Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century

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In my introduction, we glimpsed Seward in a characteristic posture in her autobiographical “Lichfield, an Elegy.” Traveling past Honora Sneyd’s burial place to her present home and by implication into the future when she will write this poem, Seward nevertheless strains her eyes looking back to catch a last glimpse of her beloved’s grave (l. 138). The image captures Seward’s state of mind as she described it in many of her later poems and letters: attentive to daily events and ongoing cultural currents but yearning for the emotional attachments of her youth. The image also represents Seward’s position as a writer. While alert to and often welcoming poetic trends such as interest in the sublime, in the gothic, in regional dialects, and in neglected forms like the sonnet, Seward remained attached to the prosodic and critical standards of her youth. Growing up in the middle of the century, she retained her belief in principles established and refined by poets like Milton, Pope, and Thomson. She welcomed the midcentury impulse to establish a British canon, participating in the debate over Dryden’s or Pope’s superior ranking and extolling the verse of contemporaries such as William Hayley. Her poetry exemplifies the sensibility inculcated in her youth to a degree deemed artificial or mannered soon after her death but prized throughout most of her lifetime. Seward’s Janus-like pose in “Lichfield, an Elegy” thus embodies her position among late-century British poets. To a striking degree, Seward epitomizes eighteenth-century poetics at the moment when verse turned to Romanticism. Her writings, I hope to have shown, offer valuable perspectives on the new movement’s organic development from previous traditions.

Her criticism reflects the strong belief she inherited in the importance of
harmonious sound to verse destined for public performance. She boasted her study of British poets’ techniques, which emphasizes how a poet might create sound effects for rhetorical purposes without distorting English usage. Such practice was common to early eighteenth-century poets like Pope but less adhered to by midcentury prosodists who, according to Paul Fussell, willingly sacrificed normal diction and pronunciation in order to achieve metrical regularity.\(^1\) Seward’s formal, polished, but “natural” versification resembled the acting style of her dramatic idol Sarah Siddons, although in Seward’s case her preference was not prompted by a novel turn away from prevailing conventions so much as by adherence to an earlier style than that currently in vogue among poets.\(^2\) Another belief following from the declamatory purpose of verse was the poet’s role in public intellectual discourse. As we have observed, many eighteenth-century poets remained convinced of their important function in leading national patriotic discourse.\(^3\) Seward intervened in public discussions following James Boswell’s publication of *The Life of Samuel Johnson* and after Erasmus Darwin’s death. In both cases, her assessments insisted on yet another set of “old-fashioned” models, the “beauties and faults” method of literary criticism and an approach that emphasized the moral function of literary and biographical studies. In an historic period obsessed with canonizing British literary worthies, Seward’s practices could be construed by antagonists as mean spirited rather than balanced or principled. But while her practices often hark back to those of her early models and mentors, Seward also exemplifies the sensibility characteristic of her youth, in its senses both of swift responses to perceptual stimuli and of sympathy with the distressed.\(^4\) When she rails against Johnson’s cruelty to living poets, she is holding him to a standard of compassion embraced by her and Boswell’s generation but not necessarily by Johnson’s. Seward’s admiration of sensibility sometimes appears at odds with her devotion to early-century critical values, but the combination marks her, like some of her admired contemporaries such as William Hayley, as the inheritor of a century’s traditions and practices.

Seward’s assumption of her role as British muse, even in literary-critical matters, invited conflict, particularly with some dismissive male writers. As Susan Staves observes in her *A Literary History of Women’s Writing in Britain*, late eighteenth-century women writers found criticism an important vehicle for establishing their role in public intellectual discourse.\(^5\) Staves takes as a model for her study some women critics’ examinations of writings by other women, who took those publications seriously by describing “faults of substance or style they discerned” as well as commending their strengths (Staves 438). When Seward approached the writings of Johnson, Boswell, and, later, Darwin in the same spirit, however, she was
publicly chastised for her presumption. Seward’s attempts to revise literary history as written by these imposing male figures closes my study, because they confirm both Seward’s eighteenth-century poetic and critical principles and make clear the obstacles placed in her way by gender constrictions, particularly as they were imposed by the end of the century. If Staves criticizes Seward for colluding, in Louisa, in the decadent sentimentalism of the 1780s—an assessment with which I respectfully disagree—she would have to admire Seward’s boldness in exerting her influence to correct Boswell’s Johnsonian portrait. Yet no critic has offered a reading of Seward’s criticism that accounts for her negative conclusions in other than personal terms. Seward, it seems, can only be exonerated for her temerity by the critic claiming that she was snobbish, jealous, or naïve.

