Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century

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The most surprising aspect of Seward’s antipathy toward Samuel Johnson is that she shared a great many of his assumptions. Seward was twenty when, in 1762, the fifty-three year-old Johnson received a pension for his renowned *Dictionary*. More than a generation younger than Johnson, she devoured all of his writings and incorporated many of his literary judgments into her own theories. They also shared some personality traits. Both, for example, indulged in forms of “talking for victory,” Boswell’s term for Johnson’s combative style. Many of Seward’s letters exhibit a Johnsonian persistence in debating topics, especially literary topics, until her correspondents admitted the justice of her opinions. Likewise, her published criticism often appeared as debates: Gretchen Foster has edited her exchanges with Joseph Weston, in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, regarding the relative merits of Dryden and Pope. Besides attacking Boswell’s writings, she also exchanged letters with Thomas Jerningham in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1801) debating pulpit oratory. From the debates with Weston and Jerningham, it is clear that Seward enjoyed such epistolary contests, although by her own account she did not enjoy conversational wrangling. In their different ways, however, Johnson and Seward excelled in rhetoric designed to convince others of, and even to insist on, the justice of their opinions.

Both Johnson and Seward admired Augustan poetic standards such as respect for traditional rules of composition, a belief in the idea that artists had a moral responsibility, and the belief that art should reflect general truths about humans and the natural world. In *Rasselas*, for example, Imlac teaches such classical precepts as that the poet “does not number the streaks of the tulip” (63) but presents
images of general nature, a belief Seward echoed in 1807 when after reading the *Lyrical Ballads* she exclaimed to Walter Scott that Wordsworth must have been mad to write about ten thousand dancing daffodils. An “egotistic manufacturer of metaphysic importance upon trivial themes,” Wordsworth had turned the classical standard on its head (*Letters* 6:366–67). Seward also followed Johnson in adopting the “beauties and faults” structure of Restoration criticism, a method that, as Jean Marsden has observed, resulted in contemporary rejection of Johnson’s preface when his edition of Shakespeare was published in 1765 (122). Marsden concludes that Johnson’s preface appeared during the transitional period “when neoclassical attitudes toward literature and the poet became intermixed with those frequently termed romantic, when emphasis on individual emotional response began to overwhelm the common consensus called taste” (126). The new standard, which Austen parodied in *Sense and Sensibility* just two years after Seward’s death in Marianne’s certainty “that rapturous delight . . . could alone be called taste” (15), made Johnson’s and Seward’s efforts to balance praise and blame seem cold, even mean spirited. Since Marianne represents both sensibility and a discernibly “Romantic” perspective, Seward’s method had become not only old fashioned but unattractive to many fashionable readers. Seward’s persistence in approaching texts from this perspective probably accounts for some critics’ impression of her malice, both in letters to friends like Hayley critiquing their latest publications and in published analyses like her chapters on *The Botanic Garden*. For Seward, as for Dryden, Pope, and Johnson, painstaking reflection on a work’s graces and defects yielded a quasi-scientific assessment of its value. She may have adopted the approach to avoid the bias against women as supposed creatures of passion rather than reason, incapable of valid critical judgment. Whatever her reasons for a critical practice at odds with that of her contemporaries, and even with her own proclaimed sensibility, Seward’s predilection for Johnsonian critical methods raises further questions about her violent rejection of his opinions.

