Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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T
he Ode on General Eliott was the last of Seward’s panegyrical odes. The fol-
lowing decade witnessed a torrent of patriotic verse as Britain waged war first
with revolutionary, then with Napoleonic, France. As Simon Bainbridge has ob-
served, war became the central theme of British poetry, as poets seized their op-
portunity to portray and interpret the wars for domestic readers (2–5). But not for
Seward. Having assumed the role of British muse in poems specifically related to
the American War and, in the elegy on Cook, Britain’s superior claim to world
domination, Seward did not perpetuate her fame by swelling that torrent. For
nearly a decade, her poetic voice was conspicuously muted except for a few verses
in scattered periodical contributions. When she finally resumed major publica-
tion, it was to celebrate the glories of rural Wales (Llangollen Vale, with Other
Poems, [1796]) and to rival Charlotte Smith’s popular sonnets (Original Sonnets
on Various Subjects; and Odes Paraphrased From Horace [1799]). Seward’s reti-
cence at this juncture surely contributed to her subsequent critical disappearance.
As Bainbridge argues, the wars endowed poetry with a rationale and impetus that
reinstated its public importance. Poets male and female, for and against the con-
lict, competed to mold public opinion by describing battles horrific, sublime, or
both. Seward’s protégé Walter Scott finally emerged, in the early nineteenth cen-
tury, as the preeminent bard of war (120). But even before Scott’s dominance, not
only the role but the nature of poet and poetry had changed amid the wars’ cir-
cumstances (35). Bainbridge describes the turn from a “feminized” sentimental
poetry to a “masculine” poetry that did not shrink from scenes of carnage whether
the poet was a manly bard or a “martial maiden” (35). By not capitalizing on her

CHAPTER FIVE

Wartime Correspondent
The French Wars and Late-Century Patriotism
association with national patriotic verse and instead concentrating on occasional and lyric verse, Seward apparently defied both the fin de siècle’s supreme verse opportunities and its crucial changes in poetic taste.

In this chapter, I explore the reasons Seward withdrew, during most of the 1790s, from her outspoken role of national muse and did not join the chorus of men and women poets who shared her hatred of Britain’s interference in French affairs. Seward’s opinions were more complicated than has been recognized, but only private correspondents would have known the extent to which she excoriated William Pitt the Younger and railed against his policies. I conclude, in part, that Seward may have feared not only her own influence were she to publish anti-ministerial verse at a juncture when civil war seemed possible but also the possible legal retaliation against such verse when prosecution for sedition hushed many potential dissidents. Numerous historicist studies have debated the precise nature of, for example, Wordsworth’s allusions to French revolutionary events and British responses to them in “Tintern Abbey.” While disputing whether history is integral to or transcended by the poem, all agree that Wordsworth’s reticence betrays anxiety about revealing his political sympathies. The Wye Valley tour memorialized in “Tintern Abbey,” after all, preceded a trip to Germany, itself most likely a “draft dodge” (Levinson 21). While Seward never faced persecution, let alone conscription, as a gentlewoman she had a more fragile reputation to guard than did Wordsworth or any of the younger women writers we now recognize as “Romantic.” She had, moreover, established her reputation as both sentimental muse and “martial maiden” in poems supporting international British exploits. To recoil in print from patriotic advocacy was therefore problematic for several reasons that deserve unpacking.

Strong evidence suggests that Seward held herself back from publishing verse relative to the late-century French wars not because she was indifferent to the national emergency but because she hesitated to publicly express her personal and quite complex position except on the occasions when it dovetailed with ministerial policy. Seward’s printed correspondence preserves an engrossing record of her opinions from the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 through the British invasion of Denmark in 1807. The letters witness her concurrence in British euphoria as the revolution began as well as in national repugnance for its ensuing bloodbaths. Seward’s growing concern for the protection of Britain’s social hierarchy and for private property was typical; her worry that Britain’s identification with the Anglican Church was jeopardized seems appropriate for the daughter of an Anglican clergyman. The conservative aspects of her response are all, in fact, somewhat predictable, just as Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s published rebuke of
Edmund Burke was the logical outcome of her association with his Dissenting opponents. When Seward did speak publicly, as in a letter that appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, it was to make a passionate plea to expatriate Helen Maria Williams to return from France before the revolution’s “carnage” engulfed her (*Letters* 3:202–9). That letter alone has led most current scholars to place Seward firmly among conservatives regarding the war. But Seward’s conservatism did not lead her to approve of British war as a means of preserving her cherished status quo. Instead, she soon turned adamantly against the war and remained so despite some small alterations in her opinions of individuals and events. In her correspondence, she created a personal and prophetic narrative that remained consistent throughout the revolutionary and Napoleonic campaigns. The apparent contradiction between her staunch anti-Jacobinism and her simultaneous, equally passionate antiwar sentiment would have been difficult to reconcile in print, given that any public criticism might be construed as sedition. It would have become even more difficult as the wars dragged on.

