In Men’s Work, Linda Zionkowski outlines the process through which, over the course of the eighteenth century, writing gradually became defined as manly work (210). In many ways, of course, the gendering of “professional” as masculine and “amateur” as feminine was a fictional creation. For example, women were perhaps less likely than men to write, teach, or perform musically for payment, but numbers of them did so. For poets, as Zionkowski demonstrates in Men’s Work, the process was particularly torturous. Samuel Johnson’s pronouncement that “no man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money” (Boswell 3:19) seems deliberately forgetful of the fact that a generation before, even so renowned a poet as Alexander Pope posed as a gentleman amateur rather than lose caste by defining himself as a professional writer. Johnson’s remark may have been facetious, an example of his fondness for witty retorts. But much like the concept of sensibility, amateurism devolved from positive to negative as it was gendered feminine.1 Amateurism, initially associated with privileged gentlemen, became the term for performances by gentlemen and ladies who were not only sheltered from salutary competition in the marketplace but who presumably could not have prospered in such a critical environment. As Zionkowski shows, women were caught in a double bind by this shift. Traditionally assessed in terms of their personal rather than their literary qualifications, women poets were praised most when their writings could be excused as the products of leisure time and their publications as exceptions to otherwise retired lives. When leisure and retirement were no longer viewed as concomitant with poetic excellence and criteria such as steady labor, sustained output, and commercial appeal came to be exalted instead, women poets
suffered more than men owing to conventions as to what counted as acceptable feminine behavior, which made conformity with the new norms problematic.2

Other factors besides the new esteem for professionalism contributed to women’s effacement. In The Contours of Masculine Desire, Marlon Ross tracks the gradual re-creation of poetry toward the century’s end as the province of lone, superior men’s minds rather than the product of gifted and social men and women. Typical among earlier poets, John Dryden had prided himself on his close relationship with members of Charles II’s court. He spoke in his poems as representative of the Stuarts; his satires upheld their policies and preferences as norms breached by Charles’s opponents. Dryden’s support for the Stuart family extended so far that he converted to Catholicism upon James II’s ascension to the throne, an act of loyalty that shortly cost him his laureateship and most of his income when James abdicated and William and Mary succeeded him. In the next generation, Alexander Pope spoke as a representative first of Queen Anne’s supporters and, later, of the opposition formed to dislodge Robert Walpole, prime minister under George I and II, from power. Both Dryden and Pope would have been astonished by the conception of poets as necessarily distanced from contemporary social and political life. Their highly traditional view of the poet as spokesperson for the views of a ruling class or of the opposition was compatible with women’s emergence into the poetic marketplace. Women could not be disdained for expressing their loyalty to the royal family or its opponents, especially when their poems also supported Christian virtues. They had certainly done so, in print, since the Protestant Revolution, a trend encouraged by the circumstances surrounding the Civil War, Interregnum, and Restoration. Women, embedded in family and social networks, might speak comfortably within and for these circles. Moreover, their works could achieve large readerships by circulating in manuscript or could yield needed income through subscription campaigns among women’s networks.3 When circumstances changed and such publication methods lost prestige and when the poet’s presumed point of view shifted to that of a solitary observer of the natural scene or a dissenter from social conventions, women necessarily lost ground. If the archetypal poet was now William Wordsworth poised over an abyss amidst the Welsh peaks, Lord Byron musing before Roman ruins, or Charlotte Smith gazing over a cliff during a midnight storm, then the typical lady, hardly ever expected to venture forth without a servant or companion, had no hope of approaching, let alone fulfilling, that ideal.

Anna Seward, although esteemed by contemporaries as among the most prominent female poets of the late eighteenth century, witnessed completion of the trajectory from positive, masculine to pejoratively viewed, feminine amateur.
John Brewer contests the latter view of amateurism in his magisterial *The Pleasures of the Imagination*. He devotes a chapter to Anna Seward as the ultimate representative of a culture of letters, centered in the provinces rather than in London, which fostered liberal ideals of excellent, as well as of participation, in literature. Brewer’s admiring and sympathetic analysis pits Seward as the provincial Whig amateur against Johnson as the urban Tory professional, a doomed contest for literary influence but one that Seward fought in an unrelenting campaign of poems, letters, and critical articles. Brewer’s persuasive study apparently leaves few avenues for development regarding Seward’s career and subsequent disappearance from literary history and therefore inadvertently consigns her to oblivion. One area, however, that he remarks little on and that I discuss here is the gendered nature of critical remarks about Seward’s career. Brewer omits this dimension because he focuses on Seward’s provincial and Whig affiliations that were opposed to the urban and Tory associations of so much “professional” writing. But he could easily have added the term “feminine” to those of Whig and amateur, because subsequent writings about Seward so frequently dismiss her as a bluestocking or poetaster. Gendering the discussion of amateurism elucidates contemporary observations, including Seward’s, of her career. By complicating the notion of amateurism, which helps to reconstruct the perspective of Seward and many contemporaries, we can more accurately assess her writings. In particular, ideas about feminine amateurism influenced public estimates of Seward’s first semi-public venue, Lady Miller’s poetic assemblies at Batheaston. After complicating but at the same time clarifying, I hope, Seward’s place in the contemporary professional-amateur continuum, I conclude this chapter with a reading of Seward’s appreciative elegy *To the Memory of Lady Miller*. Seward and Lady Miller’s relationship provides an unusual example of the multiple forms patronage took throughout the eighteenth century, including—as in Seward’s case—influence and encouragement instead of the financial assistance that often but did not always constitute patron-client bonds until the client was able to establish an “independent” professional career.⁴