The implication permeating older commentary on Seward’s criticism is that her argumentative persona was unpleasant and therefore easily dismissed. I therefore end by considering other ways of construing Seward’s critical publications: as efforts to practice on Darwin, Johnson, and Boswell the critical methods all four writers held in common, as exercises of her cultural influence, and as attempts to escape the dominion, real and imagined, of these powerful father and brother figures over her imagination and career. Seward manifestly failed in her efforts to modify future estimates of either Darwin (whose Botanic Garden has not proved immortal) or Johnson (whose character has not been deemed cruel). But many reactions to her criticism were in fact sexist. Neither a London bluestocking nor a “hyena in petticoats,” Seward was nevertheless a woman in quest of authority. Now that studies by Anne K. Mellor, David Simpson, Markman Ellis, Mary A. Waters, and others have reexamined women’s participation in late eighteenth-century literary criticism, we can appreciate Seward’s contributions to their growing influence. Like Simpson, who proposes that Mary Wollstonecraft’s “unstable” style in the Vindication of the Rights of Woman resulted not, as has been assumed, from incompetence but from her effort to reach an audience likely “to respond to the appeals of an unstable style,” I argue that Seward’s apparent vendettas against Darwin and Johnson did not emanate from insufficient self-control but from her wish to defend herself and other late eighteenth-century poets threatened by their assertions.

Among many examples of Seward’s eighteenth-century poetic principles, one suffices to illustrate why her practice was praised by contemporaries but seemed old-fashioned by the time her collected poems were published. A recent study by Elspeth Jajdelska examines the evolution of reading in Britain at the turn of the
seventeenth into the eighteenth century. Jajdelska traces the gradual change from spoken to silent reading, indicated partly by changes in printers’ punctuation conventions. Texts meant to be spoken by readers tended to have heavier punctuation, indicating emphases and pauses, because they would presumably be acted out, to a degree, by a skillful reader (14). Jajdelska deduces a gradual shift away from such punctuation in printed texts by the mid-eighteenth century. Although Jajdelska’s study is about prose, it supports my argument that Seward was a typical eighteenth-century writer, chiefly influenced by the poetry most valued in her youth. The musicality of Seward’s verse was more characteristic of Milton’s and early eighteenth-century poetry, such as Pope’s, than of, for example, Smith’s. Milton’s verse famously bends English syntax to achieve the declamatory emphasis of Latin rhetoric. Pope, especially in his youth, believed that sound should echo sense and was rewarded by his enemies with epithets such as “tuneful Alexis” (Hill, l.1). Seward labored to create mellifluous sound patterns in her verse, as we have observed throughout this study. When she delivered her poetic precepts to a Miss Cayley, she was chiefly concerned with the effects created by various combinations of English sounds, urging her young admirer to adopt some and avoid others. Seward was preoccupied with the sound of her verse because she assumed poetry would be read aloud. She often read her own poetry and that of others aloud in drawing rooms, recording proudly her reputation as a dramatic performer. But although novels and poems continued to be read aloud into the next century—in Jane Austen’s Sense and Sensibility (1811), Marianne deplores Edward Ferrars’s “spiritless” and “tame” declamation of Cowper (11)—silent reading was becoming standard. Charlotte Smith’s sonnet speakers, musing in solitude about their loneliness and unshared grief, clearly resonated with readers beginning to practice private reading more often than the sociable, vocal reading for which Seward intended her “tuneful” compositions. Seward’s techniques survived in poets such as John Keats, whose beautiful orchestration of sound in such poems as “Ode to Autumn” descend directly from prosody like hers. For his devotion to mellifluous effects, as Susan J. Wolfson has observed, Keats was accused of “effeminacy” of style, among the other charges leveled at him and his poetry by reviewers of the 1820s perturbed, among other things, by his manifest sensibility and aestheticism.

