in the third person in her forties as being “perfectly reconciled to her single blessedness;’ so Shakespeare calls old-maidism” (Seward, 1811: 3: 30). However, in spite of Seward’s apparent ease with the label, in the eighteenth century “old maidism” had pejorative connotations. Interestingly, while the term did not originate in the eighteenth century, it was redefined then. At the time, marriage was considered “a transformative point in the life cycle [...] the gateway to full, participatory adult life, and [...] one of the main ways of perceiving and representing differences between people” (Yallop, 2015: 41). Consequently, singlehood—pejoratively known as spinsterhood<sup>1</sup>, or old maidism<sup>34</sup>—was understood as a key factor in a young woman’s social ageing process because ageing was not only a “body issue, or a medical issue” but

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<sup>34</sup> The analogy between spinster and old maid was developed between 1700 and 1730: “In parlance and literature (though not in legal records where it denotes the unmarried woman of all levels of society under a viscounty), [spinster] came to connote an ageing woman and implied certain pejorative attributes” (Hufton, 1984: 374).

“an aspect of personal identity” (Yallop: 3). As such, it not only informed a person’s selfhood but also the way in which they were perceived by others at different ages.

Throughout the eighteenth century, England saw the development of the juxtaposition between two versions of unmarried women: the singlewoman (respectable, righteous, a standard of virtue) and the old maid (dangerous, physically revolting, of reprehensible morality, a social outcast) (Lanser, 1999: 304). Both Lanser and Olwen Hufton agree in suggesting that these pejorative associations were connected to the social increase of unmarried women belonging to the upper classes as well as to the negative depiction of the community in the immensely popular genre of the novel, which made them the target of ridicule (Hufton: 374). The old maid of these novels of the second-half of the eighteenth century is “so lacking in adult authority that even a youngster can mock her openly, so widely reviled that popular theatre can ban her with impunity”, not simply “a personal failure [...] but a contaminant, a signifier whose very presence is dangerous” (Lanser, 1999: 304). She is “not the virulent, physically and morally repulsive old maid” of earlier depictions but the “irksome, prattling, and small-minded [...] frugal and inconsequential bore, not a threat to family but a kind of ‘extra’ tolerable insofar as she can be of use” (Lanser: 305). This vicious depiction of the unmarried woman in contemporary literature reveals “a profound rejection of aging women’s bodies” (Ottaway, 2004: 41), and its origin has been attributed to several causes. Firstly, to the patriarchal fear of female agency and financial independence. Singlewomen were targeted in response to “patriarchal anxieties of female economic and social agency” (Lanser: 308) at a time when there was an increase of unmarried businesswomen, who gained independence and economic power (business-owning, property holding, and moneylending) in the urban commercial centres of England (Froide, 2005: 180). Secondly, there was the pro-natalist argument that stems from the idea that it is a woman’s

patriotic duty to produce sons to defend the nation, especially in times of war. Ottaway acknowledges the difficulty, and ambiguity, in setting the threshold of old age precisely because of its inevitable association with reproduction: “pinpointing women’s entry into old age is complicated further by the strong association of women with sexuality and procreation in early modern writings” (Ottaway, 2004: 41). In turn, maternity became “increasingly sentimentalized and centralized”, in the same period, and women who did not give birth or actively participate in the care and education of children “fell outside much of the dominant discourse concerning gender” (Ottaway: 41). Singlewomen, therefore, were considered to have failed in their biological and civic duty to produce sons and daughters for the nation and were therefore accused of being “deterrent to national enterprise” (Lanser, 1999: 312). A third reason is the change in discourse about singleness from the victimised woman who fails to find a suitor to the independent woman who realises she can lead an independent life, and is blamed for her choice (Froide, 2005: 181). Finally, Froide has argued that protestant England was not prepared to support such a large number of unmarried women: while other European countries had nunneries, “England largely lacked a space (both conceptual and real) for singlewomen in its society” (181). However, these women fulfilled a role that society failed to provide, even if it was one that was not considered productive. They cared for the sick, the elderly, children and young women. They were caregivers, nurses, housekeepers, teachers, and chaperones, offering a “range of services which the welfare state has struggled in vain to make a public concern.” (Hufton, 1984: 368).

Furthermore, negative depictions of unmarried women were intended as a deterrent for young women who were instructed not to follow the aforementioned paths and instead become reproductive beings subjected to male authority. As the period advanced, misogynist discourses grew “more restrained and superficially more respectful



as the eighteenth century progressed”, and Lanser suggests that singlewomen were denigrated for their conceptual opposition to maids, wives, and mothers, and were accordingly singled out as scapegoats for male chauvinism (Lanser, 1999: 308).

In the next section I present two publications that exemplify the aforementioned social perceptions of elderly singlewomen. The first, a best-selling essay in three volumes, William Hayley’s *Essay on Old Maids* (1785) has been credited with offering a popular representation his readers would be familiar with because it “synthesized the eighteenth century’s negative caricature of the ‘old maid’” (Froide, 2005: 179). Contrastingly, the second publication is a short-lived periodical that appeared thirty years before, Frances Brooke’s *The Old Maid*, first published in 1755 and 1756), which challenged those negative views and highlighted older unmarried women’s agency. Interestingly, neither work was authored by an aged unmarried woman; Hayley was a married man and Brooke, albeit single, was in her thirties and married her husband a year later. For that reason learning about Seward’s reactions to Hayley’s essay will be of special interest. While Seward was a teenager when *The Old Maid* was published and the lack of recorded opinion about the text may suggest that she never read it, she was forty-three years old when his admired and intimate friend Hayley published his successful and controversial *Essay* that made unmarried women aged forty or more such as Seward the target of ridicule.

### **5.1.1. William Hayley’s *Essay on Old Maids* (1785)**

In 1785 William Hayley anonymously published a three-volume essay entitled *A Philosophical, Historical, and Moral Essay on Old Maids. By A Friend to the Sisterhood*. (1785). It went through six editions, the last one including corrections and additions, and was translated into French and German and excerpts from it circulated amongst the

widely read periodicals of the time. It was a tremendous success, which attests to the popularity of satirical depictions of unmarried women who were at the time the recipients of jocular attention and ridiculing portrayals. There is no consensus as to Hayley's aim in writing the essays, and indeed the reader response is in itself proof of its ambiguity of tone: "readers found it to be a serious work, a satirical work, and occasionally both." (Looser, 2008: 86).

The essay is structured as follows. In Volume 1, after a brief introduction, Hayley lists the "Particular Failings of Old Maids", which include "curiosity", "credulity", "affectation", "envy" and "ill-nature". Next, he balances it by discusses the "Particular Good Qualities of Old Maids", which are "ingenuity", "patience", and "charity". Volume 2 contains a historical, if vaguely accurate, review of old-maidism from ancient history and through Christianity that is continued until contemporary times in Volume 3. The *Essay* finishes with "Topics of Consolation and Advice" to elderly women, "Discussion of a very delicate and important Question", and "a Sermon to Old Maids, delivered in a Dream". The essay, and especially its last chapter in volume 3, is an act of self-aggrandisement that culminates in Hayley appointing himself "the Friend and Pastor of Old Maids" (Hayley, 1786: 3: 254), even if he had been rejected by both his dedicatee Elizabeth Carter, and his friend Anna Seward (as we shall see in 5.1.1.1.). Furthermore, Hayley's postscript recommends the essay to the patronage of the Knights of the Garter, and he congratulates himself on having "subdued, or at least manfully attacked, not only one, but many dragons" (Hayley: 3: 265), referring to "the envious, ill-natured Old Maid" (Hayley: 265). Moreover, he describes his essay as having performed a "national service" for which he should be granted "a public reward" (Hayley: 265).

Hayley's dedication, which prefaces the *Essay*, seems to indicate that the text leans towards the comic, although it restates its ambiguity. He asks that the volume be

received “with polite good-humour” but, at the same time, he qualifies it as a “sincere homage” (Hayley 1785: 1: vii). Indeed, he affirms that “it is the sole purpose of this Essay to promote the circulation of good-will and good-humour in bodies where they are frequently supposed to stagnate (...) never overstepping the line of modesty and good manners” (Hayley: xix). In the text Hayley affirms, in sarcastic terms, that his aim is “to redress all the wrongs of the autumnal maiden, and to place her, if possible, in a state of honour, content, and comfort” (Hayley: xvi). He argues that it is in terms of “extreme cruelty”, “injustice”, and “sarcastic contempt” that elderly singlewomen are addressed, and that such treatment inevitably “afflict[s]”, “exasperate[s]”, and “debase[s]” their character. However, although he defends that he “shall zealously endeavour to afford [old maids] both amusement and instruction” (Hayley: xvii), it is clear that they are far from being the target audience for the *Essay*, but rather its object of mockery and ridicule; he deems them “as a fly in those cloudy and chilling days of autumn, when the departure of the sun has put an end to all its lively flutter”, destined to wander “in a state of feebleness and dejection” (Hayley: 9).

In spite of his constant reminders that it is not his objective to mock, the essay’s paternalistic tone often trumps any indication of irony or sarcasm: “Old-Maidism in general is a condition requiring pity and protection” (Hayley: 1: 14) is the idea that permeates from it; “to sneer at the ancient virgin, merely because she has a claim to that title, is (...) a piece of cruelty as wanton and malicious as it is to laugh at the personal blemishes of any unfortunate being, who has been maimed by accident, or deformed from his birth” (Hayley: 18). Hayley dismisses any future detractors by writing that “I shall not be surprised, if some of its more acrimonious members exclaim against this benevolent discussion of their cause, and even condemn it as libel against their community” (Hayley: 14), and blames the women he is insulting themselves for feeling offended, saying that

“it is the misfortune of these exasperated ladies to mistake their friends for their foes, and to consider an expression of pity towards any sufferers of the sisterhood, as a personal insult to themselves” (Hayley: 14). Hayley’s depictions of the so-called “old maids” are consistently tinged with misogyny: he describes them as being vane of their (faded) physical attributes, which, in his view, they strain to either retain or reproduce: “tempted to affect, either such graces as she retains no longer, or such new attractions as she thinks may become her maturer season of life” (Hayley: 55). These affectations are, according to Hayley, “an affectation of youth, an affectation of a certain censorial importance, and an affectation of extreme sensibility” (Hayley: 55). Affectations which, he affirms, are met with contempt and disgust.

Hayley opens his essay stating the figure of the unmarried old woman, which he describes as “a single class of mortals, exposed by their situation to particular failings, or oppressed by peculiar and unmerited afflictions” (Hayley: 1: xiii), has been for long a subject of philosophical attention, and that it is his objective to engage in its defence:

I flatter myself with the idea of surpassing both the French and English philanthropist, by directing my lucubrations to an order of beings, whom I think more entitled to the regard and protection of an enterprising philosopher: I mean the sisterhood of Old Maids; a sisterhood which has, perhaps, as many unmerited hardships to support as the two suffering fraternities above mentioned [authors and chimney sweepers] and without the soothing consolation, which those fraternities possess in common, from the idea, that however ill rewarded they may be, they perform a very useful and necessary part in the motley scenes of human life. I devote myself, with a new species of Quixotism, to the service of Ancient Virginity (Hayley: 1: xv).

This tone, which he adopts throughout the three volumes, is jocular and disrespectful to the point of crudeness, depicting his purposes in writing the essay as “a new species of Quixotism”, visionary and utopian but also ludicrous, and the segment of population he writes about as neither “useful” nor “necessary”. He contends that unmarried women are unnatural beings for eschewing social convention: “it is the natural wish and expectation

of every amiable girl, to settle happily in marriage”, he argues, and adds that by not fulfilling their intended social role as wives and mothers they must accept a future of mockery and sadness: “the failure of this expectation (...) must be inevitably attended by many unpleasant, and many depressive sensations”. Hayley’s pro-natalist stance was the expected, patriarchal and patriotic one in vogue—at a time when Britain was at war—that has been argued as one of the main causes for the demonisation of the unmarried singlewoman (Lanser, 1999).

He continues by lamenting that “they are proud of declaring, they regard the condition of an Old Maid as the most comfortable in human life; it is the condition of their choice, and what every wise woman would chuse.” (Hayley, 1785: 1: 12). Later in the text, he will deny that remaining single is indeed their choice, and instead describe it as a pitiful state. Curiously, the letter in which Seward professed being “perfectly reconciled to her single blessedness” was addressed to Hayley’s wife, Eliza Hayley and written in 1790, five years after the publication of the *Essay*. Although it was received a year after Eliza and William’s separation, it is possible that Hayley was acquainted with it. Hayley qualifies these displays of female agency as “false pride and mistaken delicacy” (Hayley: 14) and claims that it is precisely this non-submissive attitude which “invites that blunt but lacerating raillery, with which she is so often and so unpolitely attacked” (Hayley: 14).

What stems from Hayley’s mocking criticisms is consistently patriotic propaganda that not only reflects the period’s social consciousness but also acts as a moralising text, similar to the conduct manuals for women popularised in the eighteenth century. Many of these mid-to-late eighteenth century conduct books, such as James Fordyce *Sermons to Young Women* (1765) and John Gregory’s *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), or the later Thomas Gisborne’s *An Inquiry Into the Duties of the*

*Female Sex*, published in 1797, were similarly authored by men and intended for the consumption of young women. Whereas they were intended to instruct, inculcate, and reinforce certain values (Havens, 2016: 2), in the *Essay* Hayley is fulfilling not the role of the teacher, preacher, or parent, but rather that of the state: dictating, supervising, and regulating. While the *Essay* could be interpreted as merely a satirical work or a misogynistic diatribe, I contend that it is much more than this: it brings to the fore the social contempt against elderly singlewomen (Froide, 2005: 179), and it acts to publicly humiliate, and therefore chastise them through this humiliation. Finally, it admonishes young women to avoid becoming an old maid through the demonisation of the latter, and to marry and have children, thus fulfilling the patriotic pro-natalist stance that dominated the period.

With this purpose in mind, the *Essay* demonises elderly unmarried women to the point of cruelty. In no veiled terms, Hayley denounces that they fail to fulfil a social (domestic) role within the nation (i.e. as wives and mothers). When their “faculties are not called into rational exercise” (Hayley, 1785: 1: 19), he claims “by the interesting cares, or the elegant amusements, of domestic life” (Hayley: 19). Indeed, they neglect rational and intellectual activity that would have been put to use if they had domestic duties to fulfil, which they do not because they are, Hayley infers, a charge to another woman who keeps house for them (the wife of a relative, presumably), their moral character atrophies and they become “frivolous”, indulgent (Hayley: 20), and garrulous. Garrulousness, the habit of rambling, was commonly ascribed to elderly women, and especially unmarried ones. Consequently, there are many examples of “garrulous women”, often used as comic relief, in eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century literature in the works of authors like Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, or Charlotte Smith (Looser, 2008: 14). Interestingly, elderly women writers (such as Carter, to whom

the *Essay* is dedicated, or Seward herself) were accused of the same failing when they continued to publish into their old age, because their writings were generally regarded as both “frivolous *and* old-fashioned” (Looser: 15). Hayley’s criticism is, then, deeply embedded in the reality of the time, and not, as one might think, founded on abstract generalisations, and, consequently, it might have had an effect on his female peers, not only emotionally but also in terms of reception, because it was feeding into the stereotype they were struggling against.

On the other hand, Hayley intimates that elderly singlewomen’s social condition is not a choice, contrary to what they profess (Hayley 1785: 1: 12), but rather a consequence of their inability to find a husband. Following this view, he accuses them of vanity, credulousness, ignorance and foolishness, desperate for love and seeking male attention. He describes them as possessing “the most arrogant and preposterous vanity” (Hayley: 41) and concedes that credulity might be “the mere baby of simplicity and benevolence” (Hayley: 42), arising from their need for affection, or, as he puts it, “the wish of being beloved” (Hayley: 42). Therefore, Hayley infers that they see “a lover in every man by whom she is civilly accosted” (Hayley: 35). Behind this idea there is the change in social discourse regarding unmarried women that happened between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the seventeenth century singlewomen were depicted as victims worthy of pity, and the way society regarded them “suggested that women were forced to remain single because of a lack of male suitors” (Froide, 2005: 181) due to a fall from grace (financial, moral, or otherwise); whereas in the eighteenth century “singlewomen were no longer represented as victims; rather, they were now blamed for their marital status” (Froide: 181), because there was a rejection of the idea that these women had the agency to decide, indeed, “some women might choose to never marry instead of being forced into singleness” (Froide: 181).

Hayley then devotes Part 4 to “the infinite Increase of Old Maids after the Christian Era” (Hayley, 1785: 2: 135), which is nothing but a “wide-ranging attack on the promotion of virginity as an ideal” (Matthews, 2006: 92). This section of the essay is as much a further instance of the pro-natalist argument as it is a vindication of Protestantism. Indeed, Hayley “sees sexuality as part of the circulation that enables society as well as the individual to function healthily” (Matthews: 91). His argument is, then, one that supports and reinforces his role the self-appointed upholder of the patriotic values, supported by the antagonisation of the other (in this case, catholic nuns) and the commendation of the English singlewoman. Consequently, in it, Hayley both commends the Church of England and heralds it as one of the pillars of a well-functioning society, contrary to the corrupt, vicious and chaotic Catholic church, and asserts once again the elemental significance and value of reproductive bodies for society. For him, those bodies that (by choice) do not produce citizens are attempting against the very core of patriotic sensibility, and are akin to traitors to the state. Therefore, Hayley claims that although he is “the friend and champion of the honest Protestant Old Maid”, he is “very far from being an advocate for monastic virginity” (Hayley, 1785: 2: 136) and, condemning catholic nuns and nunneries he praises the national Protestant Old Maid he had disparaged for “support[ing] with cheerful content a virginity” which, he repeats, is not her choice, as is the case with catholic nuns, but rather a consequence “of accident of necessity, than of choice” (Hayley: 136). Additionally, he denounces that the protestant singlewoman has been “neglected and depreciated, socially and historically, although hers is “more truly consonant to the genuine spirit of Christianity” (Hayley: 137). Indeed, he accuses catholic singlewomen of taking a “secret pride” (Hayley: 138) in their status, whereas in his view protestant singlewomen are resigned and subdued (which in turn contradicts every argument he had defended in the first volume).