A number of studies reveal that amateurism and professionalism were still fluid concepts in the late eighteenth century. The Romantic era’s emphasis on the poet as a lone creator made even more problems for women, however, than the call for adherence to decorous publication methods and social conventions. As Margaret Ezell has demonstrated in *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print*, many gentlemen and ladies throughout the century preferred to share the act of authorship and to exchange their collaborative verse in manuscript rather than to print as sole authors. Teresa Barnard has explained that Seward herself participated in
at least one manuscript circle of this kind (Anna Seward 110). In *Family Authorship and Romantic Print Culture*, Michelle Levy has examined how the demise of manuscript publication was hastened by the new paradigm of solitary creativity (3). Levy’s focus is on family authorship rather than on the friendly circles in which Seward participated, but her conclusions are pertinent. She follows families such as the Wordsworths, Coleridges, and Shelleys, demonstrating how in each case, as he established his fame, the male writer worked to cloak his former participation in the group enterprise. Levy deprecates the resulting loss of acknowledgment for many women whose contributions to their male relations’ publications were obscured or denied. She admits nevertheless the appeal of “the authorial persona” (9). Eventually, “it won Wordsworth a dedicated following, while for Byron it was immediately successful. There is also reason to think that some female authors, anxious to establish their own reputations, were drawn to it as well” (9). Seward was one such author; she obscured the contributions of her manuscript circle to her first publication and resented Erasmus Darwin’s efforts to take partial credit for its composition. Seward thus anticipated the Romanticists’ vogue, although it would certainly be incorrect to state that Seward “launched” her collaborative poems at Batheaston as one would obscure the origins of money in a Swiss bank. But her Batheaston performances were a definitive step away from coterie writing and toward a culture in which individual writers claimed their productions. Seward’s decision to distinguish herself as an “individual genius” (Levy 2) belies Brewer’s mournful description of her determination to champion provincial amateurism even while poets of that description were becoming obsolescent. The deceptively stark and gendered distinctions between Seward’s career and that of Samuel Johnson, her Lichfield-born nemesis, show how difficult it is to make generalizations about a privileged and ambitious woman born in the mid-eighteenth century and seeking poetic fame on the cusp of the Romantic era.

If Samuel Johnson’s career suggests the archetypal journey of an eighteenth-century professional man of letters, Seward’s just as certainly epitomizes that of the genteel woman of letters. Johnson’s march to London accompanied by David Garrick became the stuff of legend. His years of hack writing for Edward Cave’s *Gentleman’s Magazine*, his lone compilation of the *Dictionary*, his subsequent fame and the pension that ended years of poverty, all radiate “masculine” attributes such as endurance, solitariness, learnedness, and magisterial self-confidence. Scholars have often disputed the facts behind the Johnsonian myth as it appeared to contemporaries, especially after publication of Boswell’s biography. But the journey to London followed by unrelenting, anonymous toil before emergence as Britain’s literary colossus came to be seen as the very trajectory of a professional...
writer’s life. And although a number of women writers, from Aphra Behn to Charlotte Lennox, also traveled to London where they established careers, their labors were never rewarded with the kind of success or reputation that finally distinguished Johnson’s. Since women rarely possessed the learning or belonged to the literary clubs that established such reputations, to mention only two barriers, the masculine character of Johnson’s professional career is not surprising. Even young Johnson’s initial venture would have been difficult if not impossible for an unprotected young woman, especially one who regarded herself as a lady. Such female travels had a questionable reputation, associated with characters like Moll Hackabout in Hogarth’s *The Harlot’s Progress*, who after her arrival in London quickly falls prey to a procurer. The picaresque journey of an impoverished young writer to London was an essentially masculine story, despite the instances of women whose desperation or ambition led them to attempt the same route.

Seward’s entry into the publishing world followed an altogether different path, a path as “feminine” as Johnson’s was apparently masculine. Seward, discouraged from writing in late adolescence by parents who feared its impact on her marriageability, was dejected by 1778 after her sister’s and mother’s deaths and the departure of foster sister Honora Sneyd following her marriage. Her chosen suitors having been rejected by her father and she having rejected his choices in turn, Seward had evidently decided against marriage and to persist instead in her close friendship with John Saville. As hostess of her father’s literary circle at the Bishop’s Palace and member of a supportive group of local poets in Lichfield, the thirty-six-year-old Seward had neither need nor incentive to pursue a London-based career. Instead, she accepted an invitation from Lady Miller to submit a poem for one of her poetry contests. Seward’s poem won first prize and led to several appearances at the Millers’ assemblies, subsequent contest entries, and eventual publications in Lady Miller’s Batheaston anthologies and national periodicals such as the *Gentleman’s Magazine*. Once an established writer, Seward maintained her national literary reputation by publishing in various genres (poetry, criticism, biography) while remaining in Lichfield for her whole life.

