Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century

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When she died in 1809, Anna Seward was arguably “the most prominent and formidable woman writer” in Britain (Lonsdale 313). She had produced poetry that, when collected into three volumes, spanned genres from the ode to the sonnet to a novel in verse. Her critical opinions were frequently published in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*. She had been the first biographer of Dr. Erasmus Darwin (grandfather of Charles, the famous naturalist), her former neighbor and mentor. She had championed writers such as Thomas Chatterton and Robert Burns and received homage from protégés such as Helen Maria Williams, Robert Southey, Samuel T. Coleridge, and Walter Scott, among the many who paid their respects to her in Lichfield. In the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, a biographical notice by Sylvanus Urban published the month after her death concludes that “as an Authoress, few women have exhibited more strength of intellect, or more genuine delicacy of taste, than Miss Seward. Her poetry is particularly distinguished by beauty of imagery, and vigour of sentiment” (379). Yet by the late twentieth century, even renowned feminist critic Germaine Greer challenged readers “to struggle through the great drift of indifferent verse [Seward] . . . wrote” (58). Although Seward’s acid tongue and pen had offended some—when, for example, she refused to acquiesce in the national reverence for Samuel Johnson’s character following his death in 1784—Greer pronounced Seward desperately shy and “deadly afraid of . . . the brutality and hardness of men” (58–59). How did Anna Seward decline from a poet of national stature, a critical force to be reckoned with, to a timorous poetaster sheltering herself in Lichfield from the rigors of literary competition?
To a large extent, the very qualities that made Seward enchanting to contemporaries rendered her invisible to later readers. Growing up during the heyday of sensibility, she nevertheless formed her poetics by carrying out stringent analyses of earlier models. The Gentleman’s Magazine accurately described the resulting verse as exhibiting both “strength of intellect” and “vigour of sentiment” (Urban 379) but that combination has made Seward’s writings fit uneasily into collections of either eighteenth-century or Romantic-era poems. While her first readers appreciated Seward’s ability to combine the rhetorical emphasis of poets like Pope with emotional responsiveness, later readers have found her impossible to categorize. Her poetics seemed old fashioned soon after her death, but not old fashioned enough for many current editors to include her in eighteenth-century anthologies. Unfortunately, she has also been excluded from many anthologies of Romantic poetry, partly because of her adamant dislike of certain poems, such as Charlotte Smith’s sonnets, that are today considered exemplars of an emerging Romantic style. Because Seward’s poetry does not quite fit the stylistic paradigms of Augustan or Romantic verse, or even of the verse that has until recently been called “pre-Romantic,” she has simply been excluded from most critical discussions except as a name in lists of late-century women poets.¹

My goal in this study is to extricate Seward from those lists and place her again among important late-century poets. Making her case requires if not rewriting, then refining many recent studies of eighteenth-century and Romantic-era culture and literary history. Seward’s neglect indicates some rigidity in our accounts of literary professionalism, provincialism, the public sphere, patriotism, and sensibility, to name but a few topics that have merited extensive study in the past two decades. Luckily, some recent monographs position us to understand Seward in her context, expanding our ideas about her culture. Anne K. Mellor’s Mothers of the Nation, for example, has turned upside-down the concept of a male-dominated Romanticism. Her argument recovers the context in which Seward gained national prominence. Sonia Hofkosh’s Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author undertakes “to discern other voices and other visions” besides Wordsworth’s as exemplary of Romanticism (8). She suggests that Jane Austen’s heroines, and by extension all women, “occupying the ambivalent thresholds between personal pleasure and public spectacle,” “embody the deep self of the romantic author” (139). Hofkosh’s analysis gives us the means to acknowledge both Seward’s affinities with her Romantic peers and her differing conceptions of the poetic persona and the literary career. Another intriguing recent book, Susan J. Wolfson’s Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism, counters older theories about the era’s polarized gender roles by observing instances of relative fluidity in
Romantic-era writing about masculinity and femininity. Wolfson’s refreshing study helps to retrieve the context in which the decorous Seward could, for example, masquerade as “Benvolio” to conduct a published critical debate without raising much comment on her disguise. On the other hand, Seward’s decision to adopt a masculine pen name reflects anxieties about the gendered nature of criticism typical of the earlier eighteenth century. I propose that what we have learned about such topics can elucidate Seward and in turn be enriched by consideration of Seward and her poetry. The following chapters take up the issues of Seward’s professionalism, her status as national poet, her contribution to the literature of sensibility, her participation in the sonnet revival, her obsession with Honora Sneyd, and her critical practices. All these topics have been studied before, some by distinguished scholars, but by applying recent scholarship about Seward’s contexts and paying careful attention to her poetic principles, we can come to a more accurate understanding of her. Some recent studies, for example, render her inexplicable by failing to account for how a Lichfield gentlewoman might have appeared, unironically, a “British muse” despite living an almost entirely provincial existence and having mostly provincial connections. In some instances, such as her quest for national recognition, Seward pushed beyond the boundaries designated for her location, status, and gender. In most cases, Seward could be termed the missing link between Augustan and Romantic writing, combining a sophisticated knowledge of prosody with her ability to dramatize sensibility. Her preference for musical verse and rhetorical effects was derived from Pope; her passionate responses were typical of a generation enthralled (and sometimes appalled) by Rousseau. Restoring Seward will enrich our canon and adjust cultural and literary-historical accounts.