Seward not only espoused earlier eighteenth-century poetic principles; she expounded on and promoted them. Many of her discourses must have been conversational, and many were included in letters such as her exchanges with Hayley and George Hardinge and her advice to Miss Cayley. But she also contributed criticism to the Gentleman’s Magazine and published the first biography of Eras-
Susan Staves has argued for the importance of women’s emergence, in the second half of the century, as historians, translators, and literary critics (Staves 286–361). By publishing such writings, women established their intellectual prowess and claimed their right to help shape their culture. Staves observes the significance of Elizabeth Montagu’s *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare* (1769), a riposte to Voltaire’s dismissal of the English bard (304–9). Montagu established herself not only as a capable defender of Britain’s chief writer but also as a patriot rebutting the French insult to her nation’s culture. Staves’s discussion of bluestockings such as Montagu and Carter suggests their importance as a model to Seward. Twenty-two and twenty-five years her senior, respectively, Montagu and Carter published their chief works during Seward’s teens and twenties, setting patterns for future women’s participation in public intellectual discourse. In her chronological history, Staves groups the bluestockings together with sentimental novelists as the chief literary figures between 1756 and 1776, and certainly both influenced Seward’s intellectual development. We have seen evidence of her sentimentalism throughout her poetry. To complete this study, however, attention is due to the critical writings in which Seward publicly argued her views about poetry and demanded her right to influence reception of important figures and publications. In her published criticism, as in her other writings, Seward upheld the poetic values and sensibility of her youth while attempting to carve a space for herself as authoritative female critic in a literary world that despite the triumphs of Montagu, Carter, Catharine Macaulay, Hester Chapone, and Hannah More, and the publications of many others still resisted acknowledging women’s cultural authority and at times even attempted to efface their contributions.

Seward recognized the importance of establishing herself as a critical authority as well as a poet. As I argued regarding her career choices in my second chapter, the fact that a great deal of vigorous criticism remained unpublished in her letters until after her death indicates not Seward’s shyness but her choice to confine her readership in many instances to family and friends. Seward occasionally intervened in literary-critical debates, such as those over the relative superiority of Samuel Richardson or Henry Fielding, through periodical publications. Neither was she apparently averse, at least in principle, to engaging in “professional criticism” in the sense of taking on regular assignments for pay. When in 1788, Thomas Christie invited her to become a regular contributor to the *Analytic Review*, Seward demurred, citing “feminine employments,” which might to a hasty reader suggest her refusal to enter into a paid engagement. Her explanation to Christie, however, was that “feminine employments,” such as a large household
and myriad social obligations, had left her time to master only a small number of fields: English literature, music, painting, and moral philosophy (Letters 2: 4–6). Her excuse, then, was that “a stock of knowledge so limited” disqualified her from participating in Christie’s plan for a wide-ranging “view of the present state of the polite arts” (Letters 2: 7). To her epistolary acquaintances, however, Seward had no compunction about sharing her opinions even on topics outside her boasted areas of expertise. As we have observed throughout this study, Seward imparted her views of events and figures political as well as literary in letters that sometimes seem like miniature essays rather than informal correspondence. It is quite understandable why she confined her reflections on Pitt and the wars against France in the 1790s to this sympathetic readership. But her literary discourses and debates reflect what Staves describes as the use of the familiar letter throughout the century to create networks of supportive, even if challenging, intellectual friendships (Literary History 23). Of course, Seward edited her letters, refining them for posthumous publication. The original letters, if less polished, were probably intended in many instances to be enjoyed and discussed not only by the intended recipient but by select friends of the sociable Hayleys, Whalleys, Llangollen ladies, and others. Seward thus established herself through her epistolary network as a literary authority in a medium understood by contemporaries to be among the alternatives to print publication.12

Another critical mode that Seward attempted late in her life was biography. Asked by Erasmus Darwin’s son for anecdotes toward a biography, Seward responded by publishing a lengthy series of what Mrs. Thrale-Piozzi might have called “Observations and Reflections” on her early Lichfield mentor, who had subsequently moved to Derby and died in 1802. Appearing five years before her death, Seward’s rather hastily composed Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin (1804) contains personal memories, anecdotes communicated by mutual acquaintances, and criticism of his published treatises and poems. Ashmun agrees with the Edinburgh Review in damning Seward’s valuable if unreliable record, the first published biography of Darwin (236–37). Today, it is easier to accept that Seward was, as she avows, emulating Hester Thrale-Piozzi’s and James Boswell’s biographical writings about Samuel Johnson by shaping her memoirs around striking anecdotes such as his cure of the Countess of Northesk (77–82) and the suicide of his eldest son (296–98). Her discussion of Darwin’s great poem, The Botanic Garden, became an opportunity for detailed criticism of a work admired by many contemporaries, a lengthy analysis both appreciative and, where she deemed appropriate, corrective. Through her criticism, she attempted to achieve what she thought Boswell had neglected to perform in his biography of Johnson, an honest assessment
of her subject’s brilliant but flawed tour-de-force, composed in a genre in which she felt secure of her mastery. Those expecting pure biographical narrative were no doubt puzzled by the digression, but Seward may have been motivated by the opportunity to associate her critical acumen with a celebrated work deserving exhaustive assessment.