Seward certainly had opportunities to resume her role of military elegist. Writing to Mrs. Jackson in 1794, she related an invitation to compose an elegy for a Lieutenant Colonel Buller, which she had declined on the grounds that the Cook and André poems had exhausted her stock of original images for such poems. Besides, she continued in a bitter joke, “Were I to attempt compliance with requests of this sort, my muse must e’en turn undertaker; and I had better put up a board over my door, ‘poetic shrouds to be let, and ideas for military funerals furnished in the cheapest and readiest manner.’ This dreadful war would give me business in plenty” (*Letters* 4:35). Behind the grim humor was Seward’s genuine outrage at the numbers of slaughtered soldiers—British casualty rates were perhaps higher in these wars than they were during World War I (Bainbridge 6)—and civilians. She repeatedly exclaimed against the endless deployments of troops, “their lives sacrificed in vain attempts . . . to destroy, with bombs and shells, a few French houses and their guiltless inhabitants” (*Letters* 6:344). Seward thus refused to join the women poets who, whether for or against Britain’s campaigns against France, agreed in expressing horror at the number of casualties. Eliza Tuite’s “Song, in the Year 1794,” for example, rallied popular support for George III’s policies while acknowledging that Britannia “fondly mourns her warriors slain” (Backscheider and Ingrassia 448–49). But unlike after André’s execution, Seward did not react in print, averse to rallying the nation toward ever-greater casualties and evidently despairing of her ability to intervene on behalf of peace. Only in 1804, when she decisively answered the critics of Darwin’s poem celebrating the
fall of the Bastille, did Seward make public her antiwar view, and then she did so as an apologist for a work published in 1791 (Memoirs 161–62).

Perhaps Seward feared to commit herself again in print during a conflict that had already forced adjustments of her published opinion. At the onset of the French Revolution, in August 1789, she hailed the Gallic “exertions” in a sonnet published in the Gentleman’s Magazine. Her poem’s conceit is that the French “lilies” (l. 6) were dipped in the “living waters” (l. 4) of freedom during the recent American War, inspiring the current rebellion. She joins British “exultation” (l. 7) as the French shed their shackles: “Few of Britannia’s free-born sons forbear / To bless thy Cause” (ll. 9–10). The sonnet accurately reflects contemporary public opinion. Accustomed to jingoistic stereotypes of the French as “slaves” compared with “free” Britons, the British assumed the revolution would rapidly lead to a French society much like their own. Seward’s sonnet concludes with that explicit wish:

—France, we bid thee share
The blessings twining with our civic wreaths,
While Victory’s trophies, permanent as fair,
Crown the bright Sword that Liberty unsheaths. (ll. 11–14)

In retrospect, Seward need not have suppressed this poem in her later sonnet collection and posthumous edition. Like, for example, certain early twenty-first-century Americans and Britons who assumed that revolutions in Afghanistan and Iraq would lead inevitably to the establishment of Western-style democracies, Seward and her compatriots believed sincerely in the superiority of their political system and concluded that, given an opportunity, the French would necessarily emulate Britain’s constitution. Seward admits but obscures the necessity of revolutionary bloodshed. America was the site of “Freedom’s sacred fountains . . . / . . . though with crimson stains” (ll. 1–2), and “British veins/swell”—the very veins whose wounds recently stained American battlefields—at the news of French rebellion (l. 6). Like William Blake, Wordsworth, and a host of other poets, Seward acknowledged the brutality of the goddess Liberty’s unsheathed sword. But also like most contemporaries, she imagined that the bloodshed was a temporary phenomenon, the price of permanent freedom and stability like their own.

When Edmund Burke published his Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), Seward first devoured extracts of his pamphlet in the newspapers, then ordered and perused the whole. Her immediate reaction was negative. As she explained to T. S. Whalley, Burke’s “Quixotism about the Queen of France . . . did
not please me at all. Unbiassed as I profess myself as to my reason, Mr. Burke will find it difficult to convince me, that the oppressive and barbarous monarchy of France ought to have subsisted” (Letters 3:46–47). Although her opinion of Burke’s main argument fluctuated with events over the ensuing years, Seward never condoned his extravagant defense of the Bourbons. As an Englishwoman, she remained offended by his rhetorical flights on behalf of an absolute monarchy long after his argument seemed prophetic. In June 1791, she lamented the capture of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette in their attempted escape but insisted on the positive tendency of France’s “experiment . . . to render mankind more independent of each other, more virtuous, and consequently more happy. . . . Time has already . . . given the lie to [Burke’s] gloomy prognostics of anarchy and ruin” (Letters 3:80). She happily anticipated a future when “crowns and nick-names, red ribbons and blue, will soon cease to excite the reverence of multitudes; but be cast aside over the earth” (Letters 3:88). Like many other Britons, Seward reversed these sentiments after Louis was deposed, anarchy seemed imminent, and Prussia and Austria invaded France. Louis now appeared “truly great beneath the barbarous tyranny he suffers” and his captors “fierce banditti” (Letters 3:201). Instead of praising individual liberty, Seward now extolled the “chain of subordination, which binds the various orders of national society” and blamed Thomas Paine’s “absurd and mischievous system of equality” for the crisis. She repented her sonnet of 1789 (Letters 3:203, 205–6). She now declared her convictions that “people of property” are “the only real patriots” and that national politics must be joined with national religion. Prime Minister William Pitt’s efforts to extend political rights to Dissenters must consequently cease lest chaos ensue (Letters 3:216–17).