As reflected in the works by Mellor, Hofkosh, Wolfson, and others I have mentioned, the past thirty years have witnessed a remarkable willingness to reevaluate the writings of many women whose poems, plays, and novels disappeared from view while works by their male peers were reprinted. The studies of Aphra Behn that have led to her canonization are only the most spectacular of numerous studies that have taught us to appreciate, for example, Katherine Philips’s poems and Charlotte Smith’s sonnets. Mary Leapor, the Brackley cook maid, and Ann Yearsley, the Clifton milk woman, have received fine critical biographies, as has even a poet whom Seward herself considered minor, Mary Whateley Darwall. Yet some recent anthologies fail to include any poem by Seward, who was arguably a better poet and certainly a more prominent figure in her lifetime than Leapor, Yearsley, or Darwall. When Seward’s poetry is discussed at all, it is often in the context of queer or lesbian writing owing to the passionate elegies she wrote after the death of
Honora Sneyd. This perspective informs important studies by Paula Backscheider and Stuart Curran. While such discussions suggest the relevance of Seward’s verse to twentieth-century readers, they do so while overlooking some important contemporary contexts of her work. Another influential view of Seward’s writing is John Brewer’s. In *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1997), his important survey of eighteenth-century English culture, Brewer ponders not why Seward disappeared from view but how such an “amateur versifier” achieved prominence in the first place (573–612). He concludes that Seward represented a concept of poetry as the avocation of genteel provincial poets, often women, and that this view became discredited soon after her lifetime. Yet Brewer’s explanation is in some ways self-contradictory, since his book argues that by the end of the century London no longer monopolized British culture and that all kinds of provincial contributions were gaining, not losing, influence. More recently, Jenny Uglow, in *Lunar Men*, has demonstrated the national significance of thinkers, writers, and manufacturers centered around Lichfield, headed by Seward’s early mentor Erasmus Darwin. While Seward was not a member of the Lunar Society, the perspective she shared with the group would have led her to consider the Birmingham region not as a backwater but as the locus of several important cultural movements.

More than any other woman writer except, perhaps, Aphra Behn, Seward was systematically undermined until recently. If Seward’s critical disappearance were a whodunit, her earliest posthumous commentators would be the culprits. How did Germaine Greer, for example, form the impression that Seward had composed a “great drift of indifferent verse”? Greer consulted Walter Scott’s three-volume edition of Seward’s poetry with his biographical preface (443n58). Scott had been among the many promising young writers Seward championed during her career. She had a taste for Scottish verse that was sufficiently refined (such as Burns’s) and for “authentic” antique works (such as Ossian’s and Chatterton’s), which meant she was destined to appreciate Scott’s poetry in volumes such as *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805). At the time of Seward’s death, Scott was a popular poet but not yet the great novelist who later commanded public adulation. In fact, he had embarked on a publishing career and had taken on many editorial projects. Seward evidently entrusted her collected poems to his editorial supervision with the confidence of a mentor confirming her approval of a most promising protégé. Scott was at that time editing the works of Dryden and Swift, so her request that he act as her literary executor must have seemed, at least to Seward herself, quite logical. Her selection indicated self-assurance regarding her status among living poets and her ensuing legacy. Given the contemporary appreciation of her verse, and the established nature and duration of her career
compared with Scott’s, Seward’s choice of posthumous editor was not egregious but appropriate.

Scott consented and, faithful to his trust, swiftly published Seward’s collected works with a biographical preface. But for various reasons, Seward had not foreseen the degree to which the bequest disoblige[d] her executor. Perhaps one reason it did is that editing her poems was a burdensome addition to the workload of a young publisher who had already taken on more projects than he could comfortably handle. Seward imagined a reading public for her collected poems and letters that would benefit her executor and his firm, while Scott correctly foresaw the unprofitable nature of his task. By 1809, Scott might also have been embarrassed by his connection with Seward. Her career resembled those of many respected eighteenth-century poets, gentlemen and ladies who devoted themselves to belles lettres but who had no practical need to earn a living by their pens. Scott epitomized the competing modern attitude characterized by Samuel Johnson’s pronouncement that “no man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money” (Boswell 3:19). While Scott personally esteemed Seward, distinctions between their tastes and practices doubtless outweighed their mutual appreciation of border minstrelsy. He hastened to conclude his task and to distance himself from connection with her verse. In an 1810 letter to Joanna Baillie, he confided his opinion of Seward’s poetry, observing that most of it “is absolutely execrable” (2:315). He characterized Seward’s letters as gossipy and sentimental.