The question of women's entrance into old age has been settled in age studies. As mentioned in preceding chapters, the agreement is that "middle age" began at forty whereas "old age" began at sixty (Looser, 2008: 9; Ottaway, 2004: 18). Nevertheless, we must not lose sight of marital status as a social marker factor: singlewomen like Seward were considered to enter into old age as early as at thirty years old (Looser: 15), before married ones did. Interestingly, further confirming this social convention, Hayley defines an "Old Maid" as "an unmarried woman, who has completed her fortieth year." (Hayley 1785: 1: 2), Hayley accidentally shows that, socially, unmarried women were seen as old earlier when in one of his anecdotes he makes a telling mistake in translating "une petite vieille femmelette, de l'âge de cinquante ans" (a little old lady, fifty years old) for "a little old woman of forty" (Hayley, 1786: 3: 101). Incidentally, forty happens to be the age of Seward, who was forty-four when the essay was published. And, while Seward felt comfortable in her marital status and wrote about her age in agreeable terms, she was not indifferent to Hayley's essay, as we shall presently see.

#### **5.1.1.1. Seward's response to Hayley's *Essay***

Hayley prefaced his work with a dedication to Elizabeth Carter, who welcomed neither the *Essay* itself nor Hayley's gesture (Looser, 2008: 87). Carter was sixty-eight years old when the *Essay* was published, and would go on to live until her eighty-eight birthday. In his dedication, the author emphasises three aspects of Carter's identity, identifying her as "a Poet, as a Philosopher, and as an Old Maid" (Hayley, 1785: 1: v). Knowing the pejorative implications of the term, and after assessing the portrayal of these "old maids" in the *Essay*, it strikes as surprising, if not ill-advised, that Hayley would use it to refer to Carter, especially in the context of a dedication. Hayley explains himself: "although the latter name may, in vulgar estimation, be held inferior to the two preceding, allow me to say, it is the dignity with which you support the last of these titles, that has chiefly made

me wish you to appear as the Protectress of the little volumes” (Hayley: vi). He continues by proclaiming Carter as the “President of the chaste Community” (Hayley: vi), a title bestowed (he claims) for her virtues and talents, among which he lists two of her best-known works: the “beautiful” “Ode to Wisdom” (1746) and her translation of the *Discourses of Epictetus* (1758) (Hayley: vii). In the brief note (three pages) he asks that she “accept with polite-good humour” (Hayley: vii) the volumes and do “ample justice” to what he describes as “my good intention” (Hayley: vii).

Carter’s nephew, Montagu Pennington, who is known for his work on the legacy of Carter and Catherine Talbot, reported that upon learning of Hayley’s dedication the writer was neither “pleased” nor “flattered by the compliment” (1809: 29). Carter had read the volumes, and she was shocked by the attack on unmarried women they contained. Pennington recalled that she proclaimed that “all the wit, learning, and genius, displayed so abundantly in that performance, could never compensate, in her opinion, for the improprieties contained in it; and that no compliment to herself could induce her to excuse the ridicule thrown upon others.” (Pennington: 29). Perhaps because of that, the dedication disappeared in the third edition of the *Essay*. What is most interesting from Carter’s response (albeit filtered by her nephew) is that it describes the target of Hayley’s vitriol as “others”. She expresses her disgust at the abuse promoted by Hayley as a woman, but she in no way identifies the old maid community as her own, which signals a reluctance to associate with it, perhaps because she refused to be identified as a victim of the mistreatment of that community.

As for Seward, she had a close personal and literary relationship with Hayley, for whom she professed a profound admiration on multiple occasions. She included him in her list of great contemporaries in *To the Memory of Lady Miller* (1782) and always had a word of praise for him in her letters. She was forty-three when the *Essay* came out, the

same age the old maids from Hayley's essay were, and his misogynistic and ageist attack put a dent in their friendship, although it did not succeed in breaking them apart. Seward's responses to the *Essay*, recorded in her correspondence, are evidence of how an aged singlewoman defined herself and how she responded to the attempts of others to define her. Her reaction was gradual, from curiosity, to incredulity and denial, to anger and resentment. In December 1785, Seward wrote to Hayley for the first time about the *Essay*, although by then she did not know it was his work. "The old maid has not yet travell'd to Lichfield - but I have sent for it", she told him, and added that she was surprised at being told that his name was behind the anonymous publication: "My London correspondents tell me it is given to *you*. That circumstance, waiting with what you say of it, has rais'd my expectations *high*." (Seward in Rousseau, 1967: 177). When the delivery of the books was delayed, Seward wrote to a friend about her impatience to read it: "My curiosity is on fire to become acquainted with my sisters, the old maids, of whom I hear so much, and which are said to be the bard's" (Seward, 1811: 1: 114).

Nevertheless, Seward's curiosity soon turned into disappointment the moment she received the *Essay*. In a letter from 1786 she declared that "Perhaps I wish no man had written it while, I feel that no woman would" (Seward: 1: 115). In Seward's opinion, the work was reductive and offensive. To another friend, she wrote that she wished it had never been published: "This whimsical work, richly illuminated by all those emanations, so lightly, so wantonly betrays the cause it affects to defend, that I could wish it had never passed the press." (Seward: 129). In the same letter she also confirmed to her correspondent that the work was definitely Hayley's, "certainly the production of that pen, whose genius, wit, and learning, throws most of its literary rivals at immeasurable distance" (Seward: 129). To yet another correspondent she denounced, some months later, that Hayley's "wicked wit" had "seduced him into the ungenerous conduct of

betraying the cause of which he stood forth as the champion; and of increasing, by his sarcasms, the unjust contempt in which the unprotected part of our oppressed sex are held in their declining days.” (Seward, 1811: 2: 340). Even if the content was loathsome to her, Seward still had words of praise for its author. In a subsequent letter to another friend, Seward described it as “witty, but ungenerous” (Seward, 1811: 1: 180). She confided that she had written to Hayley but that he had failed to reply, and she surmises that he was, ironically, upset by its contents: “He is, I fear, displeased with my ingenuousness on that subject; yet I cannot repent of it, but sincerity is the first duty of friendship” (Seward: 180), adding that “Should dear Mr. Hayley be offended, I shall be deeply grieved, since words are weak to say how much I love, admire, and honour his genius and his virtues” (Seward: 180).

Indeed Seward’s review—which, regrettably, has not survived—caused a split between the two friends: “You inquire after my correspondence with the illustrious H[ayley]. It is not what it was; but the deficiency, or cause of deficiency, proceeds not from me. I honour and love him as well as ever; yet I feel that the silver cord of our amity is loosening at more links than one” (Seward: 1: 168). However, even if the publication caused a strain in the friendship, it did not manage to break them apart. In May 1786, Seward published “Ode to William Hayley, Esq. imitated from Horace, B. VII. Od. IV” in the *GM*. Seward also wished to include two encomiums by Hayley in the selection of verses that were to precede her own poetry in the *Poetical Works*. Their correspondence continued until Seward’s death.

Seward’s reaction to the *Essay* indicates her awareness of the social mistreatment of singlewomen, perpetuated in the literary and periodical world and her preoccupation that works that mocked elderly single women only incensed society’s negative attitude towards them. Seward remarks that this attitude is “unjust” (Seward, 1811: 2: 340).

Seward's opinion is phrased in a very similar way to Carter's, both denouncing the treatment bestowed upon elderly singlewomen. However, whereas Carter does not explicitly include herself in that community in her recorded response, Seward does, in her allusions to the text in subsequent years. In a letter she praised the motherly duties of a common friend, adding "Ah! How much a more useful creature than such a celibaic cypher as myself" (Seward: 109), and in another she wrote, to Hayley himself, that she "should like to have the office of guarding it from extinction.—Priestess to the lamp of benevolence! Such an appointment might exalt, to some degree of dignity, the derided state of stale maidenhood." (Seward: 180).

Albeit when Seward mentions her old age she often does so with have a tinge of sadness, it might be argued that, upon contextualisation, that is because Seward's old age was accompanied by loss (first her mother and Honora in 1780, when she was 38, then her father in 1790, when she was 48, after a long illness that proved taxing for her in her role as administrator and nurse; and finally Saville in 1803, six years before her own death). Contrastingly, she cheerfully referred to herself in the third person as being "perfectly reconciled to her single blessedness", and called it "old maidism" and "celibaic cypher" (Seward 1811: 1: 109), and there is no evidence that she ever regretted not having married. Froide argues that "We can attribute some of her comfort with being an outspoken singlewoman to her relatively secure social and financial situation. Her identity as a poet also seems to have aided her representation of herself." (2005: 214). The scholar suggests that Seward "substituted her identity as a poet for that of wife and mother." (Froide: 214), and that for her "singleness did not preclude procreation, but hers was of the literary rather than biological variety." (Froide: 214), often referring to herself as "parent" of her works. As the previous chapters have proven, the author's self-presentation in terms of authorial identity and her constant assertions of literary and

critical authority demonstrate that she saw her role as an author as a foremost part of her identity.

Therefore, the evidence suggests that she proudly identified with the community of elderly singlewomen, and she had reasons to see herself in Hayley's depiction of that community. Not only did she fit the profile (past forty, non-reproductive, and single) but several of Hayley's criticisms are dangerously similar to her own experiences. Hayley's claim that older unmarried women's "simplicity and benevolence" together with their need for male attention (Hayley, 1785: 1: 42) often leads them to give away their money to prospective suitors, and to see "a lover in every man by whom she is civilly accosted" (Hayley: 35) might have reminded Seward of how society regarded her relationship to her close friend John Saville. Even if she did not feel called out by Hayley, the fact that he was reproducing ideas and attitudes so deeply ingrained in the social consciousness means that the *Essay*, for all its faults and harm, has in fact proven to be a helpful tool in this analysis to contextualise the reception of Seward's attempts at self-presentation, as an author, and as a literary critic. Indeed, a year later, in the Benvolio debates, she was mocked and diminished by Boswell, and criticised because of her arguments against Johnson, a reception of her criticism that is reminiscent of Hayley's assertion that "a word of the most harmless signification is considered as obscene" for the overly sensitive old maid (Hayley: 79). And, as we shall see in the upcoming section, after her death Seward was accused by the reviewers of her posthumous works of vanity, of affectation, and of gossip, all of which are listed by Hayley as the faults of the so-called old maids.

### 5.1.2. Frances Brooke's *The Old Maid* (1755-56)

Another contemporary depiction of the community of elderly singlewomen, published thirty years before and authored by a woman, was the periodical *The Old Maid*, published in 1755 by the novelist Frances Brooke (1724-1789), which had a short (1755-56) but successful run (Powell, 2012: 231). Brooke introduced her periodical as “an odd attempt in a woman” (Brooke, 1764: 1) but added that she saw “no reason why I may not buz [sic] amongst [the periodical press] a little; tho’ it is possible I may join the short liv’d generation; and this day month be as much forgot as if I had never existed.” (Brooke: 1). Brooke’s periodical had many collaborators, manly male friends and acquaintances, and the style of the periodical was governed by an incisive sarcasm and critically aware wit. Brooke’s periodical follows on the footsteps of Eliza Heywood’s *Female Spectator* (1744-46) in a tradition of women periodicalists that also includes Mary Wortley Montagu’s *Nonsense of Common-Sense* (1737-38) and Charlotte Lennox’s *Lady’s Museum* (1760-61).

*The Old Maid* was published when Brooke was thirty-one years old, and her *eidolon*, “Mary Singleton, spinster”, was an unmarried aunt in her fifties in charge of the moral upbringing of her niece. Brooke’s choice of *eidolon* is very significant. Powell has argued that Mary Singleton opened up an authorial space for Brooke by turning in her favour the negative connotations of the old maid and the expectations of the readers (Powell, 2012: 135). Similarly, Lanser asserts that “one of the few mid-century attempts to authorize the single woman itself yields to the title *The Old Maid* is significant, since virtually every previous effort to defend single women has avoided or overtly rejected that term.” (1999: 302). Lanser’s claim is contextualised in the seventeenth and earlier eighteenth depictions of “old-maids” as “obsessively” described as “morally and physically repugnant” (300). In this sense, Italia has contended that while it was not unprecedented to use a social outcast as an *eidolon*, these were “either undeveloped or

used as the objects of satirical attack; Brooke, by contrast, uses her periodical to elicit our sympathy for the figure of the spinster” (2005: 166).

Brooke’s *eidolon* is introduced in a mock-apology that seeks both to justify to the reader her social identity and to critically expose the social treatment of elderly singlewomen: “an old maid is, in my opinion, except an old bachelor, the most useless and insignificant of all god’s creatures; and as I am so unhappy as to be one of those very worthless animals, I think it incumbent upon me some way or other to be of service to the community; and hope, by giving to the public the observations my unemploy’d course of life has enabled me to make, to obtain pardon for leading my days in a way so entirely unserviceable to society” (Brooke, 1764: 2). However, Mary Singleton stands out because she is never portrayed as “a blathering caricature, nor is her wit attached to the scurrilous marginality of transvestite figures (...) She is virtuous, experienced, and able to speak on matters as diverse as the raising of children, politics, and the theater” (Powell: 136). She is proud of her identity as a singlewoman, she embraces the category and exploits its perks. Singleton is “strikingly restrained, lacking in eccentricity and only mildly whimsical. (...) she functions far more as a representative of good sense than as a figure of fun” (Italia, 2005: 173).

Significantly, Brooke prioritises promises to prioritise letters penned by single, elderly women to be featured in her periodical, and she actually fulfils her promise:

Mrs Singleton hopes for the correspondence of all the ingenious of both sexes, and promises to insert all such letters as she shall find proper for her purpose, with the strictest impartiality; only she begs leave to show a little favor to ladies of her own order; and promises all antiquated virgins who shall do her the honor of her correspondence, that their letters, provided they contain no scandal, shall be first taken care of (Brooke, 1764: 8).

The elderly singlewomen featured in the pages of the periodical embody both contemporary misogynistic stereotypes and more positive portrayals (Italia, 2005: 172),



which include Mary Singleton's reaffirming herself in her choice not to marry when offered that option. This offers a balance that at the same time, I would argue, seeks to compel the reader to question the treatment of elderly singlewomen in contemporary literature. Although she never abandons a sarcastic, mocking tone, Brooke is offering single elderly women a platform in which they can see themselves in a humorous but dignified way, her *eidolon's* strong will, wit, and agency empowers other elderly single women: "The Old Maid invents a spinster persona who is otherwise so perfectly qualified as a periodicalist that the venture refreshes the genre" and, more importantly, "reframes the old maid" (Powell, 2012: 136). Indeed, Mary Singleton embodies a character who "would normally arouse readerly disdain and scorn" but is however reframed and reinterpreted "the figure of the old maid and attempts to portray female celibacy in a more positive light" (Italia, 2005: 166). Italia suggests that even though Singleton is vain, she is also confident and defiant, and her literary project is presented as a public service: "she is free, financially as well as morally, to dedicate herself to the service of the 'public'" (171). This can be interpreted as Brooke breaking a lance for elderly singlewomen, suggesting that the (financially privileged) unmarried women writers who reached old age and were victimised for it are actually fulfilling a particular role in society, one that takes advantage of their freedom to think and act independently from matrimonial and maternal attachments. In other words, they are free to be intellectual beings.

Both Seward's expressed contentment with her status and Brooke's *eidolon* embracing the negative connotations of the old maid to turn them around and embrace them as empowering tools of agency suggest a women-led will to reformulate what it meant to be a singlewoman in the late eighteenth century. However, as Hayley's *Essay*, very popular at the time, demonstrates, the characteristics attached to elderly singlewomen were very much socially accepted. In the following section I will examine

how these notions permeated in the reception of Seward's posthumous works. We shall also see Seward's integration and modification of prevailing notions of singlehood, and in particular, how she deconstructs the negative connotations of singlehood in the reception of her works.

## **5.2. Posthumous Legacy in Context**

Older women writers, like Seward at this stage of her career, "shared anxieties regarding the print marketplace, critical reception, and literary afterlives" (Culley, 2017: 82). The triple-layers of gender, age, and singlehood embedded into the old maid label influenced the way in which they were received by publishers, critics, and readers alike; these had a critical and direct effect on their careers, and indeed, on their posthumous reputations. Consequently, older women writers were often urged to abandon their publishing careers in exchange for "graceful, polite retirement" (Looser, 2008: 34) in order to avoid tarnishing their reputation for being outdated. As Looser indicates, "living to an advanced age may have had a generally negative effect on a woman writer's posthumous reputation" (7). In her investigation of the critical legacies of Mary Berry and Joanna Baillie, Culley pinpoints that "collaboration is key to resisting a narrative of decline" (2017: 83). Seward was aware of the dangers of not only continuing to publish into old age, but more importantly, of publishing her life's work; hence, to withhold the manuscripts from publication in her lifetime was a strategic choice that allowed her to resist the prevailing narrative of decline. Seward hoped her waiting would circumvent the ageism in the reviewing press that would influence the reception of her works. For this purpose, not only did she wait to publish them, but also in choosing Walter Scott she left them to an author who was young, male, and famous, presuming that his name and reputation would contribute to their success. Choosing Scott was one of the steps Seward took in her plan to secure her legacy.