The contrast between Seward’s and Johnson’s careers could not be more striking. While Johnson traveled to London, and specifically to the heart of “Grub Street,” Seward traveled away from the capital, to the spa town of Bath. While Johnson engaged with Cave to produce a stream of works ranging from a translation of Father Paulo Sarpi’s *History of the Council of Trent* to ghost-written transcripts of Parliamentary debates, Seward entered a light-hearted contest, apparently to gauge her poetry’s appeal amid a like-minded group of gentlemen and ladies. Johnson endured the rough-and-tumble world of professional journalism,
competing for public attention but specializing in work that capitalized on his knowledge of languages and broad range of interests. Seward likewise destined her writings for a national audience but submitted her writings to “the Mag” because it was her selected publishing venue, not for the pay. Unlike Johnson, Seward shared the popular predilection for poems of sensibility. While Johnson’s articles were usually anonymous because that was the norm for staff writers, Seward’s were often anonymous by her choice for purposes of decorum. Johnson was mentored by Cave and established friendships with fellow hack writers such as Richard Savage. Seward was encouraged by Lady Miller and befriended other genteel writers, such as T. S. Whalley and William Hayley, whom she met at the Miller’s Batheaston salon. At each point, the early careers of Johnson and Seward read like opposing, masculine and feminine, versions of the literary life. There were women writers, of course, whose careers resembled Johnson’s. Charlotte Smith toiled throughout her adult life to support her family without ever achieving financial stability, let alone a government pension. Mary Wollstonecraft attempted careers as a governess and as a schoolteacher before joining Joseph Johnson’s stable of paid writers. But while Smith and Wollstonecraft opted to compete in a largely masculine arena, Seward maintained her distance, to the detriment of her reputation today.

Johnson and Seward actually had many opinions and qualities in common, as Brewer observes. Both enjoyed “talking for victory” (although presumably Seward’s less brutal diatribes were mostly epistolary), and both extolled the superiority of British literature. But the contrasting schemata of their initial forays into the world of letters seemingly define “typical” masculine and feminine careers, if such a division were possible. One career begins with a search for employment at fairly low wages; the other features submission to a select private jury in quest of peer applause. Both require willingness to undertake assigned topics, but while the male covers public-interest stories, the female composes flattering lyrics on themes such as the comic muse. One career demands exposure to a range of people and experiences; the other shelter among select acquaintances. The masculine writer submits to harsh critical scrutiny and emerges triumphant because he has even more stringent personal standards; the feminine writer attempts to control public exposure through anonymous, provincial, and/or subscription publication and conforms to popular taste. One is “professional”—he has competence and earns a livelihood, while the other is “amateur”—she has less-practiced skills and an avocational status.

In describing these contrasts, I have used terms such as “myth” and “scheme.” One reason I have already mentioned is that the careers of neither Johnson nor
Seward can be so neatly categorized. Another is, as I have noted, that there were numerous women professional writers and even more male amateurs. But the feminization of amateurism, with its attendant loss of status, does not refer literally to amateur writers’ gender but to the feminine qualities associated with a kind of writer who represents “the Other” to the “masculine” professional writer. To understand how Seward became a prime example of the amateur writer, we should first examine contemporary references to Lady Miller and her assemblies and then review Seward’s elegy for Lady Miller. By championing Lady Miller, Seward consciously allied herself with her culture’s definition of the feminine. Yet despite attempts to split writers into “amateur” and “professional” categories, writing and publishing were still fluid enough to warrant a more complicated understanding of these activities in respect to individual careers. Although Seward lived in Lichfield and did not depend on the profits of her publications, she most likely did not understand herself to be an “amateur” in the sense of an unpracticed or less skillful writer. As someone who aspired to national prominence, she would no doubt have rejected the pejorative connotations that were becoming associated with amateur status even in her lifetime. Unless we recover and attend to the older sense of amateurism and refuse to devalue women’s amateurism simply because it is “feminine,” we will have difficulty recovering a true estimate of Seward’s writings.

Seward’s early twentieth-century biographers were certain that her gifts would have been better served by exposure to the competitive environment of London. As E. V. Lucas remarked, “Everything conspired to increase Miss Seward’s self-esteem and importance; for the three things that might have corrected it were all lacking to her: poverty, London life, and marriage. When a vain single woman is in a position to fortify herself in the provinces behind ramparts of admirers she is in a dangerous way. Miss Seward early fell a victim and never recovered” (321). Whether poverty and marriage would have enhanced Seward’s literary productions is debatable, as the careers of Charlotte Lennox and Charlotte Smith will suggest. Virginia Woolf decisively refuted that notion in A Room of One’s Own not long after Lucas endorsed it. Women of straitened means were burdened then as men were not by daily familial cares. Poor laboring women usually returned home in the evening to a range of household chores, and even genteel women found it difficult to withdraw for the purpose of writing. The assumption that marriage, poverty, and London would have improved Seward’s character and stimulated her genius seems once again based on a “masculine” archetype, such as that of Johnson’s struggle to support his wife by moving to London, thereby embarking on one of the capital’s fabled literary careers while maintaining her in genteel, if
modest, premises. Anna Seward was in fact privileged to command a private room in the Bishop’s Palace where she read and wrote, although she conscientiously kept family accounts, hosted visitors, produced decorative needlework, and generally earned her opportunities for private correspondence and composition. She managed her father’s care until his death in 1790, after which she presided as head of the household. In short, the assumption that life in Lichfield brought Seward constant adulation, thereby diminishing the potential quality of her writing, is absurd despite the collective agreement on this point by her early chroniclers. In fact, for many years she endured her parents’ injunctions against writing and, as she noted to correspondents, in her maturity she spent a great deal of time running her household, which hindered her writing more, presumably, than did the volleys of praise she received from friends.