Like most Britons, too, Seward initially supported Pitt’s declaration of war against France in 1793. To a friend who still approved of the French rebellion, she extolled Lichfield’s “orthodoxy and . . . loyalty,” describing herself as an old-fashioned Whig, proud of the Glorious Revolution’s heritage of balanced government (Letters 3:300–302). By autumn of that year, she was condemning the “impious and awless [sic] guilt” of a nation that executed its “hapless Queen” upon an absurd charge of incest (Letters 3:335). France had become a “nation of Macbeths! A nation that licences the plunder of property, that makes massacre its pastime, and atheism its fate” (Letters 3:339–40). In spring 1794, she rejoiced at the beginning of the Reign of Terror, for now “the poisoned chalice” was “returning to the lips of the demons who administered it” (Letters 3:358). All of these sentiments were consonant with the changing flow of British public opinion, if more eloquently phrased. Seward even championed the suspension of the Habeas Corpus
Act in summer 1794 as a temporary measure to foil seditious plots (Letters 3:368). But by late July, she had become disgusted with the war effort, which she deemed “absolutely hopeless.” It was not for Britain to punish French “villainy”; that privilege was reserved for Providence. To persist in the war was to emulate “the Crusades, which spilt rivers of Christian blood in vain, warring against infidelity.” Worse, the conscriptions and taxes needed to supply the war would encourage internal sedition, leading to the same fate as befell France (Letters 3:377–79).

Throughout the rest of her published correspondence, Seward remained disgusted both with the French and with British war efforts. Fearful of appearing to support the Jacobins, however, she refused to publish her grievances with the ministry. When the radical publisher Joseph Johnson, aware of her antiwar position, asked her to write a poem supporting reinstatement of the Habeas Corpus Act, she refused. “I durst not run the slightest risk of strengthening the apprehensions of the public concerning an evil which appears to me entirely imaginary, viz. that the government of this country is likely to become despotic” (Letters 4:3). Seward’s fear of increasing public alarm arose from her even greater fear of a British rebellion by poor people oppressed by forced military service and the effects of war taxes. This guiding fear led to her changed opinion about political rights for non-Anglicans when Pitt reneged on his promise to extend civil rights to Irish Catholics in return for their loyalty after they thwarted an incipient French-supported Irish rebellion in 1798. Seward was outraged by his failure to pursue a measure that would have appeased the oppressed Catholics and united them with the English against their common enemy (Letters 5:107). Seward also changed her mind about the Habeas Corpus Act. When, by 1800, Pitt pronounced his confidence in national loyalty but refused to restore “this national column,” Seward complained bitterly that the British government had become a “despotic power”: “They prevent their state prisoners from being brought to trial! They make them languish whole years in imprisonment!” (Letters 5:282). Such injustices invited the kind of uprising that had engulfed France. But while Seward’s opinions of individual measures changed, her attitude toward the war remained essentially the same. The continental campaigns were an ill-judged effort to supplant providential justice, a waste of blood and treasure that would finally incite a French-style rebellion at home when the government was too depleted to confront the grievances of its war-weary poor.

Seward herself, recalling her original enthusiasm for the revolution in a letter to Edmund Wigley, reflected that at least “I am not too proud to confess myself mistaken” when events proved her opinions wrong (Letters 4:280). Her correspondence indicates that she devoured newspapers, pamphlets, and books about the
war, modeling how a relatively free press enabled the literate of both genders to form and express opinions and thereby influence others within their circles. Her publications might suggest Seward was indifferent to the war, but she was in fact intrigued by it. Of politics, she confessed to Colonel Dowdeswell in November 1797 that “in a period so momentous, their attraction, to thinking minds of both sexes, is resistless” (*Letters* 5:20). She boasted to T. S. Whalley that her opinions were formed by “a strictly dispassionate attention to the arguments for and against the war . . . collected from a ministerial paper, the Evening Mail—the only one I read, for I do not wish to see the errors of ministry on the exaggerating page of their avowed and indiscriminate foes.” She supplemented those views by reading, “with equal eye,” the polemical books of Burke, Williams, Boothby, Macintosh, Erskine, and Gifford. Although certain that the war was disastrous, Seward was nevertheless as “disposed to censure the opposition as the ministry, when any thing falls from their lips or pens, which tends to produce tumult and revolt” (*Letters* 5:134–35). Seward’s fear of a British revolution, supplemented by fear of being thought seditious (her letter to Johnson of 1794 seems composed with an eye toward suspicious ministers, should they intercept Johnson’s correspondence), deprived Britain of a thoughtful, sometimes witty, always passionate commentator. It is useless, however, to lament that Seward did not pursue a journalism career like Helen Williams or Mary Wollstonecraft did. It is remarkable enough that she permitted dissemination of these robust letters after her death.

Seward’s letters reveal the complex spectrum of British responses to the wars, usually described more simply in terms of radical and conservative, pro- and anti-Jacobin. Although she consistently described herself as a loyal Briton, she just as consistently declared her disapproval, mounting to near hatred, of Pitt. Before Britain even declared war against France, Seward shared with David Samwell in May 1791 her hope “that Mr. Pitt’s brain will not become incurably diseased by the manie militaire” (*Letters* 3:59). When the war did not come to an end after its ostensible purpose, the restoration of Louis XVI, was rendered moot by his execution, Seward deplored the “shallow, reasonless” ministerial “oratory, which is so perpetually shifting its ground, to defend this now totally unmotivated war” (*Letters* 4:34). Pitt’s failure to define Britain’s purpose in warring against France remained a theme of her correspondence, as did his lack of what a twenty-first-century citizen might call an exit strategy. When Edmund Burke wrote another pamphlet in an “attempt to re-frenzy the nation,” she derided his logic:

Mr. Burke presents no clue for extrication. He would have us continue the wasteful war, yet justly ridicules the absurdity of planting guns and cannons
against system;—and he calls this a necessary war, that struggles with a perni-
cious system, which he says must be subdued, or England is annihilated as an
empire; while, in another place, he tells us the same system is laid too deep in
the corruption of human nature for the hope that it will ever be renounced.
(Letters 4:275–76)