Throughout her extensive correspondence, and as early as 1787, at forty-five, Seward admitted that she “often” felt “very ardent aspirations” of literary fame (Seward, 1811: 1: 386) and talked to her friends about her hopes for recognition of her literary authority and talent in posterity:

Posterity, which seldom fails, sooner or later, to recall what is worth recalling from the shades of oblivion; in which, for a time, many superior works to any I can produce have been enveloped, by the neglect of that ungrateful age which they adorned. That my writings should ever experience this regeneration, I am far from depending; but I believe they will, if they deserve it. It has long been my wish “to leave my name in life's visit.” Should the ink in which it is written prove of a fading and perishable quality, there is no help for that, you know (Seward: 37).

Seward believed her works were indeed “worth recalling from the shades of oblivion” and would be admired for years to come for their intrinsic merit. More importantly, she “believed her genius and application had earned her a place in literary history” (Clarke, 2004: 12) and she explicitly declares that she wishes to leave her “name in life’s visit” (Seward, 1811: 1: 37), to be remembered as the celebrated writer she once was. The collected letters were “key” to her project for posthumous fame, because they showed her life-long acquired critical acumen and authority “in a form which incorporated other people’s acknowledgement of the significance of her views” a quality which endowed the published letters with the ability to “bequeath to posterity her status as well as her opinions” (Clarke: 12). Seward’s desire for posthumous fame anticipates the Romantic preoccupation with fame and posterity. For the Romantics, their “textual afterlives” (Bennett, 2004: 1) became the utmost preoccupation of the artist: “The poet [...] no longer writes simply for money, contemporary reputation, status, or pleasure. Instead he writes so that his identity, transformed and transliterated, disseminated in the endless act of reading, will survive” (Bennett: 2). In order to maintain, or establish their public image for posterity, elderly women writers resorted to posthumous publication. Their wish to

survive was in itself an act of resistance: they resisted exclusion from the literary world and took steps to ensure their literary fame would survive them, challenging a literary market that dismissed them as relics from another age.

Seward's case is by no means exceptional. By preparing her works for posthumous publication, Seward became part of a tradition of eighteenth-century writers who relied on the posthumous publication of their life's work as "an attempt to continue the 'living' voice of the author's manuscript writings" (Ezell, 2002: 128). William Wordsworth, for instance, spent many years working in the autobiographical *The Prelude* (1850), regarded as the authors' monumental mature exercise in "the art and the results of recollection" (Gill, 1989: 2). Indeed, "*The Prelude* is about how memory negotiates the past, making the past into something relevant to the present—a present that involves the real presence of people and influences that color the way one reflects on one's past." (Robinson, 2014: 4) and it also serves to "demonstrate his achievement, for the present and the future, as a multi-volume overall survey of his career" (Fulford, 2019: 158). For women, there were the added difficulties that maintaining their hard-earned literary fame and their social reputation as women writers entailed (Bigold, 2013: 200). Frances Burney also "pruned and polished her personal records with an eye to posthumous publication", which resulted in the *Diary and Letters of Madame d'Arblay* (1842). Like Seward, she also left "explicit instructions" and placed all her manuscripts in the custody of her niece, who was allowed by Burney to edit the volumes but "restricted her from adding anything" (Civale, 2011: 237). Mary Robinson similarly prepared her memoirs and a collection of poetical works for publication two years before her death (Cross, 2016: 197). Cross contends that like other Romantic writers such as Burney, Wordsworth, Byron, or indeed Seward, Robinson "was deeply invested in crafting her reputation in the immediate moment and highly aware of its ephemerality". Cross also draws attention to the fact that

she “imagined herself a neglected genius and sought compensation in a literary afterlife” (197), thus envisioning, like Seward, her posthumous publications as an extension of her career and as an assertion of her authority. In short, both authors saw their compilations as a claim to the reputation they considered they deserved.

In her study of the print and manuscript careers of Elizabeth Singer Rowe (1674-1737), Catharine Cockburn (1679-1749), and Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806), Melanie Bigold has paved the way for the exploration of the posthumous lives of these three authors, who, like Seward, envisioned their posthumously published documents as key contributors to their “enduring presence” (Bigold, 2013: 68) after death. Rowe’s posthumous *Miscellaneous Works* (1772) contains some original pieces in print, withheld from the public up until then and “published by Her Order”, as their complete title indicates. Furthermore, and contrary to her practice when she was alive, they are signed with her name. Bigold explains that in the case of the posthumous works, anonymity, was neither “requested or, it seems, assumed” (66) because Rowe saw the compilation as an instrument for the “perpetuation of her image and works” (Bigold: 66) in which the author, asserting her agency in her old age, made a claim for her posthumous legacy. Elizabeth Carter was similarly an active agent in the construction of her authorial image for posterity, and her posthumously published biography and letters have an “aura of futurity that is suggestive of her posthumous pretensions” (Bigold: 172). They are the “first act” in the consolidation of “her prescriptive literary afterlife” (Bigold: 202), but they go further: they allow for a reconstruction of her intellectual life that had been barred from the public eye in her lifetime (Bigold: 202). Regrettably, in Rowe and Carter’s case, just like Seward, the editorial changes to the original manuscripts distorted the public image they had intended to consolidate. Left “at the mercy of many who could not ‘recognise’ the coterie performer as distinct from the private individual”, Rowe’s

*Miscellaneous Works* were simply advertised as an anthology of her complete works (Bigold: 74). In Carter's case, her nephew's efforts to memorialise her and consolidate her career resulted in a "problematic and unreliable" account (Bigold: 202), leading to a disfigured image of Carter. Although all these writers' approaches are particular to their contexts' and careers', they all produced material that would ensure their posthumous fame, which in turn shows that Seward's was not a unique case.

In some instances, the publication of a writers' posthumous works was regarded as a "monumental tribute" (Ezell, 2002: 128) to their life and career by their friends and family, although examining it as such undermines the efforts and negates the agency of the authors. Indeed, of the authors below, all but Cockburn and Seward bequeathed their manuscripts to their family to fulfil their wishes. Instead of relying on her relatives or lesser-known authors, Seward chose Walter Scott as the rising star to manage her literary legacy. Her decision was by no means casual, but strategic. Seward had forged a solid network of relatives and friends, many of whom were published authors with the time and experience to handle Seward's bequest. Her own cousin, Henry White, often acted as her amanuensis and had played a role earlier on in her literary career. However, Seward wished for reputed and experienced professionals to manage her legacy, rather than family members, in an attempt to ensure that her name—and her posthumous fame—were attached to a figure who would be admired in the years to come, as she wished to be, and as she had been in the 1780s and 1790s. Furthermore, by attaching her name to a member of the younger generation such as Scott, Seward resisted the narrative of decline (Culley, 2017: 83). She also proved that although her own age situated her on the margins of literary fashion, and her own works and style might seem outdated, she had ties with the Romantic generation; she was still relevant.

### 5.3. Walter Scott and Archibald Constable's Role in Seward's Literary Afterlife

On her will, Seward bequeathed her poetry collection to Walter Scott and her letter books to the Scottish bookseller Archibald Constable. Seward's choice of Scott, of all her literary acquaintances, can be attributed to the latter's fame and reputation at the time, which Seward recognised and decided to use in her favour: "though extraordinarily famous in her day, Seward, clearly, perceived herself not only as a contemporary phenomenon. Selecting Scott as her literary executor was a deliberate effort to secure her fame" (Wheeler, 2008: 311). Scott was meant to "play a significant role in the formation of Seward's posthumous literary reputation" (Barnard, 2009: 3). Indeed, Seward's friend and lawyer Charles Simpson declared that she had "placed the rank she is destined to hold in poetry under [Scott's] care and protection" (Simpson in Barnard: 3).

Seward's relationship with Scott began in 1802. Colin Mackenzie, Scott's lifelong friend, had sent her several poems by the author, presumably by his direction, to which Seward replied with lavish praise in April 1799 (Seward, 1811: 5: 200). After learning of her admiration for his work, Scott sent Seward a letter of introduction and the first two volumes of *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, and they continued corresponding until Seward's death. Robert Mayer has suggested that Scott sought Seward's acquaintance "for the role of literary mentor" (2017: 38) to benefit from her rank (41) and her experience (42). She was, after all, twenty-nine years his senior, a well-established author in the English literary landscape and therefore well-connected. In point of fact, Scott benefitted from Seward's hard-earned influence by having an unfavourable review of *Marmion* in the *Edinburgh Review* rebutted by *The Critical Review*, whose editor was friends with Seward (Barnard, 2009: 164; see Chapter 4.2.3.4.). On the other hand, there is no evidence that Scott relied on Seward for literary advice, or that he was interested in the experienced and detailed commentary on his works she provided in their letters. In that sense, Mayer and Barnard contend, and I agree, that Seward's admiration for Scott

was not reciprocal, and that his treatment of her legacy shows how little Scott admired, or even respected, Seward's literary career.

In a letter to Joanna Baillie dated March 18, 1810, the Scottish writer acknowledged feeling guilty regarding how he had treated Seward in life, while admitting that he found her poetry "execrable" and protesting that the letters were so overly sentimental that they gave him a "most unsentimental horror":

I plead guilty to the charge of ill-breeding to Miss [Seward]. The despair which I used to feel on receiving poor Miss Seward's letters, whom I really liked, gave me a most unsentimental horror for sentimental letters. The crossest [sic] thing I ever did in my life was to poor dear Miss Seward [...] When I did see her, however, she interested me very much, and I am now doing penance for my ill-breeding, by submitting to edit her posthumous poetry, most of which is absolutely execrable. (Scott, 1861: 85)

In the same letter he expressed his fears at the publication of the *Letters*, "I anticipate the horror of seeing myself advertised for a live poet like a wild beast on a painted streamer, for I understand all her friends are depicted therein in body, mind, and manners" (Scott: 227-29). From a modern perspective, it strikes as surprising that an author of such renown as Scott would have agreed to become involved in preserving the legacy of a writer like Seward. This excerpt helps clarify this question: Scott directly describes his role as editor of the *Poetical Works* as "penance" for his "ill-breeding", presumably referring to having taken advantage of Seward's connections and authority while being dishonest about his opinion of her writings.

Scott knew of his future role as Seward's editor as early as July 1807, when she wrote informing him of the contents of her will: "In my last & lately executed Will, I have bequeathed to you the exclusive Copy-right of those Compositions in Verse which I mean shall constitute a miscellaneous Edition of my Works" (Barnard, 2017: xiii). All the while, Seward had been conducting negotiations with Archibald Constable for the exclusive copyright of the letters with Scott's assistance, who acted as intermediary. The



financial aspects involved forestalled the negotiations: Seward asked for a thousand pounds for the copyright of her works, but Constable thought the sum was too high and was advised by the English publisher John Murray not to risk his capital on the venture (Barnard, 2009: 161). Constable, through Scott, had agreed to pay Seward £130 to publish a selection of Seward's works and rearrange them into a single edition of two volumes (of which he would publish 1000 copies) instead of, as Seward wished, the whole sum of the collected volumes. Seward adamantly disagreed, citing her old age as justification: "My life is far too advanced to make the plan of selling a single edition desirable to me" (Constable, 1873: 20), she wrote to the bookseller, adding that her works would not fit in two volumes, but rather would at least "six, and probably eight, volumes of verse, and four of prose" (Constable: 20). Constable's offer was then, to her, completely insufficient. She informed Constable of her terms in a counter-offer: "For the entire copyright I shall expect six hundred guineas, and fifty copies to dispose of as presents to my friends; to be paid according to Mr Scott's statement, by bills, drawn at six or twelve months' date on the day of publication" (Constable: 22), which meant a total of £600 to be paid to her. Showing her skill at copyright negotiations, Seward reminded Constable that this amount would be more advantageous to him than the £330 he had paid to Scott for *The Mountain Bard* "though his name was then unknown in the world of letters" (Constable: 22). With this, Seward was not only showing Constable that she was well aware of the quantities her works were worth in the current market, but also reaffirming the value of her collected works as testament to a successful career. She believed the *Poetical Works* would sell as well (or perhaps even better) than her previous publications had, because they were the culmination of a successful career. Constable's response was negative.

Seward's choice to divide her manuscripts between two different editors was politically motivated: she left her correspondence to Constable rather than to Scott

because the letters “fervently avow[ed]” her political disagreements. Seward had written to Scott letting him know he would not be in charge of her letter books as she thought that the opinions expressed in them “are too horrible to your Friendships & Connections with the Belligerent Party, for the possibility of it being agreeable to you to become the Editor of those twelve epistolary Volumes” (Barnard: xiv). Seward explains that because of “the abhorrence in which, *both in a moral and religious point of view, from the close of the campaign in 1793, I have held the destructive system in this is too fervently avowed in the course oof these letters*” she considers that the letters would be “*too hostile to Mr. Scott’s political attachments and connections, for the possibility of its being eligible for him to become their editor*” (Seward in Oulton, 1801: 3: xv). This division attests to Seward’s insightful planning, which took into account the consequences that the publication might have for her editors. Regrettably, this level of detail and forethought was not reciprocated by Scott and Constable.

In the instructions left in her will, Seward indicated that she had left Constable “twelve quarto volumes; they contain such letters, or part of letters, to numerous correspondents, from the year 1784 to the present day, as appeared to me worth the future attention of the public” (Seward in Oulton: xvi). On the other hand, she left Walter Scott the entirety of her “writings in verse, which have passed the press”, “those which yet remain unpublished”, “a collection of my *juvenile* letters, from the year 1762 to June 1768”, “four sermons” and a “critical dissertation” (Seward in Oulton: xiii). These she wished would be published together with “my poems which already have been regularly and separately published” (Seward in Oulton: xiii). Seward also left thorough directions for the publication of both works in her will and testament: “With the aforesaid poetry will be found, and with which I desire may be published, the three first books of an epic poem, entitled *Telemachus*” (Seward in Oulton: xiv), “With the above-mentioned verse

will be found a small collection of my late beloved father's poetry, which I desire may be admitted into the said miscellany and succeed my own" (Seward in Oulton: xiv), "I desire my Juvenile letters may in succession be added [...] at all events, I would have the letters succeed the poetry" (Seward in Oulton: xiv), "It appears to me that it would be eligible to print the said edition of my works in pocket volumes octavo, with an engraving prefixed" (Seward in Oulton: xv), and "I wish Mr. Constable to publish two volumes of the said letters annually, not classing them to separate correspondents, but suffering them to succeed each other in the order of time, and as he finds them in the volumes" (Seward in Oulton: xvi). What transpires from the detailed set of instructions Seward left behind is the strong sense of authorship and of literary authority the writer exerted over her work and her legacy. Furthermore, her practical recommendations show her awareness of the literary and intellectual impact she knows her work has had in her lifetime, as much as her wish for this impact to survive her.

The *NLS* holds the original manuscripts Seward bequeathed to Walter Scott, which amount to the entire corpus Seward wished to be included in the *Poetical Works*. The collection currently contains only those manuscripts Scott did not include in the published work, and therefore supposes an invaluable source of information to consider alongside the will and testament. The manuscripts are currently bound in two volumes. The first volume (*NLS*, Writings of Anna Seward) contains: the original Juvenile Letters<sup>35</sup>, 1762-1768; the poems by Seward Scott did not publish (folio 86), from which only the lists of contents (fl 86, fl 114) and poetic dedications and endorsements by male literary friends that she wished would precede her collection "Poems addressed to the

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<sup>35</sup> In 2017 Barnard published *Anna Seward's Journal and Sermons*, recovering the original manuscripts for the Juvenile Letters and the four sermons mentioned above. Barnard brought together the version of the Juvenile Letters published by Scott in the *Poetical Works* (1810, vol. 1) with the excerpts he censored from the manuscript, therefore restoring them to their original state.

Author by various literary Friends on her works already published”<sup>36</sup> (fl 94); as well as the poem ‘Last Lay of the Lichfield Minstrel’, written in 1804<sup>37</sup> (fl 117) and not included in the *Poetical Works*. On the other hand, the second volume (*NLS*, Writings of Anna Seward) contains 197 leaves consisting of the first three books of the unfinished epic poem *Telemachus* (fl1); a brief collection of Thomas Seward’s poetry “Poems by the Rev Thomas Seward” (fl 92) with “directions to the publishers” attached to it, and a “critical dissertation”: “Observations by Anna Seward upon professor Spence’s Essay on Pope’s Odyssey in 5 Dialogues which had been recommended to her attention by a very ingenious gentleman” (fl 10)”; and four sermons (fl 44). These two bound manuscripts offer very important information: they are the testament of what Seward envisioned as the compilation of her best work and supply the evidence that Scott’s *Poetical Works* fails to provide. The inclusion of the critical dissertation and the sermons together with the poems conveys the importance Seward placed in her role as literary critic, and the fact that she did not consider herself as only a poet, but as a complete, writer covering a variety of literary genres.

Although in the “Preface” to the *Poetical Works* Scott claimed that he had “in every respect, punctually complied with the wishes of my deceased friend” (Scott, 1810: xxxviii), this could not be farther from the truth. Scott omitted *Telemachus*, disregarded Seward’s wish of having her father’s poetry published with hers and did not prefix the collection with an engraving. He added her juvenile letters, but he placed them before the poetry. Moreover, there is evidence that Scott edited Seward’s poetry, but the missing manuscript makes it very difficult to ascertain the extent to which any editorial differences were Scott’s and not Seward’s. Lisa Moore has written about Scott’s editing

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<sup>36</sup> These poems were by T.P. Eliot, William Hayley (2), William Bagshaw Stevens (3), Peter Cunningham, the *Gentleman’s Magazine* review of *Louisa*, Francis Noel Clarke Mundy, William Grove, David Samwell, Ch. Watson, Robert Fellowes, and Robert Farren Cheetham.