Seward, however, persisted in writing throughout her youth, and eventually, when marriage no longer seemed probable, her father evidently relaxed his objection. At this juncture, in 1778, she complied with Lady Miller’s invitation to participate in a Batheaston contest, the first exposure of her poetry to an audience other than her family, close friends, and mentors. Why choose such a venue rather than seek immediately the wider readership of London? Even the avowedly timid Frances Burney, albeit through an elaborate subterfuge to conceal her identity, submitted *Evelina* to a publisher and entered the literary marketplace. Seward, like Burney, had been writing secretly for years, and like the novelist required courage to seek an audience beyond her immediate circle. But Burney’s circumstances were different. As the daughter of a musicologist scrambling to maintain a genteel household, Burney had less social capital to lose by appearing in public, although she found the process agonizing. Residing in London, she had readerier access to its publishers than Seward did. The novel, too, was a relatively new genre, one that women had participated in ever since its origin in the seventeenth-century French romance. Except in exceptional cases like Samuel Richardson’s, the novel had not historically circulated in manuscript, was not perused like poetry by restricted groups of readers. Instead, the novel was among the preeminent products of print culture, designed not for connoisseurs but for mass readership.

Although Barbara Benedict has reminded us that poetry became just another mass-produced commodity in the eighteenth century, as likely to be cranked out by hacks as composed by leisured gentlefolk, Margaret Ezell has cautioned that some writers preferred manuscript circulation to such commodification (Benedict 63–82; Ezell, *Social Authorship* 121). While to us the situation appears questionable—why indulge in parlor games instead of seeking professional pub-
lication from the outset?—Seward’s context appeared differently to herself. Unlike the novel, for which no learning was required and which had as yet a comparatively low status among genres, poetry still claimed its high generic status, requiring at its best great technical skill and, preferably, a classical education. In other words, poetry maintained its “masculine” affiliation despite the fact that numbers of women had published their verse. A female poet still understood herself to be practicing a masculine art. As a gentlewoman whose father was the canon residentiary of Lichfield Cathedral, Seward might have chosen to make her debut at Lady Miller’s villa partly because her contests were merely a step beyond manuscript circulation within a polite circle and thus compatible with the traditional method sanctioned for publication of gentlewomen’s verse. A second reason is that by limiting her initial audience, she tested her social reception after many Lichfield associates had rebuffed her on account of her attachment to Saville. Another reason is that Seward did not desire association with “mass-produced” poetic hack work but with the kind of verse admired by gentlemen and ladies, who, like the visitors her father welcomed to his parlor at the Bishop’s Palace, esteemed literature and intellectual exchange. Such was the company she expected to meet at Lady Miller’s famously selective parties.

Although Seward did not write to earn her living, as did Samuel Johnson for many years, neither did other prolific eighteenth-century writers such as Jonathan Swift and Ann Radcliffe. Swift resembled many writers in deriving his income from his profession outside literature, while Radcliffe earned enormous sums for her novels but was independent because her spouse was a prosperous journalist. Early in the century, Alexander Pope had earned a small fortune for his Homeric translations through a combination of poetic genius, patronage, and canny business dealings. He then spent the rest of his career celebrating his financial independence and mocking those who wrote for their daily bread. Like many exceptional people, he did not recognize the degree to which his achievement was unusual. Throughout the century a growing number of writers, from Daniel Defoe to Mary Wollstonecraft, wrote for booksellers and managed to support themselves, although few duplicated Pope’s feat of acquiring independent wealth through their writings. More often, writers like Charlotte Lennox and Charlotte Smith wrote indefatigably but achieved only meager incomes in relation to the needs of their families. Few poets could be considered “professional” in the sense of earning a genteel living solely through the proceeds of their poems. Some parlayed literary success into other enterprises: James Beattie launched his political career in the wake of Ossian, and Ann Yearsley evidently “used the proceeds from her later writings” to establish a circulating library in Bristol. It is therefore inaccurate to
assume that Seward was an amateur or a poetaster simply because she volunteered her critical contributions to the *Gentleman’s Magazine* and was not dependent on her poems’ sales. Thomas Gray, William Mason, William Cowper, Joseph and Thomas Wharton, and William Lisle Bowles were among those with similar publication profiles.⁷

Seward no doubt considered herself “professional” not in our sense of earning a living through the practice of writing but in the sense that she was an accomplished, nationally recognized writer. Her poetry was widely read, each publication going through several editions in both Britain and America.⁸ It was also deemed worthy of close attention by all the principal reviewers, who often lavished her writings with praise. Seward regarded herself as an experienced practicing poet, an identity frequently on display in her correspondence with various protégés. Throughout the active years of her career, she delighted in advising and promoting young poets. She was exhilarated, for example, in 1788 when, at fifteen, the “young bards” Henry Cary and Thomas Lister began writing and publishing in Lichfield. Seward entertained the young men, encouraged them despite familial objections to their absorption in poetry, and “puffed” them among influential friends such as William Hayley and George Hardinge. She worked to convert the young poets to her opinions, as when Cary evidently complained about Mason’s strictures on Johnson’s *The Lives of the Poets*: “I hope and trust, my dear Cary, that the time will come when witty sarcasm, and splendid periods will no longer have power to dazzle your judgment against the claims of your predecessors, and to make you fancy that none have a right to speak as freely of Johnson, as he spoke of others, who were even greater in point of genius than himself” (*Letters* 2:145). More often than impressing her opinions on young writers, she offered specific advice about matters such as diction, as when she advised Cary that “[Robert] Burns is honoured by your having adopted his word ‘chittering;’ yet I know not if it is well to apply the epithet generally to so sweet a songster [as the red-bird].” (*Letters* 2:159).