Americans and Britons who lamented their governments’ failure to define the
purpose of the Iraq invasion in 2003, who questioned the practicability of Presi-
dent George W. Bush’s and Prime Minister Tony Blair’s commitment to a global
war against terrorism, might have found the ancestor of their critiques in Seward’s.
In another instance of prescient rhetorical dissection, Seward described her fury
after reading accounts of Pitt’s parliamentary oratory in 1800. She resented his
contradictory argument that continued war with France was necessary for na-
tional security even though, in other speeches designed to rally national support,
he represented France as militarily, economically, and politically vitiated (Letters
5:280). Such analyses were the startlingly modern response of a literate and con-
cerned citizen who believed she had a stake in national affairs. Seward’s letters
suggest that widespread literacy, prosperity, and access to information had not
only created a public sphere but equipped it to challenge government decisions
on a broader scale than ever before possible.

While Linda Colley has demonstrated women’s unprecedented efforts to sup-
port the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, Seward’s letters illustrate her caveat
that the majority of women probably disapproved of them (260–62, 254). Yet un-
like Colley’s examples of the subscriptions women raised to support the wars,
Seward’s diatribes remained private, perhaps because, as a gentlewoman, she had
no platform from which to declare her views except at the expense of her reputa-
tion and, perhaps, her freedom. Both Guest (Small Change 224–25) and Bain-
bridge (153–54) have described the critical assault on Barbauld for disagreeing in
print with Burke’s Reflections and objecting to the subsequent wars. Again like
modern citizens, Barbauld and Seward were supplied by the press with ample
information on which to base their opinions, then pressured by the government
and by the same press to support the wars or appear disloyal. Constrained by
gender and status, Seward risked being attacked as unfeminine, even seditious,
were she to publish her opinions. Since she frequently acknowledged her fear of
professional literary criticism, admitting the devastating effect of negative reviews,
it makes sense that Seward was reluctant to publicize her political opposition. On
the other hand, the size of her correspondence and the number of her addressees
guaranteed that Seward’s views were read by a broad if select readership, one of
the century's noteworthy instances of manuscript circulation substituting for print publication among genteel readers.

Seward's letters complicate Colley's thesis that patriotism, manifested in support for a series of wars culminating in the revolutionary and Napoleonic campaigns, played a leading role in "the invention of a British nation" (367). Seward herself found such an explanation illogical. Writing to Thomas Park in 1797, she castigated the ministry for boasting that the war itself had prevented a British revolution. If the war had, she asked, what would be the consequence of peace? (*Letters* 4:372). Nevertheless, her consuming interest in the war, as well as the sweeping geographical nature of her concerns (for example, during invasion crises, she invariably wrote to the Llangollen ladies to commiserate with them over their fears for relatives and property in Ireland), supports Colley's arguments that the wars encouraged a sense of national identity and that women considered themselves to have as much at stake in the wars as did men. Seward's letters also complicate Bainbridge's terse description of her as a conservative writer (83). Seward's mind was too capacious, her reasoning powers too keen, to merit such a simple epithet. In February 1792, for example, she responded favorably to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, deciding the author was "oftener right than wrong" in her analysis of female education (*Letters* 3:117). Later that year, she confessed to Helen Williams that she had misgivings about Williams's decision to reside in Paris during the current crisis but applauded her friend's "moderate" political stance (*Letters* 3:146–48). She repeatedly praised Britain's political system but was far from chauvinistic about its current operation. "The impotent rage and improbable schemes of our late ministry," she noted in 1806, "assisted and goaded" Napoleon "to the attainment of empire" (*Letters* 6:251). She detected the fallacy behind Britain's defense of the Bourbon monarchy: Bonaparte could not be called a usurper, because the Glorious Revolution had denied the concept of divine-right monarchy. "Let us not have one law for ourselves and another for our enemies! Liberal policy spurns the groveling partiality" (*Letters* 6:353). Seward considered her dismay the result of old-fashioned Whig principles. Such a philosophy made it impossible for her to espouse the kind of simplistic "my country, right or wrong" reactions associated with conservative patriotism today.

Yet when, in 1796, Robert Southey published his remarkable antiwar epic *Joan of Arc*, Seward was moved to respond in print with a keen rebuke. Published in the *European Magazine* in August 1797, Seward's "Philippic on a Modern Epic" (*Poetical Works* 3:67–69) denounced Southey for abusing his "sun-born Genius" (l. 3) by portraying Henry V as a Nero concerned only with aggrandizing himself.
Seward drew on historical accounts to absolve Henry of indifference to his soldiers’ fate (on the contrary, he led his troops into battle, his helmet conspicuously adorned with white feathers [ll. 9–12]). She also defended the Battle of Agincourt as a legitimate pursuit of rights ceded Britain by the French after the Battle of Cressy (ll. 12–16). Southey’s misrepresentation of heroic kings Edward and Henry amounted to “parricide,” especially infuriating from the pen of such a young poet (“O! unnatural boy!” [l. 23]). Seward points to Britain’s abiding reputation for fairness and generosity in the conduct of wars (ll. 31–34). Southey must be “dark of heart” to libel his country by instead depicting cruel kings and nobles. Since his descriptions are patently false, his laments are “crocodile’s” tears (ll. 37–38), thinly disguised Jacobin propaganda. Seward concludes by bidding Southey to acknowledge his real purpose: “And o’er the murder of the royal victims,/And o’er the Christian faith’s apostacy,/Witness’d in France, cry, “Vive la Liberte!” (ll. 39–41). Southey may as well dip his hands in the blood of French victims, “and throwing thy red cap aloft in air,/Laugh with the fierce hyena!” (ll. 44–45). Southey’s distorted version of history resembles a hyena’s chilling, inhuman, and ultimately meaningless laughter.