Indeed, Seward’s analysis of The Botanic Garden occupies two chapters and 141 of the 313 pages of the Memoirs, nearly half the entire volume. (Since another chapter, 48 pages long, describes the eccentricities of Thomas Day, Seward’s anecdotes and criticisms outweigh her memoirs.) One suspects that Seward stretched her rather meager biographical information as a pretense for publishing this “beauties and faults” study based on eighteenth-century principles such as the importance of harmonious sound and technical polish. Seward narrates the cantos of the poem, Darwin’s epic account of creation and of the perpetuation of plant life in a series of fanciful images that blends ancient myth with modern science, particularly botany. Seward compares the poem favorably with Milton’s Paradise Lost and Pope’s Iliad while praising Darwin’s ingenious accounts of such modern inventions as the steam engine, electrical power, submarines, and hot air balloons. She notes many contemporary figures whom Darwin cites, luminaries such as James Cook, James Watt, Matthew Boulton, Josiah Wedgwood, Benjamin Franklin, Joseph Priestly, and Joseph Wright of Derby. But she also makes lengthy comparisons with Shakespeare and living poets like Hayley, Robert Southey, James Beattie, and Francis Mundy, illustrating her criticism with multiple passages and even whole poems by favorite writers. Seward seems to be associating these poets with the scientific masters Darwin celebrates in the notes to his verse. Much as Darwin lauds all modern scientists but chiefly the British, Seward honors contemporary British poets as their counterparts in cultural importance. But she does not praise only poets and only men; she instances Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa and Sir Charles Grandison as “novels no longer, but English classics” known in translation throughout the world (178). Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is praised for her “patriotic” introduction of the smallpox vaccine (43). Seward corrects Darwin’s description of Mary Delany’s paper flowers, devoting three pages to a description of Delany’s life and techniques (229–31). Seward thus adds to Darwin’s encomia an additional roster of British cultural worthies, a gesture typical of her generation’s patriotism but extrinsic, in its lavishness, to the strict purposes of literary criticism.

Seward’s analysis is chiefly admiring; she narrates each canto and comments, as if for those who have not read the poem or those who will appreciate “touring” the poem with a judicious commentator. Her infrequent criticisms are expressed
authoritatively even when they correct a single phrase. For example, of one passage she comments, “Alliteration is an edge tool in the poet’s hand, improving or injuring his verse, as it is judiciously or injudiciously used” (224). She then includes a three-page discourse on alliteration citing Milton, Pope, and Beattie, concluding that “this digression . . . will not be thought irrelevant to the peculiar theme of these pages, when it is considered that, for the presumption of censoring, even in one instance, the eminently harmonious numbers of the Botanic Garden, it was requisite to justify each censure” (227). Seward’s discussion confirms her authority as a prosodic expert capable of discerning Darwin’s occasional blunders, the feminine descendent of Pope’s critic who can censure freely because she has written well. “That a poetic simile should not be precise in its resemblance is certain, at least that it is more sublime, or more beautiful, for not quadrating exactly; yet it ought to possess such a degree of affinity with the subject, that when the theme and its illustration are viewed together, we may feel, though we cannot verbally demonstrate, the perfect justice of the similitude” (239), she remarks in another place, claiming for metaphor an intuitive aptness that cannot be scientifically proven (“verbally demonstrated”) but that nevertheless exists. Seward thus insinuates that her personal critical acumen is comparable to Darwin’s prowess as scientist; she can discern unerringly the appropriateness or inaptitude of a simile much as he can use scientific apparatus to diagnose an illness or invent a new carriage.