Seward also advised several young women regarding their careers. She was especially fond of Helen Maria Williams, coaching her as she had Cary in matters of style. For Williams’s poem on the slave trade, published in 1789, Seward had much praise, but added that “perhaps I could wish this poem of yours had been written in the ten-feet couplet. . . . I think that of eight feet requires the frequent intermixture of the line of seven syllables . . . to give spirit and variety to the measure” (*Letters* 2:248). In 1793, Seward complied with the request of Reverend Richard Sykes for advice to his protégée Miss Cayley with minute directions about prosody, instructing the young woman, for example, “that frequently to begin a
line, and frequently to close one with a verb-active, gives impressive strength to versification” (Letters 3:322–23). She graciously closed her advice by urging Miss Cayley to learn by imitating “the best models, not with servile minuteness, but with generous emulation and critical attention,” adding “these are the habits with which I cultivated my own little poetic stock” (Letters 3:324). Seward’s letters to beginning poets exude generosity, as she was attentive and willing to share her carefully developed principles. They also demonstrate the confidence of a poet who, despite her professed modesty, considered herself a master of her craft. She took women writers as seriously as men, assuming that a Miss Cayley might develop into a fine poet as plausibly as might Henry Cary or Thomas Lister.

Seward’s confidence also materializes in exchanges with peers. She argued confidently for her opinions, as when she began a letter to Dr. Gregory in 1787 with “And now, Sir, our day of combat is come.—You deny Sterne originality—and say no classic ear can endure his style. These assertions more than surprise—they astonish me” (Letters 1:375). Seward proceeded to battle Gregory’s prejudice with conviction and spirit. Even revered contemporaries such as Hayley, whom she has been accused of flattering, received detailed analyses of each publication that mingled acerbic criticism with enthusiastic praise. When Hayley published a poem commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the Glorious Revolution, for example, Seward commended his effort but also shared cavils both technical (“‘science-pointed steel’ does not instantly present the image of a gun being fired”) and philosophical (“forgive me for owning that I could have wished the two lines, which bring the humanity of William into competition with the mercy of God, had been omitted”) (Letters 2:191). Seward’s exchanges with peers never exhibit the kind of “feminine” modesty that shied from maintaining a conviction or that deferred to men simply because they were supposedly more intelligent by virtue of their sex. She did, in fact, confess to errors of fact or opinion when her correspondent presented undeniable evidence to the contrary. But her capitulations were based on reason, not feminine deference. Her bracing epistolary exchanges amply demonstrate that Seward considered herself a peer among peers; she no doubt thought of herself as one among the “rich . . . galaxy of poetic stars” that had graced Britain “within the last half century” that she describes in defending the poets of her time against the charge of “weakened nature” and “exhausted art” (Letters 1:186).

Although Seward did not need to bargain with publishers regarding the profits from her works, she was attentive to the publication process. She published in Lichfield not to prevent their wide circulation (on the contrary, she eagerly awaited the London reviews of each work) but so she could more easily communicate
Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century

with her publisher. She assiduously corrected her own proofs in the belief that neither the typesetters nor even professional proofreaders would do justice to her poems. Although she contemplated leaving her sonnets and Horatian paraphrases in manuscript, she finally printed them because, as she explained to Sarah Ponsonby, “they would not so well have escaped from press-errors beneath the eye of a posthumous editor” (Letters 5:230). Seward placed a high value on her writings. At the time of her death, she was engaged in negotiations with Archibald Constable regarding a complete edition of her works. When Constable, aware of changing poetic fashion, offered to print a two-volume edition of her poems for a payment of £130, she resisted his plan. She wished him to purchase either the copyright to all her poems for 600 guineas or the copyright to all her verse and prose, except her letters, for £1,000 (Ashmun 257–60). Constable refused her offer, and their negotiations ended with her death. But Seward’s efforts were certainly not those of a retiring lady amateur, wistfully contemplating posthumous honors. Her correspondence with Constable, as with her literary acquaintances, reveals Seward’s pride in her career and her strong desire to receive the profit due to her as the author of popular and critically acclaimed works. While Seward may have commenced as what Brewer called an “amateur versifier” (573), her journey to Batheaston led her beyond merely amateur status to a career in the national literary arena. Just as she mingled “masculine” and “feminine” qualities in her writings and personality, so too Seward blurred the categories of amateur and professional in the manner familiar to her generation.