In the early twentieth century, Margaret Ball noted Scott’s apparent hypocrisy with regard to Seward. Although he “was not double-faced,” he “wrote such an introduction” to her writings “as hardly prepares the reader for the remark he made to Miss Baillie” (84–85). Ball qualified her observation by describing the critical remarks in his edition’s biographical memoir as “sedulously kind” but “carefully guarded, and throughout . . . the editor implies that the woman was more admirable than the poetry” (85). Ball’s assessment understates Scott’s insidious tone. He implies a pejorative view even in his description of Seward’s infant precocity. In his preface, he recalls Seward’s claim that she could recite passages from Milton’s “Allegro” when she was only three years old:

> It were absurd to suppose that she could comprehend this poem . . . but our future taste does not always depend upon the progress of our understanding. The mechanism, the harmony of verse, the emotions which, though vague and indescribable, it awakes in children of a lively imagination and a delicate ear, contribute, in many instances, to imbue the infant mind with a love of poetry, even before they can tell for what they love it. (Seward, Poetical Works 1:v)
Seward obviously intended her remark to intimate a native aptitude for verse, if not to predict her future genius. Scott implies that infatuation with mechanical rhythms and harmonious sounds, which naturally comprised her toddler experience of verse, probably continued to dominate the mature Seward’s expectations of poetry. The appeal of “vague and indescribable” emotions to lively and sensitive children is perhaps not a general observation so much as a suggestion that Seward, who often described herself as an enthusiast, developed into a poet whose verse, according to her detractors, likewise fails to convey specific or genuine feeling.

Scott confirms these implications later in his preface, in a discussion of Seward’s poetic style and tastes:

Miss Seward was in practice trained and attached to 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 the tone of ordinary language, which was introduced, or at least rendered fashionable, by Darwin. . . . Yet her taste . . . readily admitted the claims of Pope, Collins, Gray, Mason, and of all those bards who have condescended to add the graces of style and expression to poetical thought and imagery. But she particularly demanded beauty, elegance, or splendour of language; and was unwilling to allow that sublimity or truth of conception could atone for poverty, rudeness, or even simplicity, of expression. To Spenser, and the poets of his school, she lent an unwilling ear; and what will, perhaps, best explain my meaning, she greatly preferred the flowing numbers and expanded descriptions of Pope’s Iliad to Cowper’s translation, which approaches nearer to the simple dignity of Homer. (1:xxv–xxvi)

Scott proposes Erasmus Darwin as the Satan to Seward’s poetic Eve: since Darwin mentored the adolescent poet, he must have corrupted her style. While Darwin no doubt influenced Seward, especially by motivating her to refine the already-refined style of Pope, there is no reason to believe he was completely responsible for Seward’s style. Seward studied all the English poets admired during her lifetime. Thomson, Akenside, Young, MacPherson, and others contributed to her stylistic ideals. Like her models, Seward believed that serious poetry merited a distinctive, usually an elevated, language. By the time Scott edited her posthumous works, however, Seward’s models had become passé. As a late eighteenth-century poet who died when a succeeding and often hostile era was defining itself, Seward unwittingly chose a detractor rather than a champion for her first biographer.
Scott’s remark about Seward’s dislike of Spenser—a dislike she explained frankly in her letters—reveals their respective generational estimates as much as it damns her taste. Spenser had entered the British canon while Seward was a girl. In *Making the English Canon*, Jonathan Brody Kramnick argues that Spenser’s vogue was the product of scholars eager to establish a professional role for themselves as explicators of Britain’s esoteric, “ancient” culture (137–89). Independently confirming Kramnick’s analysis, Seward indeed seems to have considered Spenser to be a deliberately inaccessible writer in comparison with her beloved Shakespeare (although, as we will see, she defended the poetic principles of Milton, another difficult poet canonized at this time). Yet Spenser had been securely established as a precursor of the literary gothicism enjoying its reign when Scott began his career. Seward’s continuing preference for the intricacies of Pope, now deemed too refined, rather than the “simple dignity” of Spenser and of Cowper’s Homer, marked her as an old-fashioned writer and critic. Scott, meanwhile, championed the discovery and publication of vernacular Scottish ballads, another consequence of the taste for the ancient and “primitive.” Seward was reluctant to allow that such verse, with its “poverty, rudeness, or even simplicity, of expression,” could attain sublimity or manifest a noble conception. She advocated regularized versions of old ballads, purged of most archaisms and dialect. Although he published one of her ballads in a collection of ballad imitations, it’s no wonder the fashionable Scott found most of her poetry second rate. Seward represented a literary era now as seemingly “ancient” as that of the incomprehensible Elizabethan she deplored.