<sup>37</sup> This poem was published in the *Poetical Register* for January 1807.

decisions in the *Poetical Works* (Moore, 2016: xxxvi) in reference to the “Last Lay of the Lichfield Minstrel”, the only poem in which we can compare the manuscript edition with the published version. This poem was published in the *Poetical Register* for 1805 (and not for 1807 as Moore claims). However, Moore’s comparison does not take into account the version of the poem published in the *Poetical Register*, which upon close examination, I suggest was used by Walter Scott in the editing process. There are several discrepancies between the *Poetical Works* version and the manuscript version. We cannot presuppose that the manuscript version preceded the *Poetical Register* version, since the evidence tells us that Seward revised and edited her poems in the manuscripts she left for Scott; so it stands to reason that we consider the versions as follows: *Poetical Register* (1805), Manuscript (pre-1809), and *Poetical Works* (1810). Taking this into account, comparing the three versions brings us to the following conclusions: Scott used both the manuscript and the *Poetical Register* versions for his edition, and Scott made additions of his own. First of all it is true that, as Moore tells us, in the *Poetical Works* version edited by Scott the title changed from the manuscript from “Last Lay of the Lichfield Minstrel” to “Addressed to the Rev. Thomas Sedgewick Whalley, on leaving his Seat, Mendip Lodge, in Somersetshire, Oct. 10th, 1804”. However, that is the title Seward gave to the poem in the *Poetical Register* version in 1805, so we cannot attribute this change to Scott. The only changes that we can in fact assign to Scott—because they do not appear in either the *Poetical Register* or the manuscript versions<sup>38</sup>—are “Alpine” (Seward, 1810: 2: 362), instead of “lofty”; “glows” instead of “rolls” (Seward: 363); “full shades that crown” (Seward: 363) instead of “rich bowers that deck”. “Thrilling rapture” (fol. 1v) in the manuscript becomes “poignant transport” (Seward, 1810: 2: 363) in the *Poetical Works*,

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<sup>38</sup> See “Addressed to the Rev. Thomas Sedgewick Whalley, on leaving his Seat, Mendip Lodge, in Somersetshire”, *Oct. 10th, 1804* in the *Poetical Works* pp 362-265.

but was “thrilling transport” (Seward: 363) in the *Poetical Register*; and “peace and joy” (Seward: 363) was changed from the original “hope and peace” in both the manuscript and the periodical. The other changes are all present in the *Poetical Register* version, and they are too complex for the substitution to be a coincidence: on the last stanza, “all hopeless do I go” (fol. 2v) became “and rising sighs, I go” (Seward, 1810: 2: 364) in both the *Poetical Register* and the *Poetical Works*.

As for Constable, he published the entire collection in 1811, against Seward’s demand that it be published annually. Robert Southey declared that Seward had been “ill-used” by Constable when he published all six volumes of the letter books at once. In 1811, the future poet laureate informed a correspondent that “it was her desire that they should be published in portions, at intervals of two years between each” and remarked that Seward had planned it that way to ensure that “by the time the latter portions were published, some persons there spoken of, would in the natural course of years have dropped off” (Southey, 1856: 226), which is evidence of Seward’s careful planning and attention to detail.

Furthermore, Constable allowed the correspondence to be “ruthlessly edited” and “picked apart and twisted out of shape” (Barnard, 2009: 4). He not only reduced the original thirteen letter books into six volumes, but he also removed all names, passages, and reflections that were uncomfortable to him or his acquaintances. The publisher “allowed Scott and several others to scour the letter books for indiscretions, local anecdotes, and political comments. They turned their attention to anything, in fact, which was personal or either deprecated the literary establishment or was not considered appropriate from a woman writer” (Barnard, 2009: 4). After the publication of the *Poetical Works* in 1811, Southey disclosed that Constable feared the *Letters* would be badly received by Francis Jeffrey’s *Edinburgh Review*—and by extension, not sell well.

Additionally, Scott also feared that Seward's letters to himself would betray his derogatory comments against the powerful Jeffrey and wished them deleted. Seward was not afraid, as were her peers, of Jeffrey's power over their careers because she had no involvement with the Edinburgh publishing scene, so she openly criticised him in the original correspondence. This put Constable and Scott in a difficult position, which Constable solved by allowing Jeffrey's brother-in-law, Mr. Morehead, to censor any passages uncomfortable for Jeffrey. In a note to the bookseller written in 1809 in the third person singular, Scott notes that he returned Constable "twelve Volumes of Miss Seward's correspondence", indicating that he had "markd with pencil a few passages in letters addressd to himself from Miss Seward". He demands these not be printed because "some of them reflect severely upon living characters & others have reference to opinions expressd by Mr. Scott in the confidence of friendly correspondence & which he would be unwilling should come before the public as it were by informer through Miss Seward's reply" (Scott to Constable, *Letters of Sir Walter Scott* 2: 273). Indeed, Scott "excised almost two thirds of the correspondence prior to publication, sometimes discarding entire letters" (Barnard, 2009: 3), rendering the edited manuscripts unrecognisable.

Southey complained that because of the editorial decisions made by Constable and Scott, the *Letters* contain "some of the hastiest and most violent expressions, which now pass for her settled judgment, because the letters in which they were qualified or retracted do not appear" (Southey, 1856: 226) and consequently, they fail to represent an accurate portrayal of Seward. The issue of the unreliability of Seward's letters has been a matter of scholarly attention. Brewer has argued that the revised letters constitute a manufactured portrayal of Seward's idealised literary community (Brewer, 2013: 478), while Rounce denounces that they are "an obviously constructed narrative" (2013: 114). One of the earliest, and most adamant critics of Seward's published correspondence is

James Clifford. In his 1941 article “The Authenticity of Anna Seward’s Correspondence” Clifford argues that “the 1811 edition cannot be implicitly trusted for facts or contemporary opinions” (1941: 122), he contends that they “do not represent what Anna Seward originally wrote but rather what she decided in late life would better enhance her reputation” and denounces that “the published letters are late revisions, made from copies of the originals, and as such cannot be trusted as evidence in controversial matters” (Clifford: 113). Indeed, private letters are regarded as being “uniquely placed to reproduce the intimacy of familiar speech [...] to leave on the page an unusually unguarded view of the writer’s mind and of his immediate responses to the world” (Keymer, 2004: 4), a purpose that is defeated in the editing process the author put them through years later. Although, as previously argued, this is an argument I could concede, Clifford attributes the unreliability of the letters to Seward’s editing, and does not take into account Constable’s modifications, an error that contemporary scholarship still incurs: indeed, Rounce objects that “Seward’s revisions seem to work against her own interests” (Rounce: 114), because, like Clifford, he disregards the final editorial process the letters underwent, in which Seward could not participate. Furthermore, Clifford complains that “the phraseology throughout has been materially altered; and long passages containing new ideas or amplifying old opinions have been added” (Clifford, 1941: 118). However, in the examples provided by Clifford, the changes he criticises are merely stylistic. In one instance he highlights how “grace, as well as force” (Clifford: 115) becomes “majesty and force” (Clifford: 116). A comparison between the original manuscript letters and the published *Letters* would provide valuable information about the double-editing process (Seward’s and Constable’s) that Seward’s material endured. Nevertheless, the lack of conclusively original documents (i.e. never revised or edited)



makes it nearly impossible to accurately determine which changes can be attributed to whom.

There are, however, few scattered letters (adding to the ones Clifford presents in his study) that allow for such a comparison. One of those is a letter from Seward to her friend, the political writer Samuel Parr, which was published in the third volume of *The Works of Samuel Parr* (1828) and in the third volume also of Seward's *Letters*<sup>39</sup>. While there is conclusive evidence that the letters in Seward's compilation have been through at least, two layers of editing (Seward's and Constable's), the one published in Parr is presumably faithful to the original and would showcase the contradictions in the double-editing. Firstly, the date and location in the *Letters* version (version 2 henceforth) "Bridlington, August 17, 1793" differs slightly from that of the presumably unedited one in *The Works* (version 1 henceforth) "Birdlington Quay, August 18, 1793". In version 1, Seward writes "I hope the lowness of his spirits magnifies his danger, but he is very ill" (Johnstone, 1828, 3: 464), but in version 2, the phrasing is slightly more elaborated "My best hope is, that the depression on his spirits magnifies his danger; but he seems very ill" (Seward, 1811: 3: 301). The following paragraph in version 2 does not appear in version 1:

When you favour me with your company at Lichfield, you will meet with little of the provocation you apprehend from its stalled divinities. I think they would shun you for a double reason: your abilities, which they would fear,—your politics, which they would hate;—or, if they abstained from what must prove such a suicide on the pleasures of the ingenious and ingenuous, they would at least decline entering the political lists with so formidable an opponent (Seward: 301).

The fact that this paragraph does not appear in version 1 would indicate that this was added by Seward afterwards. Although Constable and every other person involved in the

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<sup>39</sup> The presumably original transcribed letter can be found in *The Works of Samuel Parr* (1828, 3: 463). The version published in the *Letters* is in 1811: 300.

posthumous editing process made changes, these are thought to have been limited to censoring names and anecdotes, and it is hard to believe that they would add paragraphs such as the above, containing private original thoughts. There is another instance of these additions in the 1811 version: “to be zealous for her interests” (Seward, 1811: 3: 303). There is also an important deletion: in version one, Seward added her sonnet “To France on her Present Exertions” to defend herself of Parr’s accusing her of being a Tory. This sonnet, which has been published in 6 magazines between August and October of 1789 (Bennett, 2004: n.p.)<sup>40</sup> was not included in the *Poetical Works*. The poem does not appear in the *Letters* either. The paragraph introducing it does not appear either:

You are mistaken, dear Sir, in supposing my muse to have been ever what you call a Tory. No loyal, or ministerial verses of hers ever passed the press. As to France, not yourself more exulted in the first liberation till she rushed into barbarous anarchy and proved that its mischiefs are greater far than those of [t]he most corrupt government and produce despotism infinitely more tyrannical. An awful warning to surrounding nations! Well may it teach the prosperous, the happy English, to be thankful, whatever of human imperfection may be found in the constitution under which they flourish! The following Sonnet of mine was printed in the Gentleman’s Magazine for August 1789. I think it breathes no Toryism (Johnstone, 1828: 3: 465).

The decision not to include the poem might be attributed to either Seward or Constable and Scott—the lack of the original manuscript for publication makes it impossible to ascertain. Moreover, the paragraph “So, the regicides are repeating their bloody work, and exciting new detestation, which, I trust, will edge with yet more resistless force the swords of chastising justice. Custine, Miranda and Brissot<sup>41</sup>, are condemned, if not

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<sup>40</sup> *The Scots Magazine*, LI (August, 1789), p. 399; *The Gentleman's Magazine* (August, 1789), p. 743; *The European Magazine* (September, 1789), p. 315; *The Morning Chronicle*, (September 2, 1789); *The Universal Magazine* (September, 1789), p.155; *The Gentleman's and London Magazine* (October, 1789), p. 552. (Bennett, 2004: n.p.).

<sup>41</sup> Adam Philippe Custine (1740-1793) was French general who served in the National Constitutional Assembly. He was executed during the Reign of Terror. Francisco de Miranda (1750-1816) was a Venezuelan military leader who sought to liberate the Spanish American colonies. He died in prison. Jacques Pierre Brissot (1754-1793) was a Girondin leader and abolitionist and he, like Custine, was executed during the Reign of Terror.

already executed. It is thus that the dire republic makes, like sin, the wages of her servants' death." (Johnstone: 3: 466), found in version 1, is missing from version 2.

Other changes are more discreet. "I trust you received my last letter" (version 1) (Johnstone: 3: 466) becomes "You received my last letter" (version 2) (Seward, 1811: 3: 303); and "my mansion" (Johnstone, 1828: 3 :466) becomes "my house" (Seward, 1811: 3: 303). Furthermore, Seward's final domestic note "I leave this place next Monday, and passing on my road home at the houses of a few friends, hope to reach home by the middle of September." (Johnstone: 3: 366) does not appear in the second version either. "That perhaps find little congeniality on other themes" (Johnstone: 3: 364) in version 1 becomes "which have, perhaps, not perfect congeniality on other themes" (Seward, 1811: 3: 301) in version 2. Compellingly, "beautiful superstructures of polity" (version 1) becomes "beautiful edifices of polity" (version 2), which further emphasises the Burkean argument of the edifice of society (Burke, 1872: 2: 322), the nation understood as a building. Another change is "philosophers and patriots" (Johnstone, 1828: 364) in version 1, discussing those English still in favour of the French Revolution in 1793—whom she describes as "the daring innovators who, with the dreadful example of France before their eyes, seek to lift the flood-gates of a torrent which they cannot bank up again" (Johnstone: 3: 365), a sentence that in version 2 loses "of France"—becomes only "philosophers" (Seward, 1811: 3: 302) in version 2. Both the omission of "of France" and "patriots" can be argued to have been intended as a critique to the English supporters of the revolutionary principles, who in this paragraph are accused of destabilising the fabric of society grounded in the monarchy and the constitution.

There is then a paragraph that appears in both versions but with several changes, here highlighted in bold. In version 1 "the factitious and discontented **now** abuse it because it has not that complete **perfection**, ill-suited to the **corruption** of mankind, and

call the **quiescent** and the grateful Tories; but when they gave to such the title of Whigs, and **openly detested the era of the revolution** in England, the constitution was essentially the same as it is **at present**; Tests and Septennial Parliaments, **now so reprobated by the growlers**, existed then.” (Johnstone, 1828: 3: 364). And, in version 2: “the discontented and factitious **of these days** call themselves whigs, and abuse government because it has not that complete **purity**, ill-suited to the **vices** of mankind, bestowing upon the **quiet** and the grateful **the title of** Tories; but when, **some forty years back**, they assigned to such the name of whigs, and **avowed their detestation of** the English Revolution, our constitution was essentially all it is **now**. Tests and septennial parliaments, **their present reprobation**, existed then.” (Seward, 1811: 3: 302). Some of these changes inform a sense of temporal distance “of these days” instead of “now”, deleting “now” altogether in the following line, and adding “some forty years back” and adds the context that a reader in 1811 might be lacking. However, when mentioning the English constitution, “same as it is at present” becomes “same as it is now”, which reinforces its unalterable, and unaltered, nature. Moreover, names and adjectives are changed and they become more precise: “perfection” becomes “purity”; “corruption” becomes “vices”; and “the quiescent and the grateful” becomes “the quiet and the grateful”.

All in all, this analysis suggests questions as well as answers. Firstly, it shows that there was an edition of the manuscript after the deed. Secondly, it proves that the text was edited in order to clarify its content, both grammatically and ideologically. In other words, it brought Seward’s thoughts from the time of composition (1793) up to date. As for the questions, due to the lack of an extant manuscript between the original letter and the final publication it is not possible to ascertain which changes are Seward’s and which are Constable’s.

#### 5.4. Reception in the reviewing press

According to the private correspondence between Murray and Constable, the *Letters* sold well (NLS, Murray to Constable, 5 June 1811), from which we infer that the bookseller, at the very least, covered costs. This piece of data, however, does not reveal how the books were critically received. Analysing the reviews of Seward's *Letters* and *Poetical Works* in these periodicals will show whether or not her project for posthumous fame had a positive response in the reviewing press, which had an undoubtable influence on the readership, and therefore was instrumental in the success of her writings. My analysis will also show how the literary critics managed their perceptions of age, gender, singlehood and authorship in the articulation of their criticism. For this purpose, I have selected three magazines: *The Critical Review* (1756-1817), *The Monthly Review* (1749–1845), and *The British Review and London Critical Journal* (1811-1825). The importance of the first two publications in the founding of literary criticism cannot be overstated: *The Monthly* and *The Critical*, led by Ralph Griffiths and Tobias Smollett, pioneered modern literary criticism (Feather, 2006: 96), reinventing reviews and rescuing them from puff pieces into actual works of intellectual exchange and journalistic accuracy, a trend—in quantity and in quality—that would only increase during the Romantic period (Wheatley, 2005: 1). As for the *British Review*, mockingly nicknamed by Byron “my Grandmother’s Review” (Byron, 1852: 46), it was founded by the evangelical lawyer John Weyland, and by William Roberts, future biographer of Hannah More, and published by the Tory John Hatchard. The reviews, quite lengthy, quote extensively from the letters: *The Critical Review*’s review piece was 12 pages long, *The British Review and London Critical Journal*’s 17, and *The Monthly Review*’s a remarkable 28.

In his 1844 *Cyclopedia of English Literature*, Robert Chambers recounted that “the applauses of Miss Seward’s early admirers were only calculated to excite ridicule,

and the vanity and affectation which were her besetting sins, destroyed equally her poetry and prose” (Chambers, 1844: 278). This idea of “vanity and affectation” was echoed by several critics. The *Monthly Review* qualified the collection as Seward’s “triumph of vanity” resulting from her “thirst for posthumous reputation” (“Miss Seward’s *Letters*”, 1811: 114), and they described her as “sitting on her throne of self-sufficiency in a provincial town” (“Miss Seward’s *Letters*”: 114), being “vain of her talents, and both pedantic and arrogant in the display of them” (“Miss Seward’s *Letters*”: 115). Moreover, they offer that the volumes “might have been entitled ‘The Opinions of Anna Seward in Various Subjects’” (“Miss Seward’s *Letters*”: 225). *The Critical* was also adamant in criticising Seward’s “vanity”, clarifying that their disapproval was not limited to her gender “We do not allude to those vanities common to her sex, we mean the vanity of authorship” (“Anna Seward’s *Letters*”, 1812: 353). *The British Review and London Critical Journal* insist on this same idea, writing that “we will not say the vanity of the sex but we may say the vanity of authorship” (“[Review of the *Poetical Works of Anna Seward*]", 1811: 171).