Lady Miller’s sudden death created a challenge for Seward. The event demanded a tribute from the now-famous elegist, but it also required great tact. Seward’s *To the Memory of Lady Miller* (1782) blends masculine and feminine characteristics in her typical manner while acknowledging her mentor’s crucial influence. Seward’s tribute appropriately commemorates the patron at whose salon she evidently first read her *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780) and *Monody on Major André* (1781). Batheaston’s approval sanctioned her publication of these poems which established her national fame. Their debuts at Lady Miller’s villa made a memorial tribute seem especially appropriate after the her unexpected death. Seward was aware that such an elegy would be perceived as unusual. Women were no strangers to the art of funeral panegyric, a traditional path to recognition and reward, which for many was its chief purpose. Since women were conventionally associated with domestic and occasional poems, deaths as well as births were familiar topics of their verse. Many women had commemorated the deaths of husbands and children as well as of noble patrons, celebrated writers, and others whose demise presented a decorous opportunity for publication. To the
acceptably feminine task of lamenting the dead was added the supposedly masculine privilege of serving as representative public mourner, a role women might fulfill by, for example, claiming to be the king’s figurative children or spouses under a regime in which the ruler represented his people’s father or husband. Women likewise invoked literal family or patron-client relationships in mourning prominent figures, excusing their boldness by pleading exceptional sentiment.

Therefore, it was not the fact that the elegy would be authored by a woman that made Seward’s decision to elegize Lady Miller unusual. Rather, Seward believed that “the marked inferiority of subject” of such a poem, succeeding her two elegies on figures whose deaths had caused a national sensation, might seem anticlimactic. She was, moreover, keenly aware of the ridicule that had circulated regarding Lady Miller’s coterie. As she explained to Whalley, those who denigrated Lady Miller while she lived could not be expected to desist after her death, and such detraction “never fails to descend upon those who dare defend the claims of the deceased” (Hesselgrave 70–71). In other words, Seward’s recently established reputation might be tarnished were she to follow her elegies on two heroes with a similar poem about her mentor, likewise a celebrity but as often the object of ridicule as of acclaim. Publishing a tribute that acknowledged her personal esteem and gratitude required some courage because it might endanger by association her own career. That Seward set aside her misgivings and published her elegy demonstrates her loyalty, integrity, courage and self-confidence. She composed the 282-line elegy in 6-line stanzas, each with an a-b-a-b-c-c rhyme scheme, a less monumental scheme than the Cook and André poems, which were both composed in lengthy verse paragraphs of heroic couplets. While Cook’s death had given her the opportunity to create such unforgettable images as that of a Tahitian queen mutilating herself before the explorer’s morai (ceremonial altar) and André’s had inspired stirring rhetoric such as her accusation against General Washington, Lady Miller’s comparatively uneventful life offered little scope for such colorful writing. Seward had to avoid, moreover, making any claims for Lady Miller that might be perceived as exaggerated or that could create grounds for humor.

The resulting poem is appropriately subdued in tone and style, describing Lady Miller’s achievement in as unadorned a manner as the genre permitted while making a claim for her distinctive worthiness. Although mocked by her only twentieth-century biographer as “not much in the way of literature” (Ashmun 91), To the Memory of Lady Miller (Poetical Works 2:150–64) is actually a tour de force, explaining Seward’s indebtedness to a woman whose love of literary and charitable activities provided a domestic balance to the international scientific and
martial exploits represented by men like Cooke and André. Seward begins her poem by acknowledging that elegiac tributes are usually reserved for warriors. But where does that practice leave women? Identifying herself, or rather her muse, in conventionally feminine terms as the poet who wove André’s poetic shroud and embellished Cook’s pyre (ll. 13–18), she implores the muses’ help once more to assist in mourning “Laura,” whose love of poetry and support of poets deserves their tribute. By identifying Lady Miller with her labors on behalf of poetry, Seward suggests the appropriateness of an elegy inspired by the very deities who most often preside over tributes to great or heroic men. As a kind of muse herself, Lady Miller, whose “heart . . . glow’d with all [the muses’] fires” (l. 23), is perhaps a more fitting subject for their mourning song than are warriors.

Seward describes Lady Miller’s assemblies in refined but accurate terms. The Millers had attempted to re-create their home as a classical Roman villa, and Lady Miller was known to have decorated her ancient urn with ribboned swags of laurel. It is therefore no exaggeration when the poet reminds the muses that Lady Miller had often been seen “in her classic bowers, / Weav[ing] the rich myrtle round the early rose” to “grace . . . the festive hours” (ll. 25–28). Surely, Seward pleads, awakening the literary aspirations of elite youth is a feat deserving lyric praise. She characterizes the assemblies as “chaste revel[s]” (l. 40), an appropriate description of the Millers’ light breakfasts. She compares their poetry readings to the morning devotions paid by ancients to Apollo, again an appropriate analogy given the ritualistic nature of the competition and the early hours at which the assemblies took place. Seward’s portrait of Lady Miller captures many visitors’ reports of her role in the contests:

[B]ending o’er her vase, fair Laura seem’d
The smiling Priestess of the sacred Nine,
As her green wreath she wove, to grace the Bard,
Whose sweet superior song might claim the wish’d reward.  (ll. 45–48)

The elegy’s classical imagery, suggested by Lady Miller’s association with the muses and by the Millers’ emulation of life in an ancient villa, is less an example of contemporary poetic diction than an elegant compliment to a woman who would have appreciated the recognition.