Scott’s comments on Seward’s poetry follow from the premise that it is now simply outmoded. Of her elegies on Captain Cook and Major André, he notes that “it would be too much to claim for these productions, the warm interest which they excited while the melancholy events which they celebrated were glowing in the general recollection.” He admits nevertheless that “when the advantage which they derived from their being suited to ‘the form and pressure of the time’ has passed away, they convey a high impression of the original powers of their author” (1:xii). But appreciation for Seward’s most acclaimed poems now requires interpretive reclamation. To understand her elegies for national figures, we must reconstruct the historic contexts that inspired them. To appreciate her occasional verse, we must recall the importance of such verse to genteel eighteenth-century ladies and gentlemen; as Mellor has reminded us, ladies were expected “to create and sustain community” by composing poems commemorating events and friendships (*Romanticism* 11).5

A clearer evaluation of certain other of Seward’s poems means shaking free of
dependence on criteria that gentlemen only could fulfill, eliminating women poets from consideration before their writings are even read. Backscheider describes such critical practices as denying women agency (24), and Scott was certainly unwilling to grant that Seward had a career with its expectations of “experimentation, progress, and incremental mastery” (Backscheider 24). Scott admires Seward’s *Collection of Original Sonnets*, for example, but dismisses her *Translations from Horace*, “which, being rather paraphrases than translations, can hardly be expected to gratify those whose early admiration has been turned to the original” (1:xix–xx). This assessment firmly denies Seward the role of national poet to which she aspired and instead relegates her to the position of an unlearned gentlewoman-poet, best at composing brief lyrics and out of her depth when attempting imitations of the classics. The latter are the purview of educated gentlemen, who need not bother with her amateur specimens. Scott concludes his cursory critical remarks by observing that the verses Seward published after the sonnets were “unequal to those of her earlier muse” (1:xxi). Since he had apologized for or given qualified praise to all but Seward’s sonnets, Ball’s comment that Scott’s preface gave no hint that he found her verse “execrable” misrepresents his remarks.

Seward’s poetry’s lack of appeal to her first biographer is understandable given their different ages, professional status, and genders. Indeed, the fact she was a woman makes Scott’s praise of Seward’s character and personality, generous as it is, fairly predictable. Of her compliance with her parents’ wishes that she exchange poetry writing for needlework as a young girl, he notes, “When it is considered that her attachment to literary pursuits bordered even upon the romantic, the merit of sacrificing them readily to the inclination of her parents, deserves our praise” (1:viii). There is no criticism of the Sewards for nearly smothering their daughter’s writing career at its outset. Scott praises Seward’s charity, her kindness toward younger writers, her partiality toward friends’ compositions. He comments frequently on her strong feelings, expressed in both the personal and professional aspects of her life. Scott hints obliquely at the self-control that enabled Seward to avoid the outright scandal of a liaison with the married man she was in love with, John Saville, but never explicitly defines their relationship. The image of Seward that lingers is one of a poetic “priestess of Apollo,” complete with “tiara and glittering zone” (1:xxvii), or of a literary queen, distinguished by strong enthusiasms and exquisite beauty (1:xxii). Unfortunately, she was a queen whose “taste for the picturesque” deprived her poetry of excellence (1:xxvii). Scott concludes his brief biography by noting that literature has lost in Seward one of its best advocates. “To the numerous friends of Miss Seward, these volumes will form an acceptable present; for, besides their poetical merit, they form a pleasing picture of her senti-
ments, her feelings, and her affections. 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 favour” (1:xxxix). Seward’s collected works are best considered as a three-volume keepsake album for friends of the deceased. Scott may have predicted accurately the neglect of Seward’s Poetical Works, but his resigned comment describing “the faithful discharge of [his] task” (xxxxix) hardly invited readers or critics to anticipate taking much pleasure from the collection.

Unfortunately, Scott’s condescending attitude toward a writer for whom he professed respect and admiration during her lifetime has proven not merely prophetic but durably influential. The propensity to dismiss Seward’s verse that began with Scott gained currency as succeeding editors and biographers followed his lead. Like Scott in his letter to Baillie, even critics ostensibly committed to reviving interest in Seward indulged in irony at her expense, as if embarrassed by their subject. Because few have attempted book-length studies of Seward, those few books have not only become relied-on sources but have seemingly replaced efforts to read and evaluate Seward’s writings themselves. The first such book, appearing nearly a century after Scott’s posthumous edition of her works, was E. V. Lucas’s A Swan and Her Friends (1907). Professedly idiosyncratic, Lucas’s study of Seward and her Lichfield circle approaches the poet as a figure of perplexing charisma. Why should Seward command a modern writer’s attention? Because “nothing could be less out of place in the present day than Anna Seward’s pontifical confidence, her floridity and her sentimentalism,” and “[to] expose these characteristics . . . ought not to be unentertaining” (2). Lucas defines Seward as a humorless bluestocking in that unfortunate period before Jane Austen revived feminine humor. She wrote poetry before its Romantic rebirth, and her critical “opinions were almost always wrong” (4).