Since the original philippics were Demosthenes’ public excoriations of King Philip of Macedon, Seward’s title announces her resumption of a national and public role. Yet her resolve to denounce in print not George and Pitt, whose policies she detested, but a young poet whose antiwar opinion she shared, demands an explanation. Seward’s refusal to publish her antiministerial views was, we have seen, predictable, but why attack Southey? Seward evidently wrote her response soon after reading Joan of Arc in December 1796. Either her philippic echoes phrases from her letters describing the new epic or the letters borrow phrases from her already-drafted attack (Letters 4:290, 295–98). The letters also suggest Seward’s complicated rationale for the publication. Upon first reading Southey’s poem, Seward ecstatically shared her opinion that “this is the age of miracles. A great one has lately arisen in the poetical world—the most extraordinary that ever appeared, as to juvenile powers, except that of the ill-starred Chatterton: —Southey’s Joan of Arc, an epic poem of strength and beauty, by a youth of twenty.” Her praise, however, was severely tempered because Southey not only misrepresents Henry V but “defames the English character in general, stigmatizes our constitution, and deifies the Moloch spirit of that of the French” (Letters 4:290). Succeeding letters to Sarah Ponsonby elaborate her concern. Southey’s poem appeared during a series of invasion crises that made his celebration of the French people seem dangerous, given his immense powers: “O Southey! Is this a period in which to exalt the French character, with parricide impulse, to depreciate that of England?”
“He cannot think the system of our ministers more execrable than I think it,” she remarked, but in her view, he should not have “calumniated” the national character and constitution at that juncture (Letters 4:328).

Seward’s philippic, then, was inspired as much by thrilled recognition of a brilliant young talent as by her fear that his powerful epic might demoralize her compatriots when threatened invasion required their courage and pride. With the French at their doorstep, British readers should not be imbibing revolutionary philosophy: “I am too ardent in the common poetic cause, not to wish the highest poetic celebrity to a work of such exalted genius as Joan of Arc; but I would not have its intellectual splendours dazzle the British heart into adoption of its very pernicious principles” (Letters 4:370). Seward initially submitted her poem to the Morning Chronicle for publication in spring 1797 (Letters 4:328), but when peace talks began, she withdrew it until late summer, “unwilling, beneath the pending pacific negotiation, in which I trust our hot-brained government is at last sincere, to say anything with my pen, which might feed the general hatred of this country towards its too-successful foes” (Letters 4:369). Confident as always in her own powers and public appeal, Seward hesitated lest her competing portrait of the French as murderers and atheists impede the longed-for peace process. Her poem’s appearance in August’s European Magazine thus represented Seward’s impulse, as an older poet still celebrated for her patriotic verse, both to acknowledge the emergence of a new talent and to caution the public against what she believed, at that historic moment, to be his work’s dangerous implications. Bainbridge has argued that Seward’s emphasis on Southey’s age “suggests that it is Southey’s youth and lack of manliness that are responsible for his political beliefs” (86). Her letters suggest that Seward indeed wished to rebuke a poet who she thought immature to curb his potentially disastrous genius. She published her poem as the antidote to his “deadliestaconite,” as a healing medicine that could only be derived from her powerful “laurel wreaths” (ll. 27–28).

Seward later became not only Southey’s friend but an enthusiastic mentor. Her conversion, so to speak, occurred after he published Madoc and his second volume of miscellaneous poems in 1806–7. Seward wrote rapturously to her friends regarding each volume; Southey became aware of her praise and initiated a correspondence. Perhaps their friendship led Seward to reread Joan of Arc from the perspective of intervening events. In 1807, she appended a note to her philippic retracting, and essentially apologizing for, her criticism. “Cooler reflection, and a long experience of the mischiefs resulting from the sanguinary system which this government has unwarned pursued through the last 14 years, have justified this Poet’s representation of Henry the Fifth’s conduct in invading France,” she
explained. Southey’s condemnation of “monarchical ambition and rapacity . . . proceeded from benevolence to the Human race, and from a spirit of justice too firm to be warped by the vanity of national enthusiasm.” Seward’s note appeared in her posthumous edition, which contrary to her expectation guaranteed the poem’s oblivion (Poetical Works 3:69). The note witnesses her capacity to change her mind when circumstances revealed fresh perspectives, as she had done with regard to the initial French rebellion and English declaration of war, the suspension of habeas corpus, the refusal to extend political rights to non-Anglicans, and other wartime issues. But because she confided her political strictures in letters, Seward appears in the midst of the war poets only to chasten a young man whose views, paradoxically, resembled hers. Hesitant to intervene partly because she recognized the power of verse, especially her own, Seward thought she had seized an opportunity to rally her countrymen when Joan of Arc might have demoralized them. Events proved her denunciation wrong, she confessed, but her philippic lingers, an indicator not of her nuanced position but of her response to one poem at one dangerous juncture of the wars.