Seward celebrates Lady Miller’s poetic ambitions as well as her efforts to create a decorous ambience at her assemblies. She describes the Millers’ well-known discouragement of inappropriate verse, no matter how clever, as their attempt “from sterling wit to clear each base alloy” (l. 65). Seward praises Lady Miller’s high-mindedness, which enabled her to disdain “Pride’s cold frown, and Fashion’s
pointed leer; . . . Envy’s serpent lie, and Folly’s apish sneer” (ll. 71–72). Seward alludes to the known fact that each year drew more established writers to the Millers’ home, a retort to the London journalists’ mockery. She situates herself among those writers as a novice enticed to compete by Lady Miller’s gracious invitation. The Millers’ encouragement is thus pointedly contrasted with the fruitless jeers of their detractors, for their sponsorship of Seward conducted her through “thy gentle ordeal’s lambent flame” (l. 85) toward pursuit of national recognition (ll. 85–90). Seward’s ensuing list of poets associated with Batheaston has since provoked critical mirth. “In these verses we see Miss Seward in a very characteristic attitude,” remarked Lucas, “for never throughout her life could she resist a bad poet” (Lucas 145). But Seward’s list—while as opaque to us as, for example, the rolls of Charles II’s opponents and supporters in Dryden’s Absalom and Achitophel—represents some of the decade’s most esteemed poets. Edward Jerningham, T. S. Whalley, Christopher Anstey, and William Hayley (who evidently never visited but sent poems at his wife’s request) were considerable names, although the succeeding generation all but obliterated them from literary history. When the poem was published Seward might well have celebrated her friend by boasting their association with her poetic institution. And of course her preceding self-description as a successful aspirant to the Batheaston prize reminds readers that Seward won her honors in gatherings that included such writers amid other merely well-born guests.

Having established Lady Miller’s credentials as literary patron, Seward devotes eight stanzas at the heart of the elegy to her charitable activities. The Millers sponsored a fund for the paupers of Bath, supported partly by the proceeds from Lady Miller’s annual collections of prize-winning Batheaston poems. Seward describes Lady Miller’s activities in lines that Lucas singles out for mockery (145) but that are no more than a deserved compliment:

When Fashion o’er her threw the shining vest,
  When Pleasure round her trill’d the Syren song,
The sighs of Pity swell’d her polish’d breast,
  The tones of Mercy warbl’d from her tongue;
She bade the fires of classic lore pervade
  With charity’s kind warmth, misfortune’s barren shade. (ll. 175–80)

Lady Miller could have chosen to concentrate solely on her successful and popular assemblies, building social connections and promoting young poets to the exclusion of other activities. Since she demonstrably longed for social eminence, such a preoccupation would have been almost predictable. Instead, she and her
husband took the lead in reviving an older charitable institution to which she dedicated the profits of each year’s *Poetical Amusements* (Hesselgrave 35–36). While well-to-do ladies were expected to engage in charitable activities, Seward observes that the very parties that aggrandized Lady Miller contributed to her benefactions; she did not separate her charitable and social activities. Seward invokes Queen Philippa, Edward III’s wife, as Lady Miller’s prototype: when Edward threatened to murder all the captive burghers of Calais after a successful siege in 1347, Philippa intervened and saved their lives with her plea for mercy. “‘Twas then thy virtues, loveliest queen, outshone / Thy Edward’s victor-plume, waving o’er Gallia’s throne!” (ll. 203–4). Seward compares Lady Miller’s preference for charitable activity over pursuit of literary fame to Philippa’s compassionate gesture (ll. 205–10).

At first, the comparison seems merely awkward. Sir John Miller was no Edward III; far from ambitious, he seems to have contentedly played host at his spirited wife’s gatherings. The Millers’ grand tour, undertaken to recover their finances during renovations to their villa, was hardly comparable to an invasion of France. And no matter how considerable the sums involved, raising money for the poor does not equal begging for the lives of captured enemies. But Seward does not apparently so much intend her readers to draw a parallel between Queen Philippa and Lady Miller as to see that the queen exemplified the priorities that Lady Miller tried to emulate in placing the demands of charity above “the shining vest” of fame or “the Syren song” of pleasure. Since Philippa apparently left the security of their strongholds more than once, accompanying Edward on campaigns in Scotland as well as in France and urging his compassion in both, she represents the principle of charitable exertion that Lady Miller imitated rather than the Batheaston lady’s counterpart. By extending her role of society hostess into the domain of charity, Lady Miller imitated Philippa’s practice of extending her role as queen consort by becoming an intercessor on behalf of the victims of her husband’s conquests. Philippa also reiterates Seward’s initial point that feminine activities are sometimes as worthy, or even more worthy, of elegiac praise than are the exploits of warriors and heroes. Seward’s apparently odd choice of analogy thus serves as a unifying motif for her poem’s theme.

Seward concludes her elegy with eleven stanzas devoted to praise of Lady Miller in her roles of daughter, wife, and mother. Even here Lady Miller’s sociable nature is cause for praise. Just as she blended the social with the charitable, so Lady Miller blended her roles of parent and spouse with that of society hostess. Since society women were frequently accused of forsaking their domestic duties for activities such as shopping, flirting, gambling, and hostessing, Lady Miller’s
ability to perform as admirable parent as well as hostess and literary patron deserved special attention. Instead of characterizing her as distracted or competitive, Seward emphasizes Lady Miller’s ebullience, a quality frequently observed in reports on her assemblies. Her personality irradiated her family’s life:

Where neither gloomy Care, nor noisy Strife,

Dark Spleen or haggard Jealousy were found;

For Cheerfulness and Love, with potent sway,

The Lares of thy hearth, chas’d ev’ry Fiend away. (ll. 231–34)