Although both periodicals adamantly underline that their criticism is not directed towards the so-called female vanity, Iona Italia has connected the “vanity of authorship” to the ingrained prejudices against singlewomen. Italia describes the “Female student”—an *eidolon* in Christopher Smart’s periodical *The Student* (1750-1751)—as the embodiment of the association of “old-maidism” with learning. The “Female student” is a “frustrated spinster” who turns “to scribbling for income when her sexual charms lose their force” and whose writing is motivated by spite against amorous rejection, to “revenge herself on those who have rejected her” (Italia, 2005: 170). Interestingly, Italia considers the vanity of authorship as being on equal footing with the vanity of the singlewoman: “The ‘Vanity’ which leads the old maid to flirt with men until it is too late

to receive an honourable proposal”, she writes, “is the same sentiment which leads her to value herself upon her education and her literary abilities”; and therefore, in the popular imagination, “the female writer is more likely to be an old maid than any other woman” (Italia: 170). The insistence on vanity is certainly compelling, but it does not come as a surprise in the context of autobiographical works at the time. Writing about the increase of the autobiographical genre in the nineteenth century, James Treadwell has observed that in review periodicals “accusations (or at least mentions) of egotism appear everywhere, attached to autobiographical writing like its shadow” (Treadwell, 2006: 63). Treadwell recounts that the accusation of “vanity” against autobiography was “directed specifically at the character of an author”, in other words, “self-exposure” was considered “a flaw in its author’s moral constitution” (Treadwell: 65). For an autobiographical work to be welcomed by critics and readers alike, it required its author’s indisputable eminence (social rank) or talent (genius). At the time, the increase in the number of autobiographies by authors who lacked either eminence or talent—or both—was received as a “sign of decay in the public sphere” (Treadwell: 74). It is no wonder, then, that the critics reacted dismissively to Seward’s authorial assertion in publishing her correspondence and compiled works, as they perceived it as an overstepping of the boundaries of propriety and modesty assigned to her gender, class, and age.

Just like *The Monthly* and Scott in the “Preface”, *The British Review and London Critical Journal* believed Seward’s later writings to be of inferior quality, characterised by “shining absurdities and ambitious faults” (*British Review*, 1811: 174). In fact, they praise her earlier compositions and attribute her success to her youth, because, according to them, reviewers were more lenient towards young lady writers than elderly ones: “Her first publications had been received with unqualified commendation; her youth, her sex, and the freshness of her fame excited an enthusiasm in her favour. These

recommendations were of a nature not to last; and every succeeding poem was examined with severer justice and increased impartiality” (*British Review*, 1811: 178). They insist that “her powers declined as age advanced, and by all her attempts at composition, which were many during her later years, she was writing herself out of reputation”. They add:

By consulting the ease of her faculties, she would have consulted the interests of her fame; but to live in unison with time and nature is the happiness of those, only, who have learned to put a sober value on the pleasures of a fugitive being, and to resign with cheerfulness what if we struggle too long to retain must at length be forfeited with disgrace. (*British Review*, 1811: 179)

By asking Seward to “resign with cheerfulness” her literary career before it has to be “forfeited with disgrace”, the *British Review* is conveying the press’ disregard for elderly women writers, confirming Looser’s assertion that “to continue to publish into old age” was not an option for many female authors because they risked “lowering a once-high reputation” (Looser, 2008: 7). Scott repeats this same idea in the “Preface” to the *Poetical Works*, arguing that all of Seward’s productions after the *Sonnets* (1799) were “unequal to those of her earlier muse”, which he suggests was due to her advancing years: “age was now approaching with its usual attendants, declining health, and the loss of friends summoned from the stage before her” (Scott, 1810: xxi), an idea that would eventually be echoed by the reviewers of the collections. Both Scott and the reviewers are admonishing Seward for not having had the good sense to abandon her literary ambitions and public writing career in time. Consequently, Seward’s later corpus exists in defiance of societal expectations of how an old, unmarried woman should occupy her time. She, and her career, are belittled because of her age, gender, and marital status.

## **5.5. Conclusions**

This chapter has explored the failure of Seward’s attempt to secure her literary legacy and how eighteenth-century social perceptions of gender and age conditioned the reception of



her posthumously published *Letters* and *Poetical Works*. From the context of Romantic posterity and posthumous reception, this chapter has situated Seward within a larger tradition of eighteenth century—elderly—women writers who envisioned their literary afterlives and made plans for posthumous publication. Seward’s attentive planning for the publication of her compiled works and correspondence denotes her authorial agency. This becomes apparent in the choices she made: aware as she was of the dangers in publishing as an older woman, she withheld publication to avoid a direct dismissal by the reviewing press; she bequeathed her works to two younger and very influential names of the Romantic literary world—Walter Scott and Archibald Constable—; both steps were intended to ensure a favourable reception for the *Letters* and *Poetical Works*. In addition, she left detailed instructions with her manuscripts that would help the posthumous publications consolidate Seward’s public image and literary fame in the years to come. Seward’s began her planning in her fifties, which, in the context of the eighteenth century and in the case of unmarried women, stripped of the social status and domestic and reproductive role that accompanied married life, was considered an advanced age. This social conception of gender and age may have prompted Seward to revisit her life at this point and to construct an image of herself looking back from her maturity and experience. Furthermore, Seward’s plan for posthumous fame itself challenges the prejudices and social scorn attached to the figure of the old maid that she embodies at this stage. She therefore resists societal expectations by reinforcing her literary authority and her role as experienced writer and mentor.

The findings raise important questions about the critical afterlife of Anna Seward and suggests that an understudied factor in her exclusion from literary discussion was the editorial decisions made by Archibald Constable and Walter Scott. While this study cannot offer a conclusive analysis of the extent of the editors’ disfiguration of Seward’s

original manuscripts, it suggests, from the available evidence, that Scott and Constable's failure to adhere to Seward's instructions, as well as their censoring of the manuscripts, misconstrued and distorted the public image Seward had been so careful to prepare, and complements the analysis on this same matter delineated in Chapter 2 (2.1). Consequently, their editorial decisions were the first step in the failure of Seward's project for posthumous fame.

Seward's exclusion from the literary landscape—in her old age, but especially after her death—was the result of a series of critical processes, an essential element of which was the reception of her posthumously published compilation. These critical processes were articulated through prejudices against gender, age, and singlehood, embedded in the cultural consciousness of the time and inbred in the reviews of the *Letters and Poetical Works*. Seward's posthumous publications are dismissed as an exercise in vanity, and she is punished for challenging a critical press that undervalued older women writers' contributions. The reviewers argue that her later career writings were inferior in quality and that by not retiring from the literary world she had been “writing herself out of reputation” (*British Review*, 1811: 179). Accordingly, and answering the question that was the point of departure of this analysis, age and gender played an instrumental part in the critical dismissal of Seward's posthumous career. Therefore, the failure of Seward's project for posthumous fame is consummated in the reviewing press. By reproducing eighteenth-century society's biases against elderly women writers, the reviewers contributed to the poor reception of her compiled works, which had a long-term negative effect on Seward's posthumous reputation, seriously impacting her critical reception in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

## Conclusions

### 6.1. Final conclusions

This thesis set out to explore self-presentation and reputation in the literary career of Anna Seward, and the ways these interacted with maturity and old age. Seward, a writer and critic at the centre of a wide network of influential correspondents that expanded both geographically and generationally, was one of the best-known writers of her time partly because of her role as national spokeswoman at a time of consolidation of British values. Nevertheless, after her death in the first decade of the nineteenth century, she lost critical favour and all but disappeared from the literary landscape. This thesis is not primarily concerned with this critical disappearance—although it inevitably engages with it—, but rather with Seward’s assertion of authority and her self-presentation in the changing literary landscape at the turn of the century. Therefore, Seward’s sense of authorial self is placed at the centre of this enquiry, at the intersection between gender, age, and singlehood. These three identity markers inform this analysis providing insight into the social conditioners that underpin Seward’s self-presentation within her literary corpus. After a thorough examination of the primary sources, the corpus has been narrowed down to the later part of her career, because it is at that stage where her authorial voice is stronger and more aware of her literary afterlife. After she has developed her style and critical abilities throughout her youth and debuted as a public author in print (1780) to much critical acclaim, Seward tackles a variety of literary genres to push the boundaries ascribed to her gender and assert her critical and literary authority. Hence, in this thesis I have addressed the following research questions: how did Seward’s authority as a writer unfold in the later part of her career (1786-1809)? How did the identity markers of gender and (old) age inform Seward’s sense of authorial self and her self-presentation in her

maturity and old age? And finally, how did age, gender, and singlehood affect the success of said self-presentation?

In order to approach these lines of enquiry, this thesis has adopted (old) age studies as a theoretical framework. There has been an increased interest in recent literary scholarship in this relatively new field, which has yielded a compelling body of criticism that for the first time regards age and ageing as key in the analysis of eighteenth-century texts. This perspective has inevitably called the attention to a notable gap in Romantic studies, a discipline that has traditionally placed a considerable importance to the notion of youth, and to writings of youth rather than those of maturity. Therefore, framing my research within (old) age studies contributes to the study of Romanticism by placing the emphasis on the construction, evolution and representation of identity from old age; as well as on the reception of elderly women writers by the reviewing press, the readership and their contemporaries. On the other hand, the study of (old) age, from a historical, sociological, and anthropological perspective, has also promoted a revision of common modern misconceptions about longevity and social perceptions of age in the eighteenth century. Therefore, by applying the studies of age and an ageing critical lens to Anna Seward's career, this thesis has been able to reassess her work, placing the focus on an overlooked period that coincides with her most productive phase in terms of critical thinking (the bulk of her literary criticism is found in this latter half of her career) and to identify common patterns in her later writings, both in her self-presentation and in their reception. In this sense, this study informs our understanding of the reception of Anna Seward's career at the turn of the century, by exposing eighteenth-century attitudes in the reception of works by elderly women writers (Looser, 2008), attitudes that also influenced Seward's self-presentation; evidence of which is that she began planning for her literary afterlife aged fifty, which in her social context (single and unmarried) was considered an

advanced age. Her perception of self, which is in turn informing us about the eighteenth-century conception of gender and age, is key in Seward's decision to prepare her manuscripts for publication, compiling and editing them from the perspective that her maturity and old age afforded her. In the exploration of these considerations, attention has also been paid to lesser-known writings by the author. In a trans-genre understanding of Seward's textual corpus, this thesis has gone beyond her well-known best-selling publications to include examples from her literary criticism, correspondence, and manuscript texts. By incorporating these elements to the primary corpus of analysis, this thesis throws further light toward a complete understanding of her literary career and her sense of authorial self.

This thesis has addressed the research questions in four chapters, each dealing with a different aspect of Seward's career, all of them connected by its critical framework.

Chapter 2 analysed two primary sources: the first one is the original manuscript document "Sketch" (*William Salt*, "Biographical Sketch"), a text that has previously been commented on exclusively in its printed form and attributed to her cousin and amanuensis Henry White, a notion I seek to rectify in my examination. The second one is the correspondence between Seward and Boswell (Benvolio debate) published between 1786-7 and 1793-4 in *The Gentleman's Magazine*. These two sources are by no means isolated but rather part of a larger corpus of literary criticism, and they have been selected as two prime examples of Seward's assertion of authority. They show an experienced, mature Seward who is aware and in command of her literary expertise, and who makes her claim to appoint herself as arbiter of taste and literature expert. In addition, they reveal an author who is, purposefully and meticulously, capitalising on her literary fame and good consideration in the reviewing press after 1780. In the "Sketch", Seward addresses

her life and career from the perspective of old age, allowing for introspection and retrospection both. While the printed version is presented as a celebration of her accomplishments as a consolidated author, I suggest that it is much more, and regard it as an assertion of authorial authority and a claim to her place in the literary canon. Reassigning the authorship of the “Sketch” to its original author, Seward herself, showcases Seward’s will and ability to retain control over her public image, especially at the end of her career. It shows an elderly Seward who, at the end of her life and career, is aware of her legacy and intends to remain in charge of it. This same will to retain control over her authorial image is also reflected in the compilation and editing of her major works and correspondence and the negotiations for the publication of the resulting volumes (chapter 5). Nevertheless, Seward’s autobiographical piece maintained its influence as a source of information for other biographical pieces until Walter Scott published his “Preface” attached to her *Poetical Works*. Henceforth, Scott’s version of her life and career replaced Seward’s autobiography, which means that the inaccuracies, and more importantly, personal biases from Scott’s version are the ones that have constituted Seward’s public image throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the other hand, the Benvolio debate is one of the many exercises in essay-letter criticism published in periodicals Seward engaged with in her lifetime. Indeed, there has been a tendency to focus our critical attention on Seward as a poet when in fact her critical essays comprise the larger bulk of her corpus (apart from her correspondence), and when it is precisely in her literary criticism that Seward strongly asserted herself as a literary and critical authority. In the Benvolio debate Seward engages with a public collective dialogue over the literary canonisation of Samuel Johnson in which she voices her concern with what she describes as a misrepresentation of Johnson. In her letters to the *GM*, Seward is outspoken in defending a model of literary criticism that values morality

and veracity above all else, a model that at the time of the Benvolio debate was considered outmoded, feminine, and amateur, and crashed with an increasingly masculinised and professionalised Romantic model (Mellor 2000). In this clash, Seward's arguments are reinforced with the experience and knowledge her age and her life-long involvement in the literary world confer on to her, pointing at the fact that she implicitly uses her age to strengthen her claim. At the same time, it shows Boswell, as representative of this masculine and professionalised section of literary criticism pushing for dominance, openly and unceremoniously rejecting Seward's appeal and, even more significant, using Seward's age and gender to articulate his dismissal.

Chapter 3 examined Seward's self-presentation as an ageing and aged woman at the last decades of her life in her collection of sonnets *Original Sonnets and Odes Paraphrased from Horace* (1799), her last published poetry, and the influence of these identity markers in her poetry's language, themes, and tone. The *Sonnets* are a pioneering publication within the female-led eighteenth-century sonnet revival as well as Seward's claim to Miltonic lineage (Kairoff 2011). By complying with the strict rules and style of the Miltonic sonnet, Seward is evincing her own ability and at the same time vindicating her own legitimacy as a woman of letters. The analysis of Seward's articulation of the experience of loss through the lens of age and ageing studies has revealed the author's processing of a lifetime of losses from the vantage point of maturity. The chronological order of the sonnets, and some of them being dated, has allowed me to pursue a diachronic assessment that showcases that Seward's poetic descriptions of the experience of loss evolving from a traditional perspective (in the earlier sonnets) to a deeply personal portrayal of her inner turmoil (in the later ones) in which she finds comfort in the balance of reason and sentimentality. More importantly, the sonnets of Remembrance demonstrate that the subject of memory explored in the sonnets evolves as the author's

age advances. Consequently, it is safe to assert that Seward's maturity and old age imbue her poetry, affording her the emotional distance to find solace in remembrance and to consider the act itself in her verses. Additionally, the analysis of the sonnets of Decay reveals the depiction of the physical and emotional consequences of age and ageing as they were being experienced by the author on her own body and on her father's. In this grouping of poems (categorized as such by the purpose of the analysis) Seward considers the progressive deterioration of the human form and the inevitability of death, and, remarkably, she places the focal point on ageing and illness rather than death itself. The choice of focusing on the physical and emotional decay reveals a personalisation of these otherwise universal themes that, in her later corpus, are no longer analysed as tropes in a classical setting, but appropriated to her own experiences and emotional turmoil. This development in Seward's poetic themes and style is inherently entwined with the author's own ageing process and reveals an interconnectedness between her style and themes and the mature frame of mind her own advanced age affords her. Furthermore, this more subdued, but deeply emotional style anticipates a Romantic mode of expression that was setting its bases at the time—*Lyrical Ballads* had been published a year before. In that sense, regarding Seward's *Sonnets* not in opposition to the Romantics but rather as part of a stylistic and thematic literary continuum helps place Seward within a changing and evolving literary landscape she actively contributed to and made hers, incorporating elements from both Neoclassical and Romantic styles.

Chapter 4 considered the issue of intergenerational mentoring through an analysis of the correspondence between an aged Anna Seward at the end of her career and a promising young Robert Southey at the beginning of his. This correspondence was recovered using Lynda Pratt's project (*CLRS*)—which has compiled and transcribed the bulk of Southey's life-long correspondence—, Seward's letters to Southey published in



her six-volume *Letters of Anna Seward Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807* (1811), and an original finding (*Houghton*, Seward to Southey, 17 June 1808). The resulting group of letters is by no means complete, and reading them as a whole highlights the gaps between them, but it is nonetheless a compelling and understudied source of information about the relationship between Seward and Southey, a relationship that goes beyond the personal and into the professional. Furthermore, the correspondence between the two authors is particularly thought-provoking when examined through the lens of age studies. When examined in conjunction, the Seward-Southey correspondence makes a compelling contribution to our understanding of Seward's impact and authority, and provides a new line of reasoning that connects with a result of the analysis in chapter 3: the extent of Seward's influence in the Romantic generation. If in chapter 3 that influence was found in Seward's later poetry's, arguably more Romantic style, chapter 4 shows Seward's literary influence over the younger generation. Indeed, the letters between the two authors reveal a young Southey that appeals to Seward's counsel directly and explicitly. From this I infer that the last decade of her life Seward's reputation and influence were still enduring, because Southey acknowledges and values Seward's literary and critical authority as a successful and more experienced author—success and experience here being cumulative and therefore tied to her age—. Southey asks Seward for advice on both his own poetry (most notably he asks for her advice relating a forthcoming revised edition of *Madoc*, and when he is finishing the first edition of *Kehama*) and his career as a whole. In this sense, the letters also disclose a salient aspect of Seward's influence in her later career: Southey benefits from the older author's sway in established literary criticism publications like the *Critical Review* by having her successfully appeal a negative review for him (as seen on 4.4.3). All in all, the relationship between the two writers that emerges from the letters is not one of collaboration between equals, but rather one that favours a

mentor-student dynamic in which Seward passes on her knowledge and experience. Furthermore, the mentor-protégée relationship that is established between Seward and Southey through this correspondence challenges long-standing notions of the gendered role of age and experience in men and in women, a dichotomy that traditionally translates age and experience as wisdom for men but not for women (Looser 2009). Moreover, it contributes to an under researched area of literary studies: the mentoring relationships that were established throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries between elderly women writers and younger male authors.