Seward wrote three other war-related poems, all but one obscure if for different reasons. In October 1798, the European Magazine published her “Additional Stanzas to ‘Rule Britannia,’ in Celebration of Nelson’s Victory” (Poetical Works 3:115–18). The poem begins by quoting the second and fourth stanzas of James Thomson’s anthem before adding seven more, commemorating victories by Howe, Jervis, Duncan, and Nelson. Her conclusion invites all participants in those battles to join the chorus when they “return, the charter’d song to pour, / When Nelson and the Nile are nam’d” (ll. 51–52). Seward’s reference to her song as “charter’d” suggests that it was commissioned, and indeed she boasts in a note in the posthumous edition of her works that the “stanzas were . . . sung at a music meeting at Birmingham” honoring Nelson’s triumph (Poetical Works 3:117). Seward’s agreement to step forward once more as the British muse reflects her genuine relief after a chain of victories that devastated the French navy, easing fears at the time of an invasion. A year later, Seward was again complaining to correspondents about the seemingly endless war (see, for example, Letters 5:248–50). But Nelson’s victory brought momentary relief and made Seward feel sufficient optimism to fulfill the civic request for a victory anthem. Her decision to appropriate Thomson’s ode might suggest that her antiwar sentiments obstructed any strong creative effort. In any case, a stringent deadline probably demanded hasty composition. But the choice of frame, including quotation of the earlier poem, also reflected Seward’s awareness that Thomson’s ode epitomized for contemporaries, as Suvir Kaul observes, “English poetry on public themes” (1). While Kaul regards Thomson’s
ode skeptically because it overlooks the actual or virtual slavery of many British subjects, Seward’s appeal to it reflects popular British belief in themselves as “free” compared with their French adversaries. In the wake of an invasion scare, Nelson’s and his colleagues’ victories seemed to rescue Britons from the prospect of slavery to the French and their dictatorial Napoleonic government. Seward borrowed the now-classic anthem as an actress might assume a “Britannia” costume for a pageant, secure in her identity as British muse rousing her compatriots’ morale. Workmanlike rather than inspired, the Nelson poem shows Seward acquiescing in her national, patriotic role during an episode when circumstances evoked her participation.

In 1799, on the other hand, Seward’s volume of sonnets and Horatian odes concluded with “To the Roman People, on Their Renewing the Civil Wars” (178–79). In this ode, rendered as a thirty-line, heroic couplet poem, Horace declares his horror that Romans have not been satisfied by centuries of warfare against others. “Is not our scorn of safety, health, and ease, / Shewn by devastated [sic] climes, and blood-stained seas?” (ll. 5–6). He fears that Rome is now destined to destroy herself in “expiation” (l. 30) for their aggression. Civil war is now inevitable, “when foes no more her might resistless feel, / But Roman bosoms bleed by Roman steel” (ll. 17–18). The poem had not been among those published in the Gentleman’s Magazine between 1786 and 1787, suggesting it was composed later. In fact, the ode echoes fears Seward expressed throughout the 1790s that by pursuing continental war, Britain had guaranteed herself the same doom. Conscription and heavy taxes would inevitably spur the British poor to revolt in emulation of their French counterparts. Seward’s intention is unmistakable, but she virtually buried it at the end of her book. Reviewers concentrated on her sonnets’ artistry or on her temerity, as a woman unschooled in Latin, in paraphrasing Horace. No correspondents selected this ode for comment. The ode is the closest Seward came to prophesying the war’s outcome, to conveying her horror over the seemingly endless, pointless bloodshed. No one seems to have noticed, perhaps because her point was made so obliquely, through Horace, and its ostensible subject was an ancient civil war. France, not Britain, might have been mistaken for her analogy, so soon after the revolution. Seward might even have been relieved that her political insinuation remained unobserved, but to readers of her correspondence it is manifest.

Seward never published her final war poem, although it best represents her attitude toward what Goya called “the Disasters of War.” Several of her letters mention captured French generals quartered in Lichfield (French officers were
often quartered before being escorted to prison in Liverpool). Seward was among the few local citizens to extend them hospitality. In June 1806, one such officer called to pay his respects before returning home after a three-year detention (Letters 6:272–73). M. De Brosses then wrote from Liverpool before embarkation to thank her for paraphrasing a poem, “The Sorrows of Absence,” his wife had written during his exile. Seward admitted adding many details to the poem, particularly mention of his children as she had seen them portrayed in a small painting Madame De Brosses had sent her husband as a Christmas present. She was “flattered” by De Brosses’s delight in the poem but worried because he reported giving numerous, doubtless flawed, copies to admiring friends (Letters 6:294–95). Seward’s “Elegy, Written as from a French Lady, Whose Husband Had Been Three Years Prisoner of War at Lichfield,” was printed posthumously in her collected works (Poetical Works 3:375–79) and has recently been reprinted in Paula Backscheider’s and Catherine Ingrassia’s anthology British Women Poets of the Long Eighteenth Century (455–57). The eighty-four line monologue is written in a-b-a-b, iambic pentameter, stanzas. The pattern is a type of heroic stanza, a choice that underlines the speaker’s simple dignity. The speaker could be any matron anywhere whose husband has been detained; the French lady mourns her “wasted youth,” regrets the passing days, and believes her husband is as mournful as she. She must imagine his sorrow, because he has not been permitted to write, even to explain why he is imprisoned. “Ah! Why are bonds for him who knows not crime?” she implores. “Fierce War ordains them! Fiend of human kind!” (ll. 44–45). Her anguished cry no doubt resembles those of anyone in her situation, but it also echoes many of Seward’s letters denouncing the war.