Instead of inculcating the pleasures of dissipation or flirtation, Lady Miller’s parties were infused with the “sweet domestic [comfort]” of her home. Her children learned the potency of “Chearfulness and Love” in securing happiness through their mother’s good-natured example. Seward’s description of Lady Miller’s virtues recalls Pope’s praise of Martha Blount’s serene good humor in his “Epistle to a Lady,” but in contrast to Martha Blount, Lady Miller exemplified those qualities without also maintaining the retirement and reserve that Pope celebrated as ideal feminine qualities. Instead, Lady Miller’s hospitality beguiled her aging mother (ll. 249–52) and taught her children to distinguish true happiness from “dissipation’s giddy circle” (l. 241). Seward leaves her readers with the image of Sir John, his children, and elderly Mrs. Riggs visiting Lady Miller’s tomb, where they will “bend o’er the holy earth, and consecrate her urn!” (l. 282). The image is conventional, but it is also beautifully appropriate, recalling the image at the beginning of the poem of the living Lady Miller “bending o’er her vase,” the “smiling Priestess” presiding over her poetry competitions (ll. 45–46). To “consecrate her urn” is therefore not only to honor Lady Miller’s remains as if classically interred but also to honor her achievement at Batheaston. Lady Miller is worth remembering as an exemplary wife, mother, daughter, and philanthropist, but her championship of poetry at Batheaston, symbolized by its famous Roman urn, is her chief claim to the muses’, and therefore to the public’s, memorial honor.

The concluding stanza of Seward’s elegy gracefully echoes the epitaph she composed for Lady Miller’s monument in Bath Abbey. There, she wittily if conventionally urged the marble panel itself to “amidst the wrecks of time/Uninjured bear thy Miller’s spotless name” (ll. 1–2; Hesselgrave 13). Seward lists her friend’s virtues, first among them “truth and genius,” followed by “love and pity,” then “liberal charity and faith” (ll. 9–10; Hesselgrave 14). These are the same qualities Seward extols in her elegy, although in the poem she reverses their order so that the poem culminates in a focus on charity and concludes with a salute to Lady Miller’s domestic love. Seward leaves no doubt, however, that the subject of her
elegy should be remembered as a patron of the arts, a mentor who emphasized encouragement over criticism and thereby nurtured Seward’s career among those of other aspiring poets. She makes no exaggerated claims regarding Lady Miller’s gifts or accomplishments, and the poem’s sole historic allusion describes a model for privileged women’s charitable activities. By taking most of her imagery from the classical culture beloved by Lady Miller and using it to recall Lady Miller both living and deceased, Seward creates an organic pattern that unobtrusively brings her poem full circle at its conclusion. Both the queenly reference and the classical image of Lady Miller as Apollo’s priestess emphasize her femininity, but they also speak to her worthiness as the subject of a tribute usually reserved for masculine exploits. Seward’s mingling of classical and gothic, social and domestic, and masculine and feminine categories in her elegy captures the flux of poetic models, professional boundaries, and gender roles characteristic of late eighteenth-century British culture.

Lady Miller’s death deprived Seward of a champion but not before Seward had established a national reputation based at first on her Batheaston triumphs. The women, both of whom nursed “masculine” ambition that tested but never flouted “feminine” propriety, were mutual benefactors. Lady Miller might have boasted her discovery of Seward, whose Batheaston debut led directly to prominence. Seward, however, emerged only after testing her poems before a select audience composed of both estimable writers and genteel tastemakers. A modern writer might admire Seward’s strategy, which created a prepublication market among some of England’s most sophisticated and fashionable consumers. She is habitually described as “amateur” because she chose, in midlife, to compete in Lady Miller’s drawing room contests before venturing into print, even though if she lived today, we would admire the cleverness with which she pursued the professional goals of publication and critical acclaim. Thereafter, Seward limited her print appearances until the end of her life when she arranged her poems, some never published before, into a collected edition. She may therefore have agreed to call herself an amateur, a title that preserved her status as a wealthy gentlewoman. But Seward was not amateur in her skill, and certainly not in her ambition. Seward would have claimed amateur status in the older sense that denoted a genteel writer’s privileged access to the learning and leisure required for genuine literary achievement, in contrast to the paid writer’s drudgery. She would have repudiated the notion that amateurism necessarily entailed self-indulgence or the uncritical approval of a restricted circle. Batheaston did not function for Seward as the kind of place where a spoiled child might show off her uncertain skills among admiring friends. Rather, it provided a select testing ground where she might assess
her poetry’s impression on a sophisticated audience. Her poems competed against a wide range of verse, from awkward riddles to hasty but accomplished submissions. She won a number of prizes owing to the artistic virtuosity and cleverness she brought even to these poems limited in finish by their two-week deadlines and in scope by their assigned topics. Within these restrictions, she was able to display real ingenuity as well as mature skill. Seward’s poems, like all the Bath-easton poems, have been mocked for their invariable compliments to the Millers. But because most poets have written complimentary verse for patrons or addressed to family, friends, or heroes, such mockery is not to be taken as the verdict on Batheaston’s or any other occasional verse. Seward’s Batheaston poems were not only accomplished. They also launched her toward a career that she would have recognized as “amateur” because she was never required to publish as well as “professional” in our modern sense because she possesses virtuosity and pursued a national readership and critical admiration. Batheaston served Seward as the threshold between manuscript and print culture; it poised her characteristically—and successfully—between the patterns of her earlier eighteenth-century youth and late-century maturity.