Finally, chapter 5 focused on Seward's two posthumous publications, *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward: With Extracts from Her Literary Correspondence* (1810), and *Letters of Anna Seward: Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807* (1811) and examined them as the author's project, started in her old age, to create a compilation of her life's work in order to consolidate her career and ensure that her authority and influence would endure after her death. The chapter focused on three stages of this project in order to identify the role played by the intersection of age and gender in each of them: first, it examined the process of preparation of the material and the negotiations for publication in which Seward engaged the assistance of Walter Scott and the Scottish bookseller Archibald Constable. Secondly, it considered Scott and Constable's role in the project and, drawing from the idea first exposed by Barnard (2009), this chapter went further and showed that by disregarding Seward's instructions and heavily editing the manuscripts, the two men produced an enduring portrayal of Seward that was a distortion of the author's Seward's carefully constructed self-presentation. Finally, the third stage is the reception of the work, which was assessed through an analysis of its reviews in *The Critical Review*, *The British Review* and *London Critical Journal*, and *the Monthly Review*. This analysis considered the extent to which the intersection of Seward's age,

gender, and singlehood had an impact on the failure of her plan for posthumous legacy, which in turn elicits her critical disappearance. On the one hand Seward's advanced age is what prompts her to begin compiling her works, and what affords her the mature perspective with which she revisits her lifetime of poetry and letters. Similarly, the compilation itself, and her wish to have power over her literary afterlife show, once again, the author's awareness of her own talent and influence, and her willingness to exert said power to consolidate her position. It is another example—the last, and the most significant one—, of Seward's assertion of authority, and it denotes her authorial agency, further enriching our knowledge of Seward as an author. Furthermore, Seward's plan challenges the prejudices attached to the figure of the old maid (as seen in 5.1) that she embodies at this stage and shows her resisting societal expectations. On the other hand, ironically, the advanced age which prompts and reinforces Seward's attempt at posthumous literary fame is what elicits its failure. The social prejudices of the time against elderly (unmarried) women in general and elderly women authors who had continued to publish into their advanced age (Looser 2008) in particular, incite and articulate the dismissal of Seward's project. This dismissal is enacted in two steps: First, in its posthumous editing process—the editorial decisions made by Constable and Scott were, the first step in the failure of Seward's project for posthumous fame and contributed to her exclusion from the literary landscape. Secondly, in the ageist reception in the reviewing press, which condemns Seward's plan for posthumous fame through a series of critical processes, buttressed in the prejudices against gender, age, and singlehood. This discriminatory criticism was perpetuated in the reviews of the *Letters* and *Poetical Works*, in which she is accused of indulging in an exercise of vanity and of having done herself a disservice not having retired from the literary world when she was younger and at the prime of her career. In short, this analysis reveals Seward's self-insertion within a literary tradition in

a crucial and complex moment of transition (and coexistence) between the Enlightenment and Romanticism (investigated in chapter 2) and her proactive participation in the similarly changing print market and reviewing press culture. In revealing and addressing the bias articulated through the intersection of gender, old age, and singlehood by the critics in the reviews examined here, I seek to suggest a lens through which addressing issues of reception and its impact in mature and elderly women's reputations and their literary afterlife. Tackling these critical mechanisms of bias and cultural exclusion from literary studies will enhance our understanding of these authors' critical disappearance from the high point of their careers and until their recovery in modern times. Thus, this approach hopes to, if not dismiss, at least encourage a reassessment of the idea that these women's intellectual contributions were less relevant or less interesting than those of their (similarly aged) male counterparts.

In light of these findings, and bearing in mind, once again, the research questions from which this study departed, my final conclusions are as follows:

On the one hand, Seward's advanced age reinforced her claim of literary authority because it carried the weight of her years of experience as a celebrated published author that had been recognised as a national spokeswoman. Indeed, her reputation, established in 1780-81, endorsed her public remonstrations and set the bases for her enduring influence in her old age. Seward's literary and critical authority was unambiguously asserted in the latter part of her career (1786-1809) through a variety of publications and strategies: in the Benvolio debate (1786), in her autobiographical piece "Biographical Sketch" in 1796, in her pioneering role in the sonnet revival in which she self-legitimises her role as poet of the nation mirroring Milton through the "sonnet's claim" in the *Original Sonnets* (1799), in her mentoring relationship with Robert Southey (1807), and in the preparation of her posthumous publications. Of all of these instances Seward's

assertion was either dismissed (Benvolio and posthumous publications), ignored (“Sketch”), and acknowledged (“sonnet’s claim” and in her mentoring of Southey).

As the analysis of the case studies examined reveals, Seward was perfectly confident in her ability, and in the artistic and intellectual strength of her corpus. She knew, and assertively declared, which works best represented her best assets, why she deserved a place within the literary tradition, and how she wanted to be remembered in her literary afterlife. Furthermore, Seward’s old-age corpus reveals a self-fashioned portrayal of the author as a highly educated woman of letters who is an active participant in the literary public debates of her time, whose authority and influence are sought after and recognised well into her old age by the leading figures of the Romantic movement in their youth and inexperience. In this sense, this thesis has highlighted qualitative aspects in this corpus that, I suggest, should be integrated in contemporary and future critical assessments of the author and her work. Doing so has offered a wider picture of Seward’s influence in the literary tradition she belonged to and actively participated in, and a clearer portrayal of the author as a proactive, self-aware actor in the development of her career, in command and assertive of her ability, influence, and reputation.

On the other hand, gender, (old) age and also singlehood were consistently used to delegitimise her claim. The negative connotations of elderly singlewomen writers in eighteenth-century society conditioned the way Seward perceived herself and inevitably determined the way she was perceived by her contemporaries, which, together with the changes in professionalisation and masculinisation of the literary world at the onset of the Romantic movement, affected her attempts at posthumous fame. The social perceptions of age and gender, then, embedded the critical processes that resulted in Seward’s critical disappearance.

Interestingly, in her public portrayal Seward also shows an awareness of the dangers she was putting herself in, and this is reflected in the different strategies she uses to either hedge her arguments or to completely disguise her authorial voice, using her cousin's gender to protect or further legitimise her own ideas. This is not the only evidence of Seward's insight in the critical press and bookselling business. The preparation of her compiled works and correspondence for posthumous publication also showcases her acute knowledge of publication strategies. She bequeaths her works to Walter Scott because she foresights that having his name attached to the works will help them sell, and therefore, will work to her advantage in the consolidation of her posthumous fame.

This investigation showcases the hostile and reception elderly women writers faced at the time, against which Seward, and many others, persevered. Despite the various ways her assertion was received, Seward persisted throughout her later years to present herself as an authority figure of enduring influence in an antagonistic literary landscape. In spite of this the bias and personal and financial interests of her contemporaries—in this case Scott and Constable—and of the reviewing press, led to the failure of her attempt at securing her posthumous reputation. These actors (Scott, a leading Romantic voice; Constable, a very influential publisher, and the British reviewing press) were key in the development of the literary canon, and they made it their business to decide which authors were included as cultural agents in the redefinition of a modern literary tradition and which were excluded. As this analysis has shown, women, especially elderly women, and elderly singlewomen, were prejudiced against on the basis of their identity, regarded as a failure to comply to certain societal expectations (such as marriage and motherhood). Seward, embodying these three elements (age, gender, singlehood) was

judged in disadvantage, and consequently excluded, in spite of the intellectual value and artistic merit of her corpus.

## **6.2. Further Research**

During the course of my research I have encountered a variety of compelling lines of enquiry that, because they were beyond the scope of my investigation, I have not been able to pursue, but which I nonetheless consider thought-provoking ideas for further research. Likewise, I have on occasion been deterred from pursuing a specific query due to certain gaps in the scholarship of Anna Seward's literary career. These I believe could be solved with a digitisation project that could unify the available manuscript material, published and unpublished. While Lisa Moore's work in collecting Seward's literary works, from the *Poetical Works* and a myriad of periodicals of the time, is of the utmost value in the recovery of Seward's literary corpus, this would be a step further in recognising the diversity of genres in which Seward wrote as equally valid elements of study to her poetry and correspondence, and would therefore provide a fuller and more accurate portrayal of the author and of her literary context. This is especially true in the case of different manuscript versions of the same work (be that a poem or essay or, more importantly, a letter), because doing so would enable scholars to study the editing process Seward's manuscripts underwent during her life and after her demise. These comparisons would, for example, help establishing which changes to the final published version of her compiled works and correspondence are to be attributed to her or to Scott and Constable. A consequence of Seward's critical disappearance from the nineteenth century and until recently is that many items belonging to her physical legacy—annotations in books she owned, for example—have not been traced and therefore they cannot be studied. With the knowledge that Seward profusely annotated her books, if these books were to be found, they would open the possibility to be studied as specimens of her literary criticism,

which in turn, following the methodology of Carme Font Paz's WINK Project, would allow for an analysis of women's literary criticism as a trans-genre phenomenon, that is, not limited to one genre (the essay, or the letter) but making one evolving discourse extensive and permeable to a variety of them.

In terms of the thesis' critical framework, the intersection of (old) age studies, gender studies, and literary studies has proved very fruitful. My work hopes to contribute to a burgeoning field that is reassessing how we consider writers' corpus and reception, especially compelling in the case of women writers, because age had a marked influence in the way older authors were perceived, and in how they perceived themselves. In this sense, I believe there is much more to be said about eighteenth-century (elderly) women writers' role as mentors in general, and as mentors of their male Romantic peers in particular. We know the male Romantics read their female contemporaries, but we have yet to explore what patterns of influence exist in those relationships. In Seward's case specifically, her role as mentor of Southey was not testimonial; there is evidence that she established several mentoring relationships in her old age with younger writers such as Henry Cary. However, her mentoring was frustrated in her relationship with Walter Scott, who did not show any interest in her counsel or experience, as evidenced in their correspondence. There is, therefore, much more to be said about Seward as a mentor, and about Seward extending her influence in her old age to other younger authors that survived her. Exploring this matter will shed further light on Seward's authorial influence in her time.

Finally, there is much more to research in terms of eighteenth-century elderly women writers and how their age conditioned their contemporary and posthumous self-portrayal and its reception. Pursuing this thesis' same line of investigation but complimenting it with more case studies (contributing to the work being done by



experienced scholars in the field such as Looser, Culley, or Crossley), would help elucidate previously overlooked common aspects that contributed to these writers' marginalisation and that were underpinned by identity markers of age, gender, and in some cases, singlehood. Indeed, the issue of singlehood, especially in the eighteenth-century, is a compelling aspect to regard in further research in literary history. There has been some work done on the formation of the old maid and the spinster, in their presence in the literature of the time and in the implications that such popular depictions had in the social perceptions of aged singlewomen at the time. I suggest bringing all three together as context in order to see the extent to which they determined the way aged singlewomen writers presented themselves at the end of their careers would be a fruitful path to follow. Did they continue writing in their socially determined advanced age? Did the way they portrayed themselves change in any way from that point onwards? What strategies did they use to defend themselves from anticipated or real attacks? These are essential questions I propose as a continuation of the research carried out and presented in this thesis.

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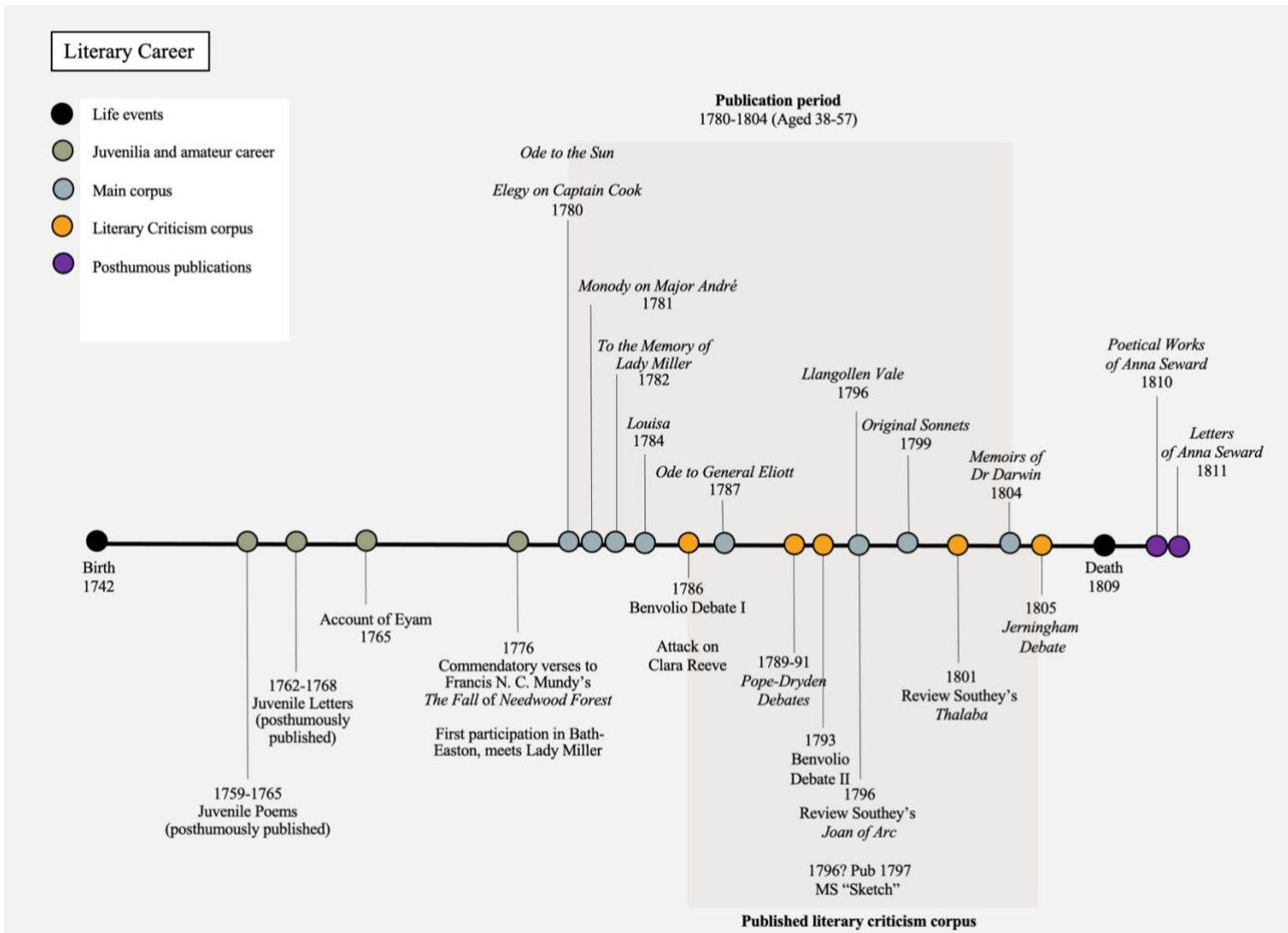
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# Appendix

## Appendix A

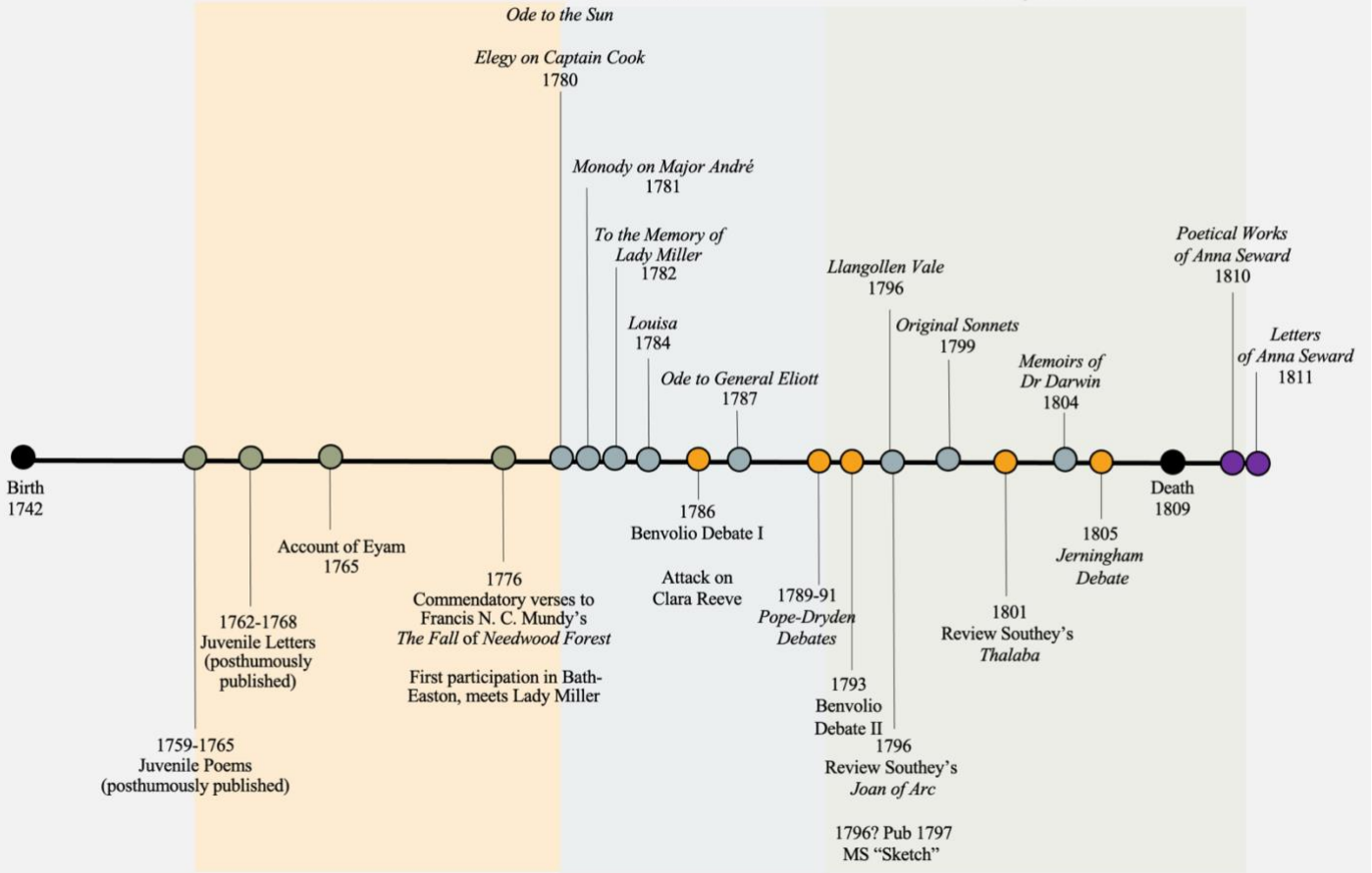


Literary Career/Age

**EARLY CAREER c1760-1780**  
18-38

**MATURE CAREER 1780-1790**  
38-48 years old

**LATER CAREER 1790-1811**  
48-69 years old



## Appendix B

### William Salt Library, Stafford, Staffordshire.

Seward, Anna. "Biographical Sketch". 1796? William Salt Library, Stafford, Staffordshire, S. MS. 580/2. Manuscript.