Seward worried that the many extant transcriptions of her poem inevitably contained serious flaws. Such concerns often spurred eighteenth-century writers into print. In this case, although she was proud of the poem (she replied to more praise of it, by another French prisoner, in November 1806 [Letters 6:320]), she refrained from sending it to a London journal. She may simply have reached the point in her life at which she no longer coveted, or had the energy to pursue, publication. Perhaps she felt that since the poem was the expanded paraphrase of verses she had not translated, it might attract the kind of criticism leveled at her Horatian odes. Perhaps she worried that having condemned the French as godless murderers in her philippic, she would appear inconsistent and insincere. Perhaps she feared the poem would be perceived as pro-Jacobin in its sympathetic portrait of a lonely, fearful French wife. Seward’s poem indeed conveys the touching vulnerability of the wife, who maintains her home as if her husband had never left:
All things around me seem to expect him here;  
My Husband's favourite robe enfolds me still;  
Here have I rang'd the books he lov'd,—and there  
Placed the selected chair he us'd to fill.  
(ll. 57–60)

The books, the chair, and especially the detail of the husband's old robe, comfort- 
ing his wife by "enfolding" her as he used to do, suggest that the war, while little understood by noncombatants, has destroyed families rather than aggrandize 
nations. At last Seward had written a poem that elevated the domestic over the national, the "private, sentimental, and impassioned" (Guest Small Change 267) over the stern demands of patriotism. The "Elegy, Written as from a French Lady" is spoken by a victim of British military prowess rather than by the poet as British muse. It is therefore anomalous, but it adds to Seward's scant record of wartime verse the expression of her deeply felt conviction about the war's inhu-
manity and, ultimately, its futility. Taken together, Seward's war poems offer the barest glimpse of her complicated political responses. Seward's correspondence, in its passion, richness, and scope, is the distinguished successor to her national patriotic poems, even though she confined her epistolary reflections to a select group of trusted friends.

Seward's war poems and letters invite speculation about the complex rela-
tion of women to the public sphere in what we now call the early Romantic era. Anne K. Mellor has been among the chief scholars disputing the paradigm that assigned men and women to "separate spheres." In Mothers of the Nation, she points to women's numerous publications on social and political issues as well as their leadership in political and philanthropic movements and argues that "if women participated fully in the discursive public sphere and in the formation of public opinion in Britain by the late eighteenth century, then the assumption that there existed a clear distinction in historical practice between a realm of public, exclusively male activities and a realm of private, exclusively female activities in this period is also erroneous" (7). Her chapter on women's political poetry ac-
knowledges the achievements of "poetesses" like Felicia Hemans who identified themselves with "femininity," but Mellor champions women who wrote powerful verse advocating causes like abolition and women's rights: the ancestors of mod-
ern feminists. Charlotte Smith's "The Emigrants" (1793), which invites sympathy for those French who have fled their homes during the Reign of Terror, exemplifies the woman poet's abhorrence of patriarchal abuse and her advocacy of an "ethic of care" (73–74). Mellor's point transforms our conception of the late eighteenth century. If there were, objectively speaking, no separate spheres, then why did not
Seward pursue her public career as British muse throughout the 1790s? Why did she not publish her “Elegy, Written as from A French Lady” as Smith published her poem on a similar topic? France declared war on Britain in early 1793, so Smith’s plea on behalf of French refugees was courageous at the time. Seward’s retreat from poetry on national affairs seems pusillanimous in comparison.

Part of the answer lies in the fact that although there may have been no literal separate spheres, there were assuredly ideological separate spheres to which men and women, and especially gentlemen and ladies, were encouraged to adhere. If Seward had not understood this to be so, she would not have described herself in letters as her father’s nurse instead of, as she really was, his business manager (Barnard 72–73). Most importantly, she would have defied propriety more openly in conducting her relationship with John Saville. Instead, she behaved with such great discretion that until Teresa Barnard’s recent biography, many scholars did not suspect the length and depth of their commitment. Yet, as Barnard observes, Seward’s chaste liaison brought on her the consciousness that at any time she could be accused of sexual impropriety, at a time when such a charge would also have damaged her pretension to speak as the British muse (89, 93). Indeed, Seward’s attachment invited unwanted attention from men such as James Boswell, who assumed that she was open to sexual propositions (Barnard 135–39). Seward’s relationship was literally self-limiting; in unpublished letters, she revealed it as the principal reason she stayed in Lichfield after her parents’ deaths (Barnard 21). The revelation makes “Lichfield, an Elegy” even more of a creative tour-de-force: contrary to her declaration there that memories of Honora kept her from moving to London, a living beloved was the motivation she did not dare proclaim. In the case of her patriotic poems, the socially precarious relationship with Saville would have compounded her reasons to avoid print, should she have wished to express her disillusionment despite public pressure to support official government policies. As in the case of her amateurism/professionalism and her posture as national muse, Seward’s wartime correspondence usefully complicates what we know about women writers in the early Romantic period. As a gentlewoman and an ambitious writer, protecting an unconventional romance as well as a national literary reputation, she falls between the poles represented by Mellor’s “poetesses,” on one hand, and her admirably outspoken political poets, on the other. Thorough consideration of Seward’s position increases our understanding of women poets’ obstacles and their triumphs in the 1790s, as well as the challenges faced by all poets throughout that tumultuous decade.