Seward’s attention to Darwin’s techniques is intrinsic to her old-fashioned “beauties and faults” critical method. She excuses her presumption in citing the weaknesses as well as strengths of The Botanic Garden:

Human ability never did, and probably never will, produce an absolutely perfect composition. The author of this memoir has, from infancy, sedulously studied and compared the writing of the distinguished Bards of her nation, together with the best translations of those of Greece, Rome, and modern Italy. She has presumed to descant upon what appeared to her the graces and defects of the Botanic Garden; induced by a conviction that the unbiased mixture of candid objection with due praise, better serves the interest of every science than unqualified encomium upon its professors. (277)

Seward claims an expertise in her “science” based on lifelong study of poetry in English. Darwin’s epic is flawed, but after all, “no eminent Poet has so many passages which are every way exceptionable, as . . . our great, our glorious Shakespeare” (279). The purpose of criticism is to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of a literary text, and, “if, after a just balance of beauty and defect, the first out-
weighs the latter in immense degree, then attention, love, and applause is due to that work as a whole” (278). Having metaphorically weighed, as in a laboratory, the fable, characters, and techniques of _The Botanic Garden_, Seward concludes that the poem is destined for lasting fame. In concluding her analysis with Shakespeare’s great and glorious name, Seward returns to an earlier passage favorably comparing Darwin’s to Shakespeare’s imaginative power: “The lavish magnificence of imagery in this work, genius alone, bold, original, creative, and fertile in the extreme, could have produced” (151). For Seward, Darwin’s imaginative genius outweighs any incidental failures. While she observes scattered technical lapses (for example, “Personification is surely carried too far when . . . azotic gas is made the lover of virgin air” [156]), Seward considers Darwin a worthy successor not only to Shakespeare but to Milton and Pope, a triumvirate she venerated throughout her life.\(^\text{13}\)

By placing herself in the role of Darwin’s critic, Seward turned the tables on her first poetic mentor. Her lengthy technical digressions and occasional corrections of fact seem designed partly to prove that the pupil had now outstripped her master both in technical skill and sometimes even in knowledge, as in her description of Mrs. Delany’s paper flowers. In one instance, Seward chastises Darwin for using, with no acknowledgment, forty-six lines written by herself for his exordium (258). While expressing near-worshipful admiration of _The Botanic Garden_, Seward manages to suggest her poetic superiority, in some respects, to the man who encouraged her verse writing at thirteen but later claimed her lines for his own and had earlier been credited by some with rewriting Seward’s original draft of _Elegy on Captain Cook_ (Ashmun 74–75). Teresa Barnard believes that Darwin probably collaborated in the Cook elegy when it originated as a manuscript exercise (Anna Seward, 118). Seward, as the chief writer, had later taken full credit for the poem, as was customary in such circles. After her initial, successful publications, Seward established herself as an independent poet (Anna Seward, 118). As Darwin’s protégée, Seward, however, was ideally qualified to assess his work. Darwin evidently instilled in Seward her admiration of Pope and urged her study of his style. Her eventual mastery of Pope’s craft thus became not only her source of authority but the critical “edge tool” with which she dissected Darwin’s couplets. Unfortunately, both Darwin’s and Seward’s adherence to the technical virtuosity that dominated poetry of the early century, such as attention to sound effects, would shortly doom both to oblivion, or at least to excision from studies of both eighteenth-century and Romantic-era verse. In his reprint edition of _The Botanic Garden_—included in a Garland series of significant minor poetry between 1789 and 1830—Donald H. Reiman quotes Leigh Hunt’s explanation for
why he was dismissed: Darwin “was of the school of Pope,” and by developing Pope’s “monotonous and cloying versification” to an extreme, he “gave the public at large a suspicion that there was something wrong in its nature” (1:xiii). Far from an immortal masterpiece, *The Botanic Garden* seemed to Hunt in 1815 a decadent exercise in the outmoded couplet form. Reiman concludes that although all of the early Romantic poets were surely influenced by aspects of Darwin’s work (Blake, after all, engraved plates for the first edition), most considered his style a negative example (1:xii–xiii). Since Seward focused her critical discourse precisely on Darwin’s style, the Popeian style she too had worked to analyze and refine, her elaborate study of *The Botanic Garden* had as little chance as the epic itself of impressing posterity. Her own poetry would fare no better.