My transcription.

Biographical Sketch

of

Miss Seward

(with a Portrait

Anna Seward is the daughter of the late Rev<sup>d</sup> Thomas Seward, Rector of Eyam in Derbyshire, Prebendary of Salisbury, & xxx Canon Residentiary of Lichfield; a Gentleman of learned education, & who had passed two years, between thirty & thirty five, the period of his marriage, in France, & Italy, with his Pupil Lord Charles Fitzroy, the Duke of Grafton's 3.<sup>d</sup> Son; one of the finest young men in England. His Family, & his xxx Tutor, sustained the severe disappointment of his death, by fever, at Rome, in the cause of those travels.

Mr. Seward has graceful manners, great hilarity of spirit, uncommon singleness of heart, & active benevolence. His xxx poetic talents were by no means inconsiderable, & he studied with discriminating taste, & in their xxx original languages, the Greek, Latin, & English Bards. He was known to the xxx world of letters as chief Editor of Beaumont, & Fletcher's Plays, published in the year 1750; also as Author of a learned, & ingenious Tract on the conformity between Paganism & Popery. It was very <sup>^much</sup> celebrated in its day, tho' now out of print. To Dodsley's Collection he sent a few elegant little poems, which may be found <sup>^late</sup> in the second Vol: extending to its close. By mistake they were printed anonymously. These poems commence with -the female right to Literature- written at Florence, & sent from thence to Miss Pratt, afterwards Lady Camden, the Athenia of the verse. To that succeed some lines on Shakespeare's monument at Stratford, that will not lose by a comparison with Milton's, on the same subject. In the later Editions, two of the lines are spoild [sic] by substituting the word Swain for the original word, Swan, either from mistake of press, or from an ill-judged desire in the Editor to improve the xxx



rhyme, at the <sup>expense of ruin</sup> to the sense, as M<sup>r</sup> Seward has often been heard to observe. The change destroys the antithesis, & confuses the metaphor.

At the Village of Eyam, situated amongst the highest of the Peak mountains, M<sup>r</sup> Seward passed the first eight years of his marriage. In the second his eldest <sup>Daughter</sup> the subject of this memoirs, was born. She had several sisters, & one brother, but all died in their infancy, except the second Daughter, who lived till she was nineteen, & then died on the Eve of her nuptials; the chosen Friend, as well as companion, of our author's youth; lovely in her person, angelic in her disposition, & the intelligent sharer of her xxx <sup>sister's</sup> studies.

In Miss Seward's seventh year her Family removed from Eyam to Lichfield, & in her thirteenth they became Inhabitants of the Bishop's Palace, which remains her home to this hour.

M<sup>rs</sup> Seward, who died at 66, in the year 1780, was a woman of strong sense, & <sup>had possessed</sup> extreme beauty, a large portion of which she retained to her latest hour. Without taste for literary pursuits, she had never encouraged them in her Daughters. For the delight they mutually took in books, they were indebted to their Father's early instruction.

Fancying that he saw the dawn of poetic genius in his eldest Girl, he amused himself with its culture, tho' no xxx <sup>from</sup> any idea, or desire that she shou'd ever become an Author. Her ear for poetic recitation, in which <sup>he</sup> himself was remarkably excellent, inspired the pleasure he felt to nurse her in the lap of the muses. At three years old, before she cou'd read, he had taught her to lisp the Allegro of Milton, & in her ninth she was enabled to speak by rote the first books of the Paradise Lost, with that variety of accent necessary to give grace & effect to the manly harmonies of that Poem. I have heard her say, that its sublime images, the alternate grandeur, & beauty of its numbers, perpetually filled her infant eyes with tears of delight, while she performed the parental task, by daily committing a portion of them to memory.

M<sup>r</sup>. Seward brought from the University of Cambridge, & always retained, xxx <sup>considerable</sup> knowledge of the Greek, & Latin Languages; -but, he wished to improve the xxx <sup>hereditary</sup> talent of his xxx <sup>Daughter</sup>, he had the good sense to perceive that the English tongue produces the best models of writing, both in prose & verse; -that she might drink from the pure fountains of Epic, & Lyric Poetry, in Milton, & Gray; <sup>for the Dramatic</sup>, & from the deepest [,] fullest, & xxx

<sup>^richest</sup> sources on the pages of Shakespear [sic]. He was often heard to say that intimacy with Homer, Virgil, & Horace, never enabled a Person to write English verse well that, xxx <sup>^where</sup> Nature had sown the germs of poetic genius, they can only be well cultivated in the bowers of the English Muses.

For an account of the experiments her Father practiced upon xxx her ability to write verse in Infancy, & for the criterion of them by the celebrated Dct. Darwin of Derby, then resident <sup>^Physician</sup> at Lichfield in her sixteenth year, see anecdotes of Miss Seward, in the European Magazine for April 1782. The poem which was the result of D[octo]r Darwin's trial, is there inserted at length. Those anecdotes were collected the information of a Lady, lately deceased, to whom, from her birth, she had been intimately known, & who always contrived one of the most affectionate of her Friends.

Passing the first seven years of her existence at Eyam, & often, as her youthful Summers rolled away, residing some weeks xxx with her beloved Father in that Alpine Village, she has been heard to observe, that the romantic sublimities of that Country increased her native enthusiasm -inspiring even in Infancy, a pensive luxury of sensation, ever after attached to her survey of wild, & lovely Scenery, amid the savage grandeur of rocks & mountains.

Hence Macpherson's noble translations of the old Caledonian Bard (of whose originality no labour, or testimony of Prejudice has induced her to doubt, against the force of her internal evidence) cou'd not fail to vibrate every chord of her Imagination, whose early impressions withheld the fidelity to Nature, which marks its solitary landscapes; -nor cou'd an heart, so affectionate, peruse undelighted the blended tenderness & greatness of the sentiments.

Often also does she acknowledge that her taste for picturesque & exalted writing, is xxx <sup>^no less</sup> than to the noblest of our Poets, indebted to Compositions, which have neither measure, nor rhyme, nor yet assume the elevated style of the Orient; -but which profess the essence of the best Poetry; -dramatic spirit, & Shakesperian [sic] truth of character; conversations & letters, which disclose the latent & subtle motives of human actions, with force & truth, superior even to our best moral Essayists <sup>^& adorned with classic and historic allusions</sup>; - strokes of description, that bring every scene, & every person of the volumes, distinctly to the eye, & sentiments of resistless power to awaken Piety, & to xxx energize virtue.

Readers, who know impartially to appreciate literary excellence, will not need to

be told that the works alluded to, are the Clarissa, & the Grandison of Richardson.

It has been already observed that Anna Seward's progress in the composition of Verse met the chillness of maternal discouragement, & her father, as she grew up to womanhood, <sup>^was</sup> induced to withdraw the animating welcome he had given her early muse. Thus repressed, she cast away, during some years, her own poetic lyre, or at least awakened it only at short, & xxx <sup>^seldom returning</sup> intervals, devoting much of her time to fancied needleworks, & the gay amusements of her xxx <sup>^juvenile companions</sup>.

Irrestrainable [sic] however was the ardor she felt to peruse, with discriminating attention, the writings of our finest Poets,

“Aonian Song was yet her first pursuit;---

“Its harp had rung to her adventurous hand.

It seemed her design to remain in a great degree, stationary at Lichfield, but she found too many xxx <sup>^resources</sup> in her own energies, & varied employments, to regret that circumstance. Her youthful excursions were chiefly into Derbyshire, with her Father; Mrs Seward's ill health almost precluding other xxx <sup>^journies[sic]</sup>. When, at twenty, she xxx became the only child of a mother, sorrowing over the untimely grave of xxx one of the most amiable young women that xxx <sup>^ever</sup> blest the parental wishes, her almost continual presence at Lichfield grew more desired.

Soon after this deplored deprivation the xxx beautiful & intelligent Miss Honora Sneyd, who, from the age of five, had been educated in Mr Seward's family, rose into womanhood. Her sweet society, xxx <sup>^and</sup> recompensing friendship, rendered several ensuing years animated, & interesting in no common degree. Then, to young women, thus dear to each other, & thus congenial in their inclinations & pursuits, was Lichfield the Abyssian vale, while its delights were unembittered [sic] by any of those restless wishes, that induces the Pekuah of Rasselas to sigh for emigration.

XX  
XX  
XX

To Friendship, to music, which till her twenty third year she had not been permitted to learn, & to xxx <sup>^the</sup> once again partaken delights of the xxx Library, Miss Seward dedicated those years, which she often called golden -but they xxx <sup>^became</sup> gloomed, long ere the meridian of her life, by the loss of her passionately beloved Honora's society, recalled to the Family of her own Father, Mr. Sneyd. Two years afterwards, that charming young woman married a Mr. Edgeworth of Ireland, & became lost to her Anna Seward. xxx She was seven years a wife, & died a few months before her maternal Friend, Mrs. Seward, in the year 1780, & aged 27.

A Miss Seward's confinement to Lichfield xxx xxx became more strict than ever from the death of her mother, in July 1780, till the period of her Father's life in March 1790 in his 81.<sup>st</sup> year; since, xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx in x<sup>^the first twelve months</sup> after the death of his wife, he, who had till then been a strong & healthy man, became subject to paralytic, & apolectic [sic] seizures, enduring seven or eight of them annually; each sudden & violent; each threatening instant death, so that his struggling against them ten years, at so advanced a period of life, was miraculous. Beneath this xxx <sup>^pressure</sup> the energies of his mind gradually sank, & melancholy was that consciousness to an affectionate Daughter. She gave him all his food & medicines with assiduous care; watching every presaging appearance, that she might administer those cordial assistances, xxx <sup>^necessity</sup> to support the vital powers in their xxx <sup>^approaching</sup> conflict. Except beneath the paroxysm, of which, on recovering from it, no recollection remained, she had the comfort of perceiving that her aged nurseling had little bodily suffering, & no disquietude of xxx <sup>^spirits</sup> & of hearing him hourly express the tenderest satisfaction in her cares, & attention. He felt that she fondly loved him, & was fervently solicitous to preserve his life, & those are balmy convictions to a Parent's heart in declining life.

In respect to the temper, & manners of the subject of this memoir, however partial may be the attachment of its author, the testimonies of Miss Seward's Seward's enemies may be quoted for all of praise which Friendship shall here bestow. Enemies she has, both personal, & literary, tho' lasting resentment, except towards experienced treachery, she is not capable of feeling ---but her sense of injury is too quick & keen, her frankness too unguarded, her attachments too zealous, not to have created Enemies. That they <sup>^her</sup> friendships



accidentally acquainted with Lady Miller of xxxx of Bath-Easton, by whose persuasions she was induced to write for the poetic Institution of that Villa, & to become a candidate for its mystle wreath. She obtained it repeatedly. The prize-poems were published, & adopted, from the Bath-Easton Volume, into xxx other public prints, with the names of the authors; & thus the Rubicon was passed. ---  
xxx <sup>^Early the</sup> next year, 1780, her Elegy on Cap<sup>t</sup> Cook was given to the world, with an Ode to the Sun subjoined, on the bright unwintered year of 1779.

Those poems meeting a flattering reception, she was xxx <sup>^encouraged</sup> to pour impassioned regrets on the public ear the ensuing Spring, for the cruel fate of her gallant & amiable Friend, Major André. Her Monody on him, & also her Elegy on Cap<sup>t</sup> Cook, involving a series of events, the most important in the lives of their heroes, xxx formed a new species of funeral song. Doct<sup>r</sup> Darwin used to tell her she was the Inventress of Epic Elegy.

When the Monody of Andre was written, the general <sup>^prevailing</sup> opinion condemned Gen<sup>l</sup> Washington as having needlessly sacrificed him to a barbarous xxx revenge. Affectionate regret caught the fever of popular xxx <sup>^misconception</sup> & induced her to anathematize the conduct, in that disastrous transaction, of xxx the first public Character of the Age. It is now understood that xxx Gen<sup>l</sup> Washington cou'd not avoid giving his sanction to that inflexible Court-Martial, which decreased ignominious death to the heroic martyr of the Cause of his Country. A few years back, intelligence came to out author from the first authority, that the General, before sentence was passed, endeavoured to snatch Major Andre from his impending doom; & wou'd have succeeded if a too nice sample of honor, on the part of the Prisoner, had not prevailed over the love <sup>^desire</sup> of Life. Thus has she long felt [and] acknowledged the misguided zeal of her muse; -& learnt to revere the memory of the great man, xxx <sup>^benignant</sup> as intrepid, who wished in vain to have saved from his lamented xxx <sup>^fate</sup> the too adventurous Excellence she loved.

Lady Miller died July 1781, in the meridian of her days. Her virtues, & her patronage of the poetic Art, seemed to claim the rising song of funeral Eulogy, & her beautiful Institution was an auspicious theme. Early in the next year appeared a poem to her memory from the pen of our author. Its exordium is as follows

Not to your tombs alone, ye martial Dea,

The scatter'd flowers of plaintive rhyme belong,

(...)

This Elegy proceeds to describe the Bath-Easton Institution & the fair Priestess of the Shrine, bending over her vase, & extend[ing] its myrtle wreath <sup>^vernal meed</sup> to the poem xxx which, by a majority of voices, had obtained the preference; - next, to characterize the writings of those various Poets who had, at different time,s won the garland. The poem xxx then adverts to xxx Lady Miller's active benevolence <sup>^benevolence</sup> in promoting the public charities of Bath, & the beneficence of her gentle spirit in private donation; -observing that not the xxx <sup>^jewels</sup> of the Andes, nor the cestus of Beauty, when they grace the form of Majesty, so highly adorn the female Sex as the xxx <sup>^mental lustre</sup> of xxx <sup>^exerted</sup> composition. That remark introduces an episode, which is the gem of the Poem. It describes the lovely and benevolent Queen of Edward the third, pleading, on her knees, at the gate of Calais, for the condemned Citizens. The domestic traits of Lady Miller's character are next delineated; her filial piety, connubial & maternal tenderness; & the Elegy thus concludes,

O faithful Memory, may thy lamp illumine  
Her honor'd sepulchre with radiance clear!  
(...) consecrate her urn.

In the year 1784 Miss Seward's poetical Novel, Louisa, appeared, & is perhaps the most popular of all her compositions. It is now in the fifth edition. The story is allowed to be interesting; the situations to have dramatic effect; the sentiments to be just, pathetic, & impressive. It abounds with landscape-painting, not drawn from books, but from Nature.

The return of the great & good Gen<sup>l</sup> Eliott from xxx Gibraltar, in 1787, drew from the same pen, an Epic Ode, which its Author estimates, in poetic value, above all her other writings. It opens with an invocation to rescued Britain to meet, with ardent gratitude, & xxx triumphant praise, the Hero

“Whose dauntless prowess, in resplendent rays,

“Shone on the darkness of her long defeat,

& restored her olive, & civic wreaths, so madly cast away in that oppressive [sic] & absurd War. The Gibraltar Siege xxx <sup>^is</sup> next described. It is demanded of crest-fallen Britain, where there had been the Mistress of the ocean, if Valour,

& military Skill had made only common exertions. The effect of those balls of fire, which wrapt in flame the hostile Navies, is thus pictures,

Mark the invading host, elate no more,  
(...) illumin'd by the flames.

The humanity of those exertions in the Generals Elliott, & Curtis, which induced them to send out boats to save the sinking Victims of an attempt so heroically repelled, is next depicted, & this Country apostrophised. Apostrophised, as emerging, in that hour, from every cloud xxx ^which had eclipsed the acknowledged benevolence of her national Character, & ^by which Defeat had darkened her martial glories.

The Poem then reverts to the advantages which the abilities & xxx bravery of her Generals had procured for this nation, in the present Century, - the victories of the Duke of Malbrough, the Duke of Cumberland, & Gen<sup>l</sup> Wolfe. That intrepid young hero is thus painted, as xxx sinking amid the shouts of that conquest he had attained.

Nor sacred less the youthful Warrior's fame,  
(...) triumphantly expires!

Eternal palms are invoked for the memory of those great distinguished then -but is it justly asserted, that Great Britain's obligations are yet higher to General Elliott; -they added to xxx her professed glory, & prosperity, he restored when she had lost them.

The blessings of that honorable, that happy xxx ten years peace, for the establishment & permanence of which we were indebted to Gen<sup>l</sup> Elliott's victory at Gibraltar, are xxx illustrated by the following simile,

So when the wintry Tempest's baleful powers  
(...) he leaves her to repose.