Margaret Ashmun’s The Singing Swan (1931) succeeded Lucas’s “impressionistic” study but not with the goal of correcting his impressions (xiii). Although hers was the only full-length biography of Seward until Teresa Barnard’s 2009 study appeared, it is prefaced by a note from Frederick Pottle explaining that its “chief charm” is Ashmun’s descriptions of Seward’s contemporaries (x). As for the literary merits of Seward’s circle, they are few, as far as Pottle is concerned. He dismisses Darwin, Day, Edgeworth, Hayley, and Seward herself: “As writers they are all either a little mad or more than a little ridiculous” (ix). But while he confesses that he would not have found Seward worthy of a biography before reading Ashmun’s manuscript, Pottle admits he now believes her personality, if not her writing, merits such distinction. After this unpromising foreword, Ashmun main-
tains the ironic tone inaugurated by Lucas. Seward’s first published poem, for example, a commendation of Lady Miller’s Batheaston salon, is described as “somewhat incoherent” (72). “Severe as may be our critical judgment of the result” of Batheaston’s inspiration, “we may,” Ashmun adds, “at least congratulate [Seward] on having found an outlet for her emotions” (73). Ashmun is only mildly dismissive of the elegies for Cook and André, which she considers Seward’s best verse: “The high-flown and overwrought style which ruins most of her work was not so deadly in these monodies as elsewhere” (88). Regarding Seward’s other work, Ashmun is generally scathing. Of Seward’s popular novel composed as a series of poetic epistles, she remarks that “the age is as much to blame as the author for an artificial, far-fetched piece of bathos like Louisa” (125). Ashmun cautions that we should not begrudge Seward the praises showered on her translations of Horace, “though they seem to be somewhat richer than she deserved” (146). Of a poem Seward published celebrating the glories of Llangollen Vale, Ashmun admits that “certain stanzas have a liveliness, a dash, and a technical finish which entitle them to a degree of commendation; though the poem as a whole is artificial, forced, and uninspired” (213). In reviewing the many events and relationships in Seward’s life, however, Ashmun makes every effort to be fair. She produces contemporary testimony corroborating Seward’s insistence on Samuel Johnson’s rudeness, particularly respecting other writers’ merits (121–23). She discusses Seward’s devotion to the married John Saville with both sense and sympathy (178–87). Ashmun also supplies a great deal of information that would surely have been lost without her assiduous research. But her criticism begins with the premise that Seward was a mediocre writer inexplicably valued by her contemporaries, and she never deviates from that premise to consider what readers might justly have admired in Seward’s publications.

Hesketh Pearson’s one-volume *The Swan of Lichfield* (1936) offered those intrigued by Ashmun’s account an opportunity to peruse Seward’s correspondence without immersing themselves in the entire collection. Pearson unfortunately prefacces his book by declaring that Seward’s “flowery sentences” nauseated nineteenth-century readers while “to us they are simply funny, as they were to her contemporaries” (9). Seward, he contends, was “a blue-stocking, a highbrow, . . . and she has suffered the invariable fate of such,” so that “their only hope of survival is to be restored as ‘period pieces’” (9). Although Ashmun advises caution when approaching Seward’s letters on the grounds that “the emotional nature of the poetess gave her a lofty contempt for mere accuracy” (xiii), Pearson takes the view that Seward sincerely expressed her feelings and opinions without regard for those of her correspondents and that she was adamant about maintaining what she believed to be
facts unless presented with incontrovertible evidence to the contrary. These statements are quite true: they usefully modify Ashmun’s observation. Pearson recommends Seward’s letters as both a window into her time and the record of “not only an honest but a good woman” (11). James Clifford’s 1941 article advising caution when seeking biographical facts in Seward’s edited correspondence both complicates Pearson’s assumption of Seward’s honesty and further diminishes the value of both Ashmun’s and Pearson’s work, so heavily reliant on that source. But Pearson’s preface often reverberates in succeeding criticism, and unfortunately what echoes is not his commendation of Seward’s personality but his insistence that her writing style is the florid affectation of a highbrow, a bluestocking, a figure of fun.