Seward’s antipathy to Johnson appears in a series of letters to Thomas Whalley in 1781. She describes Johnson’s character as a compendium of antitheses: “at once the most liberal and the most ungenerous; the most dark, and the most enlightened; the most compassionate and the most merciless; the most friendly, and the least sincere; the best-humoured and the most acrimonious; the most soothing, and the most abusive; the most grateful, and the most ungrateful, of mankind” (Whalley 1:346). She defined each of the opposed traits, explaining that Johnson was literally generous to the poor but “ungenerous because he has no mercy upon reputation of any sort, and sickens with envy over literary fame; as his
late work ['The Lives of the Poets'] sufficiently evinces” (Whalley 1:346). She found him a religious bigot whose superstitions were “malign and violent” and who was merciless to anyone whose political or religious views differed from his (Whalley 1:347). Although Johnson could be friendly and affectionate, “from the instant that the lightest opposition is made to his opinions, he exalts his voice into thunder, and ‘don’t talk nonsense’, and ‘sir’ or ‘madam, it is false’, and ‘if you think so, you think like a fool’, becomes the language he uses, and with which he interlards his imperious dogmas” (Whalley 1:347). These impressions were based on Seward’s observations of Johnson during his biannual visits to Lichfield, when he dined at the Bishop’s Palace and was often in her company. There was probably more than one instance like one she recalled in which Johnson condemned her to “die in a surfeit of bad taste” for admiring Lycidas (Letters 1:66). Seward found Johnson’s animosity toward Milton, as well as his sharp criticism of Cowley, Collins, Gray, Mason, Beattie and other poets she admired, unforgivable. Since Johnson had dedicated his Dictionary to the honor of his country, he was certainly aware of patriotic efforts to establish a British canon. As we have seen, Seward believed that Johnson’s criticism threatened both the national taste and the “literary and moral” reputation of British literature (Memoirs x) and that she was not exaggerating his potential influence (Bonnell 134). When in 1785 Boswell asked her for anecdotes about Johnson, she reminded him that “the genuine lovers of the poetic science look with anxious eyes to Mr. Boswell . . . expecting . . . impartial justice “ (Letters 1:42). Her disappointment with the Life of Johnson and determination to delineate the uglier aspects of Johnson’s character—his literary jealousy and bigotry—were thus rooted in her wish to counter Johnson’s denigration of British writers and to reinstate the “defects” amid the “graces” she found too prevalent in Boswell’s account.

Seward’s repeated claims that Johnson exhibited jealousy were, we have seen, the object of a sonnet about an occasion when she believed she tricked Boswell into admitting that Johnson’s disparagement of David Garrick resulted from envy of the actor’s early success. Boswell, on that occasion, had asked why a critic would envy dead poets. Seward’s response assumed Johnson resented his many years of obscurity before achieving recognition and financial security. The opinion of neither was to change. Seward believed that The Lives of the Poets did not contain disinterested, balanced criticism but “sophistries . . . which seem to have put on the whole armour of truth by the force of their eloquence and the wit of their satire” (Memoirs x). Seward’s belief that criticism was a quest for the “truth” about a work’s value was another belief she inherited from predecessors, along with the assumption that criticism was a moral as well as intellectual exercise.
Marsden has observed, for example, that Johnson’s disappointment with the lack of poetic justice in Shakespeare’s plays was becoming anachronistic (124–25). Johnson believed Shakespeare’s lack of concern with poetic justice indicated a moral failing. Similarly, Seward believed that Johnson’s failure to comment justly on the nation’s poets was a moral failure. His “gloomy bigotry” additionally undermined his critical reliability: religious prejudice made disinterested moral criticism unlikely. Seward proposed to dissuade Boswell’s readers from “boundless veneration” of Johnson that would lead, in turn, to “injustice toward many” other writers (Memoirs ix). This task would require exposing the jealousy, sophistry, and bigotry she had witnessed from childhood but that Boswell had purged from his account. While Boswell and others accused her of malice, Seward believed herself to be enacting her proper role as British muse, exposing Johnson for the glory of British poetry. In her view, Boswell had failed, in both the Tour and Life, in his critical duty by not portraying Johnson’s “deep . . . shades” as well as his virtues (Letters. 1:45). In letters published in the Gentleman’s Magazine after each publication, Seward attempted to balance Boswell’s account.