In light of her correspondence, Seward’s verse deserves the kind of historicist reading that has found contemporary political references in other apparently
unrelated poems like “Tintern Abbey.” One of Seward’s best-known poems, “Llangollen Vale” (*Poetical Works* 3:70–80), was written in 1795 after her first visit to that Welsh terrain, which culminated in her meeting with Sarah Ponsonby and Lady Eleanor Butler, the famed “Llangollen ladies” whose invitations were much coveted. In a letter to a Miss Wingfield on August 14, Seward described the valley’s history, which she soon transformed into a poem (*Letters* 4:89–93; on September 7, she minutely described to her cousin, the Rev. Henry White, her visit to the Llangollen ladies at their exquisite neo-Tudor home (*Letters* 4:98–109)). Most criticism of this episode and the ensuing poem, from its publication until now, has concentrated on Seward’s description of the fascinating ladies. The letters and poem have recently come to be regarded as part of a Sapphic tradition, enthusiastic celebrations of a well-known same-sex partnership by a poet identified as lesbian. Barnard, having clarified Seward’s sexual identity (Saville was actually her traveling companion, although the published letters do not mention his presence), instances “Llangollen Vale” as an example of Seward’s antiquarian interests (127). The poem indeed resembles eighteenth-century models such as Thomas Warton’s “Ode Written at Vale-Royal Abbey in Cheshire” (1777), a reflection on evocative medieval ruins, and also recalls Thomas Gray’s earlier “The Bard” (1757), with its stirring description of a thirteenth-century Welsh bard defying Edward I from Snowdon’s heights.

But in the context of her letters, Seward’s concentration on the bloody history of the valley before celebrating the women who have redeemed its barbarous past assumes new significance. In June 1795, for example, she had written to her friend Dorothy Sykes expressing her horror at the sadistic treatment of Louis XVI’s orphans. She described the plight of the Dauphin and his sister in heart-rending terms before inveighing against their “inhuman” guards: “That such inhuman and impious wretches are not permitted to be crushed, rendered a warning to other nations, and an awful example of the chastizement of an outraged Deity, seems incomprehensible; but God, in his own time, will punish these blasphemous and cruel republicans” (*Letters* 4:74). Of her own country’s government she had little better to say. “Persisting in a war originally just, but now become hopeless, we seem to forget that there is a God to punish the wicked without our waste of blood and treasure in a desperate cause” (*Letters* 4:74–75). Seward’s comments seem a perfect illustration of Mellor’s argument, in *Romanticism and Gender*, that women writers embraced a political model based on “domestic affections” in place of the twisted patriarchal paradigm that was wreaking havoc in Europe (66). Seward instances the perverse treatment of “sweet innocent children” (*Letters* 4:74) as proof of the French republicans’ failure to establish an acceptable government but re-
frains from wishing them “crushed” (presumably by the British and their allies). The misguided British government, too, she consigns to divine punishment. In retreating from the fantasy of wishing to see either government blasted by divine retribution, Seward joins other women writers who, as Mellor observes, replaced the extreme revolutionary ideal with one of gradual, organic development (65)—or at least with punishment meted out “in [God’s] own time” rather than according to violent human impulses. From this perspective, Seward’s initial, seventy-eight-line narrative of the Llangollen valley’s medieval history, over half the poem, mirrors in her account of English-Welsh warfare the recent and equally fruitless war of British against French. She represents Owen Glendower, for example, as a Welsh hero, but describes his birth amid a visitation of the plague. Even Glendower’s victory over Henry IV, inaugurating a period of peace in which bardic song flourishes, is described as pyrrhic: Wales’s “Thermopylae” (l. 60), won by “slaughtered heaps” of soldiers (l. 57). After Glendower’s revolt, the bard Hoel won “deathless fame” singing of his “ill-starred love” for a local lady. Seward’s tribute to Hoel is followed by her lengthy description of Ponsonby and Butler and their peaceful domicile, a place where they “to letter’d ease devote” themselves, and a place that is “Friendship’s blest repose” (l. 96).

Seward describes the music created by the ladies’ Aeolian lute, then asks what human could duplicate such ravishing sound. “The proud sex as soon, with virtue calm, /Might win from this bright pair pure Friendship’s spotless palm” (ll. 105–6). Having stated her doubt that any man could merit that privilege, she concludes her poem by comparing the area’s former domination by Valle Crucis Abbey, scene of bleak rituals and enforced vows, with the ideal life of the Llangollen ladies. She ends by wishing them long lives and after death a mutual tomb commemorating their friendship, which, she implies, has redeemed this valley from its history of superstition, warfare, and fruitless courtly love. The poem might well illustrate Mellor’s theory regarding women’s Romanticism, with its emphases on women’s superior reason and on friendship as the basis of a domestic partnership that is, in turn, the ideal model for government, far preferable to the abusive patriarchal system of the time (Romanticism and Gender 38). Seward’s descriptions of Owen Glendower’s revolt, of Hoel’s songs, and of Valle Crucis no doubt appealed to readers intrigued by Britain’s Celtic past, but each also speaks to her own culture, with its bloodthirsty revolutionary battles and counterbattles and institutionalized repression, tragedies seemingly unaffected by the eloquent verse of contemporary poets. Likewise, readers wishing for a glimpse of the Llangollen ladies’ elite milieu would have been gratified by Seward’s description of their “gothic” abode, but the ladies’ blissful existence seems to have struck her because
it was precisely the enlightened reverse of Llangollen’s brutal past. We can con-
clude that Seward was circumspect indeed if her implication regarding a superior,
nonhierarchical, feminine domestic realm, opposed to the bloodthirsty, patriar-
chial political system she deplored, escaped notice as particularly appropriate given
recent events. But after reading her wartime correspondence, we can appreciate
both the social challenges that dissuaded her from writing more forcefully against
the French wars and the subtlety with which, even writing within eighteenth-
century poetic conventions, she occasionally insinuated her convictions.