Among the few scholarly efforts focused on Seward in the wake of Lucas’s, Ashmun’s, and Pearson’s volumes is Samuel H. Monk’s article, “Anna Seward and the Romantic Poets: A Study in Taste” (1939). Monk’s purpose was pejorative. To the question he raises at the outset, whether Seward’s “opinions articulate the blunted, limited, and perhaps perverted poetic sensibility of her times” (119), the answer is a resounding “Yes.” Poor Seward is not to be held responsible for her views, since they were merely those she picked up from her environment as her Aeolian harp caught its harmonies from a breeze. But she epitomized, in Monk’s view, “the age of gush” (122), an entire generation’s perverse adherence to “criteria which robbed poetry of all distinction, and put it within reach of the Hayleys, the Whalleys, and the Swards” (126). Monk values Romantic poetry because it satisfies his primary critical demands for “plastic language” and “imaginative synthesis” (126). He scorns Seward’s preference for content over form and thought over imagination—although Seward would have noted her careful choices of form and her devotion to poems that excited her fancy. Monk, however, had no interest in eighteenth-century ideas about genre. Her critical acumen disparaged, her writing style deemed ridiculous, Seward was thus banished from serious consideration by the very scholars who had troubled to examine her life and writings in the first place. Having lived in what has been termed “the trough of the wave” between Augustan and Romantic verse, Seward might in any case have been ignored for many decades.7

Seward’s sparse reappearances were usually as background to studies of other figures. In his 1970 biography of Sir Walter Scott, Edgar Johnson refers to Seward as “a bluestocking of the most ultramarine dye, equally ready to admire fashionable mediocrity and reject unfamiliar merit” (1:271), a description that confirms his lack of familiarity with Seward, who was often among the first to hail new talent—such as Scott himself—or to criticize work she deemed unworthy even when published by her favorite acquaintances. He also refers to her as a “highbrow,”
which suggests the influence of Lucas and of Pearson, although he cites only Ashmun as the source for his characterization (1:272). Such descriptions simply indicate that Johnson was too busy researching Scott to become knowledgeable about his early patron.

Even when poets of her generation began to receive renewed critical attention, Seward was left out of most studies. Her career unfolded in the years covered in A. D. Harvey’s *English Poetry in a Changing Society, 1780–1825* (1980), but he omits all reference to Seward. He mostly confines himself to discussing poets who vanished after impressing their contemporaries, but it still would have made sense to mention Seward given her practice of, and fondness for, several of the poetic modes he examines. Even when her critical leadership was prominent, he declines the opportunity for mention. He remarks, for example, that “during the 1780s a popular, though rather pointless, topic of controversy was whether Pope or Dryden was the greater poet” (150). That debate had culminated in a long-running epistolary battle in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* throughout which Seward defended Pope’s reputation against several antagonists.8 The controversy was not pointless, because by defining what they considered the strengths of both poets (Dryden’s vigor and lack of polish, Pope’s exquisite harmony and refined style) contemporaries were deciding which qualities they prized in modern poems. Harvey might have found such evidence useful, and by dismissing it he also lost the chance to include Seward even among “the third-raters” of his book (170).

Over the past twenty-five years, however, Seward has been included once again in chapters and studies devoted to late eighteenth-century poets, especially women poets.9 She appears in various dictionaries and anthologies, although at times the information about her seems to have been hastily gathered.10 Scott, Lucas, Ashmun, and Pearson are still consulted for background information. When these sources are echoed, a patronizing or ironic tone often emerges, as in Greer’s comment about Seward’s “great drift of indifferent verse.” Greer’s sources include Scott, Pearson, Todd, and Ruth Hesselgrave’s portrait of Lady Miller and her Batheaston assemblies, contemporary with Ashmun’s biography and equally facetious in its treatment. Greer’s general intention is sympathetic, but her remarks tend to affirm the sentiment that Seward ought to be consigned to oblivion. She defines Seward as the victim of male oppression, stressing her shyness and docility, a characterization the mature poet herself would have disputed. The emphasis of Brewer’s sensitive chapter is similarly on the cultural forces that caused Seward and her work to disappear soon after her death. Such an account again resembles the plot of a whodunit by identifying Seward as a victim before concentrating on the perpetrators of her failure and consequent disappearance.
But other recent studies suggest positive contexts for renewed study of Seward’s writings. Histories of sensibility, for example, chart the trajectory of its vogue, creating an opportunity for placing Seward, avowedly passionate, in relation to the culture of sentiment.11 Since Walter Scott concluded that her poems rarely contained “natural effusions of real passion” (Poetical Works, 1:xxvii), we must assume that by the time he was writing his preface in 1810 a revolution in taste had already obscured what Seward’s original readers considered the “vigour of sentiment” (Urban 379). As Thomas J. McCarthy observes in Relationships of Sympathy, the late century’s larger, more democratized readership “shifted the focus in the reading of lyric poetry away from the universal, the commonly held values, to the individual, the particular, and the idiosyncratic” (148). Readers’ preferred emphasis on “the inner life of feeling” (McCarthy 198) supported the vogue for Charlotte Smith’s sonnets, and so Seward’s “Miltonic” occasional sonnets appeared less compelling, despite their technical perfection. Another pertinent body of scholarship concerns eighteenth-century Britons’ growing sense of themselves as a nation and their consequent patriotism.12 Although Seward wrote many occasional pieces and sonnets that were deemed “feminine” by contemporaries, her proudest accomplishments were public funeral odes on the deaths of national heroes. Her reputation was established by the monodies on James Cook and John André. On the other hand, Seward deplored William Pitt the Younger’s policies, which, in her opinion, had dragged England into fruitless wars against her American colonies and France. Seward’s complicated relation to the evolving concept of patriotism also locates her more accurately amid Romantic-era women writers, whose opinions of Britain’s late-century politics, both domestic and international, have received attention.13 Seward’s letters to Helen Maria Williams, for example, trace her growing disillusionment with the French Revolution and are often read as evidence of her political conservatism. But her subsequent disgust with British warfare against the French complicates such a simple conclusion, expanding our conception of the nuanced political positions held by women all along the political spectrum.