Seward’s temerity in addressing Boswell is more remarkable in light of Barnard’s revelation, in her recent biography, of a series of secret letters between Seward and Boswell in 1784. Boswell, enamored of the beautiful author of Louisa, initiated the correspondence in the guise of a literary admirer. Since his seductive intention was clear, Barnard concludes that Seward engaged in a brief exchange in hope of converting Boswell’s physical attraction into an intellectual affinity. Seward, flattered by the attention of an influential man of letters (134), knew that Boswell was aware of her reputation, damaged by her relationship with Saville, and hoped to convert his salacious thoughts into friendship. The letters ended with Seward’s definitive, yet flattering, refusal of an affair (138). Yet, as Barnard notes, the episode must have affected their public exchanges over Johnson (139). Seward undertook her public accusations knowing that Boswell could, if he chose, reveal a clandestine correspondence that, despite her refusal to permit his advances, showed her willingness to accept his addresses. An eighteenth-century woman already concerned about her reputation would have to have considered such a possibility, unrelated as it might have been to her critical purposes. In the secret letters, Boswell confirmed that, for him, Seward’s sexual appeal took precedence over her literary ability (136). He might easily have chosen to end her critical attacks by exposing what would have been considered at least an impropriety. According to the period’s logic, such an exposure would have doomed Seward’s critical reputation. She chose nevertheless to persist in her campaign to adjust Boswell’s portrait of his beloved mentor.
Seward’s first letter to the *Gentleman’s Magazine* appeared in February 1786 among a number of critical letters following Boswell’s publication of his *Tour of the Hebrides* (59:125–26). Her main purpose of exposing Johnson’s lack of benevolence is indicated by her choice of Benvolio as a nom de plume. Since, as we have seen, Seward defined Captain Cook as heroic owing to benevolence, she implied that Johnson was antiheroic because he lacked that virtue. Her letter first chastises the magazine for idolizing Johnson, whom Boswell’s recent journal has revealed to be prejudiced and sophistical. She deplores Boswell’s scenes recounting Johnson’s pious respect for ancient Catholic ruins, particularly when he railed against Dissenting fellow Protestants. She attests that personal acquaintance confirms the accuracy of Boswell’s recollections, although he “strives to spread a veil” over Johnson’s “malignance” (59:125). She instances Johnson’s insulting remarks about Scotland even in the company of his hosts, his claim that Cowley was more concise than Pope, and worst of all, his refusal to acknowledge Garrick’s leadership in reviving Shakespeare’s popularity. Garrick, she protests, revived Shakespeare by producing and performing his plays. Garrick, in fact, was “Shakespeare’s best commentator, not excepting” Johnson (59:126). Seward questions Boswell’s taste in recording Johnson’s disparagement of Elizabeth Montagu’s defense of Shakespeare and concludes by rebuking the magazine for claiming, in its review of Boswell’s *Tour*, that “virtue was the best recommendation” to Johnson (59:126).

The friend of Richard Savage and Oliver Goldsmith (whose veracity had been questioned) could not be described as a man who demanded virtuous companions. Toryism, she suggests, was a stronger criterion, leading him to praise Richard Blackmore, damn Thomas Gray, and declare “King William a rascal” (59:126). This first letter contains most of the themes in Seward’s private correspondence: his religious and political bigotry, jealousy of fellow writers and of Garrick, and the sophistry with which he defended his absurd opinions.

Seward took most seriously her self-imposed mission to expose Johnson’s failings before his biographies managed to establish him in the public consciousness as a kind of saint. She did not wait long before publishing, in April 1786, another Benvolio letter aimed more squarely at undermining Johnson’s reputation for morality, as attested by Boswell in his *Tour* and Thrale-Piozzi in her *Anecdotes*. Benvolio is outraged by Thrale-Piozzi’s pronouncement that Johnson was “good beyond the imitation of perishable beings.” In Benvolio’s view, the “injustice and malice” displayed throughout *The Lives of the Poets* amply refute Thrale-Piozzi’s accolade (59:302). Seward cites Johnson himself, in his *Rambler* 60 essay on biography, in defense of Boswell’s disclosures of Johnson’s less attractive remarks and actions. Accurate representation is a duty “paid to knowledge, to virtue, and to
truth” (59:303). Her own reflections perform that duty by observing, in Thrale-Piozzi’s memoirs, instances of unchristian rudeness and lack of charity. She adduces comments that Johnson himself must have known to be insincere or even false, as in his remark that “any man, any woman, any child, might have written Ossian’s works” (59:303). She questions the superior virtue of a person “who delighted to destroy the self-esteem of almost all who approached him by the wound- ing force of witty and bitter sarcasm” (59:304). “If it is possible,” she concludes, “that a man might have been pre-eminently excellent, who scarce ever conversed without violating the rule of doing unto others as he would they should do unto him . . . there may be sanity in the declaration, that Dr. Johnson was ‘good beyond the imitation of perishable beings’” (59:304). Exposed even by his admirer as having violated Christ’s chief command, obedience to the “golden rule,” Johnson may have been “one of the greatest geniuses, and certainly the most extraordinary being that ever existed” (59:302), but he was still human and liable to sin. By naming and illustrating his sins (besides pride, anger, envy, and untruthfulness, Benvolio also alludes to Johnson’s sloth and gluttony), Seward tries to cut Johnson down to mortal size after Thrale-Piozzi’s apotheosis. Today her gesture would seem irrelevant, but since, as we have seen, Seward adhered to the same tradition of moral criticism expounded by Johnson, her effort to unveil his moral failures was an intrinsic part of her campaign to undermine his critical authority. As we have also observed, she was walking a literary tightrope, because Boswell might have accused her of moral failings in turn if he had not maintained a gentlemanly silence.