It is important not to overstate Seward’s negativism in the *Memoirs*. An earlier study of Darwin’s poetry by James Venable Logan devotes several pages to the possibility that Seward may have written critically of Darwin because at one time she loved him but had been jilted (5–9). Logan weighs whether such an episode accounts for the “alleged malice in the *Memoirs*” (5) but fails to find support for either the love affair or the allegations, judging her biography “pronouncedly friendly” (6). Logan does, however, assert that Seward had “a good deal of spleen in her nature, as witness her attitudes toward Dr. Johnson and Edgeworth, and in her later years it vented itself on Darwin” (7). We encounter variations on Logan’s diagnosis of Seward’s “spleen” in observations from the eighteenth century until now, as various critics grapple with her propensity for judgmental evaluation. In *Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets*, Desmond King-Hele describes Seward’s biography as “often quite waspish” (15) but deems her review of *The Botanic Garden* “both discerning and magnanimous” (155). King-Hele, however, believes that since Darwin likely wrote or heavily revised portions of Seward’s *Elegy on Captain Cook*, he unconsciously borrowed lines of hers as a sort of repayment (153–54). His deduction supports the notion of a competition between the younger poet and her mentor; he considers their “literary relationship . . . incestuous” and assumes that each influenced the other (154). King-Hele’s hint of a kind of family relationship, in which Seward began as a poet firmly under the tutelage of her poetic “father” but later wished to distance herself, while Darwin remained understandably oblivious to her rebellion, rings true. We have noted Teresa Barnard’s discussion of the origins of the Cook elegy in a manuscript circle (*Anna Seward* 118), a practice that, as we also have observed, later Romantic-era poets disclaimed after they rose to prominence, according to Michelle Levy. Seward’s transition from collaborative to individual poet was thus not untypical—or rather, it would soon resemble the career path of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, and other poets.
who worked to obscure the collaborative bases of their early publications. In each case, the writer’s path to acknowledgment as “an original genius” was fraught with complexity owing to relationships with early collaborators (Levy 9). King-Hele’s suggestion thus seems quite plausible and represents an advance over Logan’s, which seeks an explanation in Seward’s emotions and settles, if not on the resentment of a woman scorned, on the peevish “spleen” of an aging spinster. King-Hele acknowledges that Darwin wrote some of the lines in Seward’s first, spectacularly successful, published poem but concedes her anger over his later plagiarism was justified. He considers Seward’s criticism as that of a practicing poet, albeit a poet with an axe to grind.

Seward’s critical remarks, dismissed as padding by Ashmun (236), in fact follow Samuel Johnson’s precedent, in his Lives of the Poets, of including criticism within biography. Seward’s analysis also suggests a good deal about her relationship with her first mentor. Much as she diverts veiled anger against her father into her portrait of Eugenio’s well-meaning but destructive father in Louisa, so in the Memoirs she subtly avenges Darwin’s professional slights by exposing his theft of her forty-six lines of verse not once but twice (94–96, 258) and criticizing his various poems incorporated into her narrative. She, moreover, chastises the impiety of his proposition, in the Zoonomia (1794), that animals have a share of reason rather than mere brute instinct. Darwin’s ideas, of course, later became the groundwork of his grandson Charles’s evolutionary theory, but to Seward, the idea that humans and animals were not completely different creations was, if not blasphemous, the result of such devotion to his theory of interrelatedness that he failed to recognize the barrier God had erected between species (61–68). Under the guise of an impartial, on the whole admiring, biographer, Seward insinuated her mentor’s poetic and religious failings, suggesting in turn her personal superiority in those areas. In the end, then, Seward’s Memoirs of Dr. Darwin is as much about herself, or about her relation to Darwin, as it is about the doctor. But Seward presented her biography as a model of indifferent observation, clearly intending a contrast between her “warts and all” portrait and the worshipful narratives Thrale-Piozzi and Boswell had written about Samuel Johnson.