It is disappointing that Seward has not figured more prominently in books about sensibility or patriotism. More surprising, however, is her exclusion from most feminist studies except for passing references. Seward’s writings should have benefited from the great wave of feminist scholarship that has transformed literary studies in recent decades, but several reasons for her near-omission are apparent. One is Seward’s membership in groups that did not attract late twentieth-century scholars. A clergyman’s daughter, and a woman of independent means who preferred Lichfield to the capital city she facetiously called “Babylon,” Sward has
no place in recent studies of laborer-poets, oppressed aristocrats, and professionals struggling to earn their livelihoods in London. Unlike Leapor and Yearsley, whose meager records inspired masterful efforts to reconstruct their lives, Seward was thought to have enjoyed the benefit of Scott’s and Ashmun’s biographies. As we have seen, that benefit was only apparent: Scott’s and Ashmun’s refusal to take seriously Seward’s writings left her with an apparently well-documented life and negligible literary reputation, which has undoubtedly contributed to Seward’s neglect even when her inclusion would seem logical in a particular study. Seward’s social rank and retired life have perhaps made her career seem less serious than that of, for example, Charlotte Smith, who struggled against deadlines in order to support her family. Seward is too easily caricatured as a “lady poetess” or dilettante rather than seen as an ambitious poet worthy of serious study. Analyses of the progressive identification of writing as a masculine profession, such as Linda Zionkowski’s in Men’s Work, invite speculation about the consequent demise of esteem for poetry written by gentlemen and ladies, formerly poetry’s custodians. Brewer identifies this trajectory as responsible for modern neglect of Seward and her literary acquaintances such as William Hayley and T. S. Whalley. The socio-economic and cultural history that created this revolution cannot be ignored, but literary scholars can do better than ignore or mock those who maintained their amateur status amid the changes.

A welcome development is resurgent interest in the bluestockings, the group of genteel women who influenced London’s intellectual and social life through two generations. In their recent anthology, Reconsidering the Bluestockings, Nicole Pohl and Betty A. Schellenberg expanded the term to include those provincial women such as Seward whose homes, like those of the original London “Blues,” were the cultural centers of local society (5). Pohl’s and Schellenberg’s volume features Janice Blathwayt’s extensive bibliography, which cites manuscript collections of Seward’s letters that clarify her personality, relationships, and writings, and the degree to which she manipulated these in her edited, posthumous correspondence. The volume also includes an article by Susan Staves that examines the relationship between Church of England clergy and the bluestockings, and one by Gary Kelly that addresses Clara Reeve’s status as a provincial bluestocking. Both Staves and Kelly mention Seward but neither discusses her at length, opening two more avenues for research. Seward, a clergyman’s daughter, numbered many clergymen among her friends and often professed her faith in the Church of England. Yet she departed from the views of powerful church officials in her political opinions and pushed the boundaries of decorum by persisting in her relationship with John Saville. Seward’s complicated relationship with
the clergy in Lichfield and beyond invites analysis. Likewise, Seward’s resemblance to the London bluestockings requires study. She has been identified as a member of a younger, extended group of bluestockings that influenced cultural life throughout Britain. Seward inherited her role in Lichfield’s cultural life from her parents, who entertained all local residents and visitors distinguished in arts and letters. Following their example, she presided in her drawing room until late in life, often holding dramatic readings or concerts in addition to hosting visits. A study of Seward’s role in promoting culture in Lichfield would enlarge our perspective on her activities, which to date has been confined to the personal consequences of her social events and relationships. Gary Kelly has supplied a valuable tool with his six-volume collection, *Bluestocking Feminism* (1999), featuring writings by women formerly accessible chiefly in rare book rooms and online databases. Jennifer Kelly’s edition of Seward’s writings for that collection provides a concise introduction to Seward’s life (albeit drawn chiefly from Ashmun’s biography), some discussion of the context in which she wrote, and a representative collection of her verse and prose from the Scott and Constable editions.