Seward’s third Benvolio letter appeared in August and answered a response to her previous articles charging her with malevolence for exposing Johnson’s faults. Once more she focused directly on her mission as moral witness. She comments that if Benvolio’s strictures of Johnson’s malevolence are themselves malevolent, then a judge who condemns a murderer is himself a murderer (62:684). She adds that since evidence of Johnson’s “jealous pride . . . irascibility . . . and envy” is manifest in printed records, it cannot be malevolent to acknowledge his faults, even if Johnson, in his published diary, confessed only to indolence (62:684). Seward concedes that Johnson’s personal failings do not lessen the force of his moral arguments. But she insists that Johnson’s lack of charity rendered him less than Christian: “If Johnson walked humbly with his God, he did not walk obediently, since his life was one continued disobedience to the humility commanded by Him in the Scriptures; and to his great precept, ‘Do unto others, as ye would they should do unto you’” (62:685). She concludes by defending herself against the charge of malevolence, instancing published evidence of Johnson’s injustice,
superstition, and unfairness. “To bear testimony against its corrosives, with a view to counteract their influence and baleful example, cannot render misapplied the signature of Benvolio” (62:685). By systematically dismantling her critic’s argument, Seward reveals the false logic of the charge. Johnson’s lack of charity, reflected in his bearing false witness against Milton, Gilbert Walmsley, Matthew Prior, James Hammond, and Gray, has the potential to damage their reputations as men and as writers owing to his “unjust influence and baleful example.” She compliments her adversary for comparing Johnson to a pineapple while insisting that his rough exterior did not conceal inner sweetness but “internal bitterness . . . of which the generous mind is indignant” (62:685).

Seward’s Benvolio letters attracted rejoinders, but they appeared among other Gentleman’s Magazine reviews praising or lamenting aspects of recently published Johnsoniana. While adamant, they were among a number of reviews both friendly and hostile. Benvolio’s perspective was that of a moral critic calling attention to Johnson’s envy and injustice in order to undermine his literary judgments. Since Johnson routinely misrepresented his fellow writers’ work, denying even the most characteristic aspects of their writings—“he . . . has denied to Prior ease, to Hammond nature, and to Gray sublimity” (62:685)—he cannot be trusted. Although the Benvolio articles selectively repeat ideas conveyed many times in Seward’s private correspondence, they focus on her moral intention and argue logically from the evidence in Johnson’s, Boswell’s, and Thrale-Piozzi’s publications. Benvolio’s tone is indignant, expressive of “the generous mind” fearing Johnson’s corrosive influence on national literary taste. Defending herself against the charge of malice, Benvolio claims to defend charity toward fellow writers, Dissenting Protestants, and former mentors. Johnson failed to treat them benevolently and thus requires chastisement lest others be misled by his unchristian example. Although she identified herself as Benvolio to friends, she did not publicly avow the letters until December 1793, by which time their clarity and logic had been obscured by an intervening controversy.