Boswell and especially Johnson lurk throughout the Memoirs as Seward’s unacknowledged models and adversaries in the art of biography. While the Memoirs are about Seward’s relationship with Darwin almost more than about Darwin himself, they are also about Seward’s relationships with Boswell and Johnson. Seward’s need to outdo Boswell at his own, Johnsonian, biographical methods derived from a contretemps in the previous decade. She echoes Boswell’s claim, in his Life of Johnson, that “had [Johnson’s] other friends been as diligent and ardent as
I was, he might have been almost entirely preserved” (1:30). At the conclusion of her preface to the *Memoirs*, Seward remarks that another Darwinian protégé, a Mr. Bilsborrow, is writing the doctor’s life, but Darwin left few biographical materials, Bilsborrow only knew him in his Derby years, and she is the only living authority on Darwin’s Lichfield years who is willing to share her information about him. Between herself and Bilsborrow, therefore, “all will probably be known that can now with accuracy be traced of Dr. Darwin” (*Memoirs* xii). However, Seward, unlike Boswell, does not include letters and other documents in his biography, remarking that Darwin’s letters were not exceptional and that he frowned on publishing inferior work (vi). Neither will she record conversations, “since Dr. Darwin constantly shrunk with reserved pride from all that candour would deem confidential conversation, and which the world is so apt to ridicule as vain egotism” (xi). Since Boswell’s *Life* most memorably portrayed Johnson through conversations both public and confidential, Seward seems to imply that her own, much briefer study is in fact superior because she eschews recourse to letters and conversations. Seward, moreover, knew that Boswell had been selective in his anecdotes, refusing to use material he considered particularly unflattering. Her “beauties and faults” approach seems designed to counter his selectivity with her rigorous fairness, “precluding, on one hand, unjust depreciation, and on the other, over-valuing partiality” (xii). Her dependence on personal experience and the testimony of a few trusted witnesses contrasts with Boswell’s effort to fill the gaps caused by his late acquaintance and long absences from Johnson. In short, *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin* represents Seward’s last effort to settle scores with Boswell by crafting a biography more honest and fair, if obviously less complete, than his famous *Life*. By applying the critical values she imbibed from Darwin, as his pupil, and from Johnson, as his avid reader, she attempted to surpass Boswell in his own biographical medium.

Johnson is the third, perhaps the most important, professional rival looming over Darwin’s biography. Seward first alludes to him in her preface in an ostensibly admiring remark about Thrale-Piozzi’s and Boswell’s portraits. Had they not portrayed Johnson as a genius flawed by “somber irritability . . . literary jealousy . . . party prejudice . . . [and] bigot zeal,” readers would have believed all the invidious assessments in his *Lives of the Poets*. “Then, to the injury of our national taste, and to the literary and moral character of the great English classics, more universal confidence had been placed in the sophistries of those volumes” (ix). The chief accomplishment of Thrale-Piozzi and Boswell, then, is that they inadvertently exposed Johnson as an unreliable arbiter of British literary culture. Johnson himself appears only briefly in the *Memoirs* because he and Darwin felt
“mutual and strong dislike” for one another (43). Pausing to consider for several pages Johnson’s failure to acknowledge the many literary and learned inhabitants of Lichfield—including her father—Seward concludes that “Johnson liked only worshippers” and was averse to the society of his intellectual equals (53). Johnson overlooked Darwin, for example, because although the latter was “at least his equal in genius, his superior in science,” his stammer disqualified him for Johnson’s combative and sarcastic conversation (54). “[Too] intellectually great to be an humble listener to Johnson, he shunned him. . . . The surly dictator felt the mortification and revenged it, by affecting to avow his disdain” (54). Seward’s observation of the antipathy between two great men, neither of whom would acknowledge the other’s eminence, is quite plausible and reflects almost as poorly on Darwin as on Johnson. Yet Seward frames their aversion as entirely Johnson’s fault, an example of his “literary jealousy” that she condemned whenever given an opportunity.

Seward’s conviction of Johnson’s rudeness and unfairness, based on personal experience and printed evidence, emerges early in her correspondence and culminated in a public dispute with Boswell. The exchange took place in a series of letters to the Gentleman’s Magazine following Boswell’s publication of his Tour of the Hebrides (1786) and again after the appearance of Johnson’s Life (1794). In both instances, Seward’s intention was to dissuade the public from lionizing a brilliant man whose flawed character rendered his guardianship of the British literary canon, not to mention his stature as a moral and intellectual exemplar, questionable. Seward’s quest to dethrone Johnson has been considered at best naïve and at worst malicious but always puzzling. Ashmun cites Walter Scott’s conviction that snobbery inspired Seward’s contempt, although she admits that there were plenty of witnesses who corroborated Johnson’s rudeness and disdain for other writers (117, 121–23). Seward’s mystifying preoccupation (Ashmun describes it as “almost . . . an obsession” [123]) demands explanation and appropriately concludes this study. Johnson was another, perhaps the most significant, in the series of Seward’s literary “fathers”; she shared more opinions with Johnson than otherwise, and her chief objections were not based on snobbery or ignorance but on justifiable principles.