Seward is taken quite seriously in such important studies as Paula Backscheider’s 2005 *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry* and Susan Staves’s 2006 *A Literary History of Women’s Writing in Britain, 1660–1789*. While I do not completely agree with either of these distinguished scholars in their assessments (Backscheider views Seward primarily through the lens of same-sex desire, and Staves prefers Smith’s sonnets to Seward’s), both consider Seward a major poet of her era. Paula Feldman’s anthology of *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era* includes a dozen of Seward’s sonnets, and Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia’s anthology of eighteenth-century women poets includes a selection of Seward’s verse. Both anthologies enable teachers of eighteenth-century and Romantic-era poets to include Seward in their courses. Articles and book chapters on various aspects of Seward’s interests—environmental, musical, scientific—are beginning to proliferate, although most concentrate understandably on her knowledge and attitudes rather than on her poetic techniques. Examples of such studies are Sylvia Lorraine Bowerbank’s chapter on Seward’s environmental beliefs in her book on *Women and Ecologies of Early Modern England*, Gillen D’Arcy Wood’s article on Seward as exemplar of her era’s sociable music culture, and Teresa Barnard’s article on Seward and science. Barnard’s 2009 critical biography, *Anna Seward: A Constructed Life*, is the most important contribution so far to Seward studies. Barnard corrects our understanding of this complicated woman, whose preservation and editing of her correspondence for posthumous publication refined the persona that has descended to us as the poet’s if indeed it did not outright create
Barnard’s research answers some of the questions that have perplexed students of Seward, enabling writers like myself to reconstruct her motives and career more accurately than has been possible to date. Also welcome to readers who, like me, are intrigued by Seward’s relationship to contemporary poetic kinds and techniques are books such as Jennifer Keith’s *Poetry and the Feminine from Behn to Cowper*. Keith features sensitive readings of seven poems, examining Seward’s paradoxical fascination with the sublime: a concept she associated with masculinity but explored in a number of anguished sonnets.

John Guillory’s insights in *Cultural Capital* offer some clues about why a poet who so exquisitely encapsulates the poetry of the long eighteenth century is no longer included in most discussions of the subject. According to Guillory, it was during Wordsworth’s career that a standardized English language appropriate for prose was adopted as the proper language of poetry (131). He points out how Wordsworth repudiated Gray’s “elaborate” poetic diction (124) in order to distinguish his own verse from that of earlier writers. Guillory deems Wordsworth’s effort self-contradictory (128), but Wordsworth’s apparent success in stigmatizing poetic diction, the style that had previously distinguished poetry as a higher genre than prose, effectively condemned poets such as Seward. Because she had so publicly defended the practice of a style appropriated to poetry, Seward was especially vulnerable in the new literary climate even though, in poems like “Lichfield, an Elegy,” her old-fashioned diction and style could yield beautiful, moving verse. Other factors besides her diction worked toward exclusion, however. Wordsworth himself emulated Miltonic diction. Shelley’s style, rarely simple, strives to convey his philosophy. John Keats was ridiculed for his elaborate diction. All three were admitted into the canon. Seward’s diction and complex musicality, as well as her reliance on heroic couplets and devices such as personification all worked against her recognition, along with her sensibility, gender, social position, and even her latecomer status among eighteenth-century poets.

Guillory remarks elsewhere in *Cultural Capital* that when academics seek to expand the canon, they almost always mean by including more writers of a different race, class, or gender than are currently represented in it (9). Seward fits very uneasily amid the women who have recently been included on account of her privileged status and conservative Anglicanism. Her mastery of a style deemed obsolete by poets emerging at the end of her life ensured her posthumous oblivion. But, as Guillory also observes, the creation and dissemination of a literary canon has always been the province of academic institutions. We are revising the canon of eighteenth-century British poetry, for example, to reflect a more complex understanding of how literary trends rose, persisted, overlapped, and declined.
Such a canon accounts for, and can be enriched by, Seward’s challenges to our cultural assumptions. Guillory’s focus in *Cultural Capital* is elsewhere: he believes our internal canonical debates miss the larger challenge facing our profession, the increasing marginality of literary studies themselves. From that perspective, reinstating Anna Seward as an important late eighteenth-century poet will hardly make history, although the near disappearance of an important poet will certainly have been exacerbated by the marginalization of literary studies. But to the extent that Seward’s reclamation restores an enigmatic chapter in the saga of poetry’s development throughout the century, it might remake literary history, which is ample reason for undertaking it. Since current scholarship has produced the foundation for more accurate evaluation, and even for appreciation, we will commence with Seward’s perplexed relationship to contemporary professionalism, including her debut with that maligned institution, Lady Miller’s Batheaston assemblies.