The March 1793 issue of the Gentleman’s Magazine contained a series of extracts from letters between Seward and Hayley following publication of The Lives of the Poets in 1782 (73:197). As she explained in a letter to Anna Rogers Stokes, she had transcribed passages from their letters for correspondents who had been curious, at the time, about her and Hayley’s opinions of Johnson’s Lives (Letters 5:223). Ten years later, apparently capitalizing on public interest in Boswell’s biography, one of those correspondents had anonymously submitted the extracts for publication. Anyone who remembered Benvolio would have recognized “his” opinions and style in Seward’s remarks. The letters to Hayley, however, suggest a
personal element to Seward’s antipathy that counters her pose as defender of justice. She describes entertaining Johnson during a visit to Lichfield and biting her tongue when he disparages Beattie and Mason. When Johnson has little more to say about Hayley than that he “is a man of Genius,” Seward recalls, she mutters to herself “And is that all that thou hast to say?” but “to his ear I kept an indignant silence” (73:198–99). Since Seward has already described how she recoils from the volleys of sarcasm unleashed by Johnson on those who contradict him, her silence throughout the conversation is understandable. But her anger toward Johnson after he commends her friend as a “man of Genius” is confusing. Angry with him for abusing Beattie and Mason, she is nearly as irritated by his failure to elaborate on Hayley’s brilliance, although he has confessed to reading only one of Hayley’s poems. Here we sense a more than professional animosity. It is as if Seward, having constructed her notion of Johnson, is disappointed by his failure to condemn Hayley and thus confirm her image of his unfairness. Hayley’s extracts are more playful and disinterested; he compares Johnson to Milton’s Satan and styles him the Leviathan of criticism. Seward’s excerpts are eloquent but reveal a personal dimension that could be used to her disadvantage. Seward herself, however, seems chiefly to have objected to the extracts’ unauthorized publication because she thought it might annoy Hayley. Her letter to Stokes describes mortification at finding her exchanges with Hayley in print (Letters 5:224). In a letter to the Gentleman’s Magazine in May, however, she corrected some transcriptions in her own letters lest they seem “nonsense” (73:293) but otherwise expressed no reticence about having her correspondence made public.

Seward’s final published strictures of Johnson were part of an uncomfortable exchange with Boswell in the late fall of 1793. Boswell had asked Seward eight years previously for anecdotes about Johnson, and she had complied with stories based not only on her personal observations but also on his mother’s and Lucy Porter’s memories. “If he inserts them unmutilated . . . they will contribute to display Johnson’s real character to the public,” she explained to her Quaker friend Molly Knowles (Letters 1:47). When the Life of Johnson was published in 1791, however, she was predictably disappointed: “What I foresaw has happened. That ingenious pencil which so well fulfilled the biographer’s duty, and painted the despot exactly as he was, when roaming the lonely Hebrides, has, at the impulse of terror, been exchanged for a more glowing one; and in this work almost everything is kept back that could give umbrage to Johnson’s idolators” (Letters 3:85–86). She nevertheless believed that Boswell had recorded enough rude or contradictory remarks about living persons that Johnson’s true character was exposed. She paraphrases Johnson’s “Vanity of Human Wishes”: “Say thou, whose thoughts
at humble fame repine, / Shall Johnson’s wit with Johnson’s spleen be thine?” (Letters 3:87). She was further disconcerted at finding few of her anecdotes included and those few, edited to suit Boswell’s version of his mentor. One incident she had narrated, for example, was a dispute she had witnessed between Johnson and Knowles about the conversion of a young heiress, Jenny Harry, to the Quaker religion; Johnson condemned Harry as an apostate despite Knowles’s defense of Harry’s right to obey her conscience. Johnson had persisted in reviling the “odious wench” for her disobedience to her father and desertion of the Anglican religion. Seward was incensed. She had not read the second volume, “but I hear it contains the memorable conversation at Dilly’s, but without that part of it of which I made minutes, and in which you appear to so much advantage over the imperious and gloomy Intolerant” (Letters 3:74). Although she does not record her protest in her letters, she must have challenged Boswell about his omissions because he responded in notes to his second edition. These notes, too, disappointed Seward because he rejected some of her information, claiming it was based on unreliable sources. Boswell’s repudiation spurred Seward to attempt a public intervention.