That stanza was honored by the manifest imitation of one of the first Poets of this Age. The late Mr. T. Warton's Birth-day ode, for June 1789, two years after the publication of the Poem on Genl Elliott, opens xxx thus,

"As when the Demon of the Summer Storm  
"Walks forth the noontide landscape to deform,  
"Dark grows the Vale, & dark the distant Grove,



“And thick the bolts of angry love  
 “Athawrt the watery Welkin \*glide,  
 “And streams th’ aerial torrent xxx <sup>^far</sup> & wide!  
 “(...) with hasty smile.

Here is <sup>^the same picture, but with</sup> more amplification, less simplicity, & less distinctness.

The Ode on the Gibraltar Victory passes from the simile of Peace. Then it applauds the calm, philosophic, & patriotic xxx <sup>^prevalence</sup> [of] General Eliott’s conduct evinced of unexacted [sic] duty to selfish gratification. Instead of returning to England at the head of his Victor Troops, to catch the aura popularis in its first xxx <sup>^exulting</sup> breath, he xxx suffered xxx <sup>^the armies</sup> to return without their great commander, xxx remaining two years in the Garrison, that he might superintend the xxx reparation of the bombarded Ramparts, & xxx <sup>^every effort</sup> that might increase the safety of the important Rock, & cause the British Flag to stream, thro’ Ages, over the plains of Iberia. Thus the Ode concludes.

May the blessings which await  
 (...) lift the brow sublime!

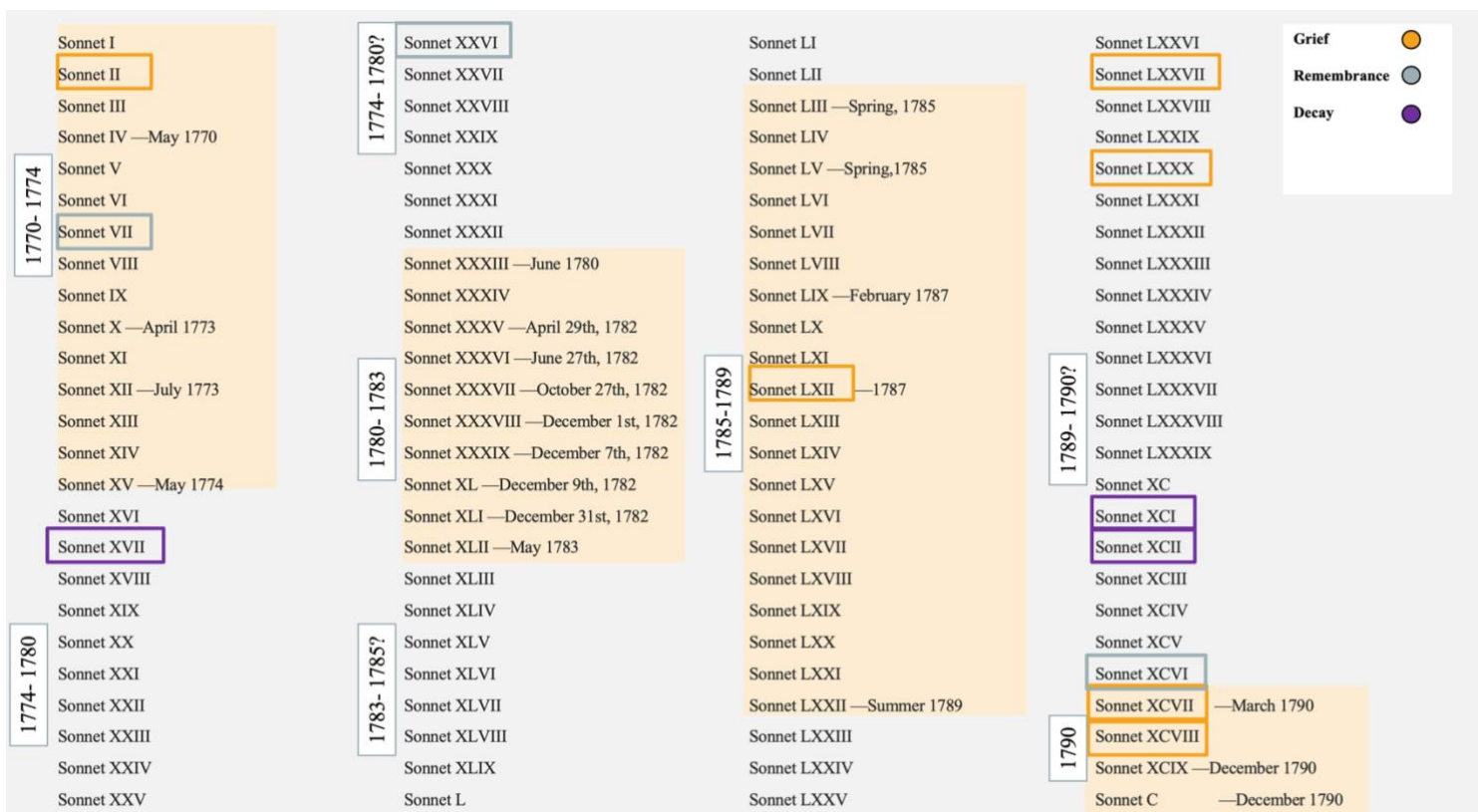
In the long interval between this <sup>^Ode</sup> & the appearance of her late poetic Collection, our Author lost her beloved Father in March 1790 aged at the advanced age of eighty one. Last Spring Mr Sale of the Strand, published her Llangollen Vale, with other poems <sup>^of hers</sup> subjoined; -the xxx Vale, thrice consecrated, by Valour by Love & by Friendship -a Poem whose fate it was to be criticized by a Critic thrice profound, who discovered that neither our Author, nor, by consequence, Doctor Johnson knew the meaning of the word thrill, since the description in <sup>^his</sup> xxx xxx Dictionary exactly corresponds with all the use she has ever made of that word. The Poems which accompany Llangollen Vale are - One written on the Coast of Hoyle, -another, [describing] Wrexham & the Inhabitants of its Environs.- <sup>^Next, a Runic</sup> Poem, built on a terrific & Sublime idea, from the Norse Poetry, given in vulgar prose, by Doc<sup>r</sup> Hicks. Our author has invested the rude tale with circumstances which render it intelligible without departing from the grand & wild character of Runic Verse. That composition is contrasted by one of softer complexion, written on xxx revisiting her native

Village. It expresses filial regret, & breathes of the days that are flown.-So also does the next, which describes those Winter Evenings that were gilded by the smile of Honora. The Collection is closed by six Sonnets. They are given as specimens of that xxx <sup>^centenary</sup> of Sonnets, which she purposes <sup>^means</sup> shortly to publish. They were written during a course of more than twenty years, as xxx <sup>^their author's</sup> imagination became impressed by circumstances which excited emotion, or reflection; -of by Scenery that might be described in that limit. Hence the subjects of these Sonnets are various -they are of the legitimate order, & their measures are Miltonic.

## Appendix C

Seward, Anna. *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects; and Odes Paraphrased from Horace*. London: G. Sael, 1799.

Chronological distribution of the sonnets. Grouped sonnets (sonnets of Grief, sonnets of Remembrance, and sonnets of Decay) shown in this figure as well.



**Appendix D**

Anna Seward

by Tilly Kettle

oil on canvas, 1762

NPG 2017

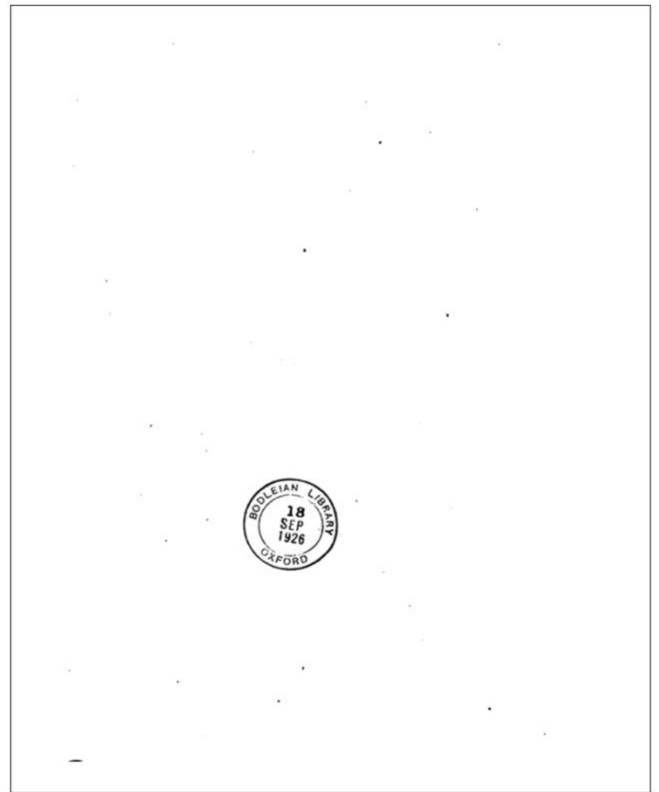
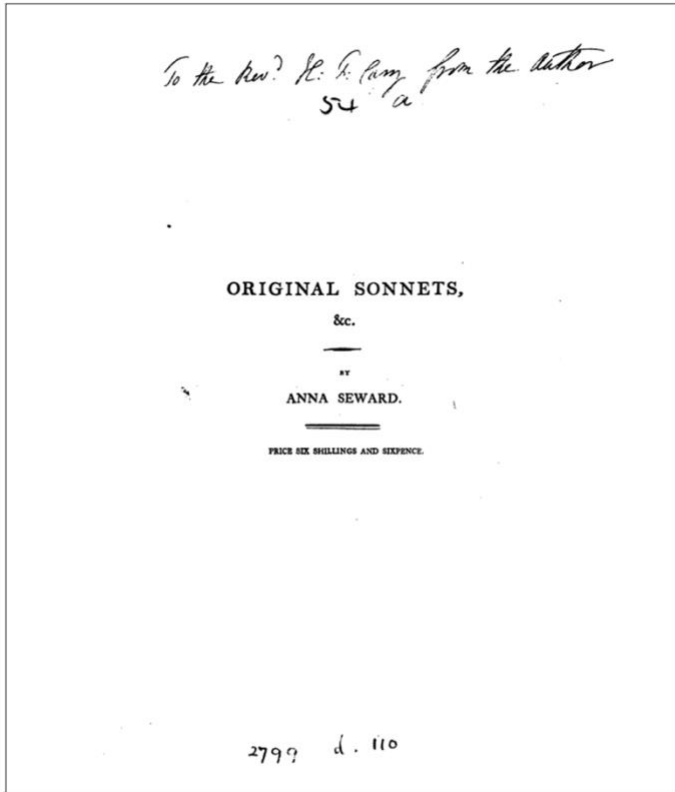
© National Portrait Gallery, London



**Appendix E**

Seward, Anna. *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects; and Odes Paraphrased from Horace*. London: G. Sael, 1799. *Internet Archive*,

<https://archive.org/details/originalsonnets00sewagoog>. Accessed 2 June 2021.



## Appendix F

### Harvard Houghton Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Seward, Anna. Letter to Robert Southey. 17 June 1808, Amy Lowell Autograph Collection, Harvard Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Lowell Autograph (283). Manuscript.

My transcription.

Lichfield June 17th 1808 28

My Friends, Mr & Mrs Robert Wolseley, are about to visit your lovely lakes, & offer to convey a letter to you. There is no resisting the temptation of sending you my costless thanks for your welcome letter of May 28, announcing the arrival of the stray paquet. I am glad it is with, or rather has been with you, & hope Nichols will not mutilate the strictures. Your comic reason why the anti-Jacobin cou'd not be the repository for them amuses me much. It is certain I shou'd as soon have thought of sending Jack Ketch a diamond bracelet for his own wear, as of displaying the beauties of Madoc to these doughty & popular politics. Abhorrent of their principles on every subject & never look at their work.

Mr R. Wolseley is Sir Wm Wolseley's 3<sup>d</sup> son. His Brothers are dashing Fellows of the present mode, but he is a Being of a different order. I have known him long & intimately. He has read, is intelligent & ingenuous [sic]. Vice never stained his character nor falsehood his lips. Mrs R. Wolseley is a sensible & good young woman. In bestowing her gentle self & handsome fortune upon my Friend she ensured her happiness.

When this young couple were my Guests, during a week of the last eternal winter, Miss Fern & myself read to them aloud every line of Madoc. We declined evening parties that we might enjoy, without interruption, that banquet for the imagination & the heart. The gratification it afforded them together with that wh[ich] they had received from your former works, wou'd make the honor of your notice a delight of no common fervour to be enabled to say they had but even beheld the author of Madoc!

I almost fear to suggest this hint, conscious as I am of the priceless value of your hours, nay minutes—I am afraid that from the length of my letters, you suspect me of

having but little of the reality of this mercy about me—but certain sins are not always proofs

[page break]

of irreligion. Ere this time you have doubtless received my last unmerciful trespass, which went to London in search of its freedom. The beauties of the new Joan formed my temptation to re-volumize.

I thank you for all you say of Marmion, & have the honour to think with you on many points of your criticism;—yet feel that for the wild irregularity, & mortley [?] gart [?] of its style, his beautiful apology for them in the interlude to H Erskine, is all in all sufficient.

“From me, thus nurtur’d, dost thou ask  
The classic poet’s well-conn’d task?  
Nay, Erskine, nay! on the wild hill  
Let the wild heath-bell flourish still!

Cherish the tulip [?], [?] the vine,

But leave untrimm’d the Eglantine!

Your attestation, so honorable [sic] to the work, (“that you had rather read two such poems as Marmion, than one on wh[ich] its author xx had bestowed) twice the time to render it more perfect; because the sum total of beauty ‘s delight wou’d be greated [sic] “equally admits the atoning power of the spirits & genius wh[ich] pervades it.

You observed when I had the high-strung pleasure of conversing with you audibly, that you thought the power of rhyme had never been ^put forth to its best-possible effect. I did not, at the moment, intirely [sic] comprehend your meaning. The perusal of Marmion has unveiled it.

It appears probable that Scott wrote that poem beneath a similar idea;—that, to accomplish it, he mingled the lyric numbers & the dramatic style in his stirred song. The rhymes rapid, vehemently doubled & rebled & wholly irregular, produce on suitable occasions, par[?] in ^the canto of Flodden Fils, xxxxxxxx echos [sic] of the sense, wh[ich] even the bold verse of Dryden did not attain, at least in equal degree.

They pour on the ear with torrent force, & compared to the great masters of the heroic couplet, Dryden & Pope, are as the falls of Niagara to the more ever, more beautiful & grandeur course the Ganges.

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I will not again dispute your fancied obligations to a Poet so inferior to yourself, for your power of producing a picture by a single word, of **wh**[ich] Gebir certainly exhibits a few instances; but they abound in poetry of yours **wh**[ich] preceded the appearance of Landers' quizzical [sic] Epic—. I went over that ground in my last letter, **wh**[ich] I trust reached you cost-free.

Amongst the plenteous instances of that power in Pope, Mr Lloyd, senior's translation of the 24th Iliad presented me, from my comparison of its worth Pope's & with Cowper's version, one striking example

But when Aurora daughter of the dawn,

Redden'd the East, then, thronging forth, all Troy |Cowper  
Encompass'd noble Hector's pile around. |pleonasm  
But when Aurora, bright with rosy dies, |Lloyd  
Rose in full glory up the eastern skies, |clash  
The people &c.

Soon as Aurora, daughter of the Dawn,

With rosy lustre stretch'd the dewy lawn, |Pope  
Again the mournful Crowd surround the Pyre.

The picture is bright to the eye by the happy verb stretch'd. The slant streaks of muddy light on the fields & garden, & **wh**[ich] proceed from the emerging Sun, all must have observed who have beheld^ that glorious sight on a fine morning of summer. Neither Cowper nor Lloyd have used that picture-giving word. It is one of Pope's felicities. I think the best modern Poets, more than ^did the ancients, possess this condensing art. Will you pardon the temerity of instancing a couplet in my poem, Louisa, **wh**[ich] I have fancied possesses this merit in some degree. And, tossing the green sea-week o'er and oer [sic],  
Crept the hash'd billow on the shelly shore.

Right glad shou'd I be to learn, that you had another poem on the anvil, did I not fear that excessive exertion might endanger your health;— that you do not allow



yourself a sufficient portion of the “chief nourisher at life’s feast”. Take care, dear, & most revered Friend, that the two rapid chariot ^wheel does not dangerously kindle on its course!—O what a mythologic circle does your muse meditate to run!!! Doubtless its accomplishments wou’d give you xxx garlands, unwoven by any preceding Bard, while every flower wou’d have the life of the amaranth.

I do not personally know the Editor of the Poetical Register, but frequent letters have passed between us. His name is Davenport, any letter directed to him at Rivington’s will find him. I know not his profession, farther than that it is not clerical. He has, at different times, coaxed me out of a great number of trifles of my own, amounting to at least two thousand lines. These he springled over his 5 volumes octavo; & stout octavos they are, as to size. I have often remonstrated with him about admitting loads of trash from the Poetasters. His own verses are not, by any means inelegant. The wings of his Muse are not soiled, tho’ they are not the opinions of the Eagle. In the course of these crowded volumes, I find you only in 3 of your Higginbottom-sonnets. Coleridge’s sublime harmony, & his beautiful inscription for a pathing stone over a spring, are the gems of the 3d. If another volume is out, I have not seen it, or sent any contribution to its contents. What can Coleridge mean by lecturing so paradoxically as in seeking to prove; that Shakespear [sic] did not intend to depict the passion of jealousy in the Play of Othello? It is enough to make the great Master of the Passions start from his tomb, & rail at the sophistry “ for an [sic] whole hour by the Shrewsbury clock”. Pray tell me how you like Joanna Bailey—Does the beam divine, wh[ich] illuminates her writings, gleam or shine in her conversation? or is it self-shrouded there, like your fire flies [sic] in their optional darkness? Miss Fern sends you her adorations with mine. Adieu!

Your faithful & obliged ASeward