The October 1793 number of the Gentleman’s Magazine opened with a letter from Seward complaining that Boswell had not only rejected some of her information but failed to state the reasons why she believed her facts were accurate. For example, Boswell “corrected” her testimony, gleaned from her mother and Lucy Porter, that the poem “On Receiving a Sprig of Myrtle from a Lady” was written for Porter by the adolescent Johnson. Johnson’s longtime friend Edmund Hector had told Boswell that the poem was in fact written by Johnson on behalf of Hector after the latter received a gift of myrtle. Seward argues that Hector’s contradictory story was easily explained by Johnson’s probable reluctance to confide, when giving a copy to Hector, that his poem had originally been addressed to the daughter of the woman he eventually married. She adds that Johnson’s many patently false critical assertions made plausible the “slight untruth” of such an evasion. Seward concludes by insisting that her letter be published in order to clear herself from Boswell’s imputation of dishonesty, vanity, or prejudice (74:875).

After his silent reception of the Benvolio letters and the excerpts from the Seward-Hayley exchange, Boswell was roused by Seward’s published complaint. He replied at length in the November Gentleman’s Magazine in a letter calculated to embarrass and insult his antagonist. He begins by paraphrasing her October letter, in which Seward explained that she had obliged Boswell’s request for information by “[covering] several sheets of paper” describing a few anecdotes (74:875). Boswell mocks her by admitting that Seward “did indeed cover several sheets of paper [with a] few anecdotes,” but her stories were “not only poetically
luxuriant, but . . . tinctured with a strong prejudice against” Johnson (74:1009). He proceeds to dismiss one of Seward’s anecdotes, claiming the three-year-old Johnson composed a brief poem about killing a duck, as “utterly improbable . . . credulously related” by “good Mrs. Lucy Porter, among others” (74:1009). Another vignette, recounting Mrs. Johnson’s stern conversation with her son about marrying Mrs. Porter, struck Boswell as “so strange” that he sought confirmation from the person whom Seward claimed as her source. That lady promptly repudiated the story, which Boswell then suppressed because “my book was to be a real history, and not a novel” (74:1009). Of the myrtle sprig poem, Boswell comments that since his version was originally published by Thrale-Piozzi and confirmed by Hector, he had no choice but to correct Seward’s anecdote based on their “decisive evidence.” He quotes the note in his second edition, which recounts Seward’s information, adding that “she no doubt supposed [it] to be correct; but it shews how dangerous it is to trust too implicitly to traditional testimony and ingenious inference” (74:1010). Boswell thus neatly undercuts Seward’s authority by rejecting her sources, her mother and the “credulous” Porter, in favor of Thrale-Piozzi and Hector. Having detected Seward’s prejudice against Johnson, he suspects the motives of her “ingenious inference.”

Boswell argues against Seward’s assertion that the myrtle verses were written for Lucy Porter “as if good enough only for a schoolboy. They have been long and universally admired . . . and require no defence” (74:1010). He believes it more likely that Johnson wrote the poem for Hector and then, “with a pleasant economy, made them serve a second time for a compliment to her” (74:1010). Such conjecture, however, is irrelevant because “that they were written for Mr. Hector . . . is all that is necessary to be proved; and it has been proved” (74:1010). Boswell declares that Seward should not have felt her veracity questioned because “it is only a matter of argument upon evidence; and, I think, a very plain one” (74:1010). Having rejected her ability to construct a sound argument along with her evidence, Boswell proceeds to question Seward’s grasp of context. She has accused Johnson of making false assertions but failed to grasp that his witty remarks were not intended to convey his serious opinions. Rather, they were instances of his “wonderful dexterity in retort” (74:1010). Seward, he implies, is incapable of appreciating that distinction, even as she is incapable of reading Latin; Boswell remarks that Johnson’s conversational judgments “are evidently ardentia verba (glowing words—I ask her pardon for quoting a Latin phrase)” (74:1010). How could an unlearned woman appreciate Johnson’s epigrams? Boswell defends his mentor from Seward’s imputations of falsehood, suggesting that they proceed from malice. He concludes by implying that he chivalrously repressed Johnson’s
opinion of her, “thinking that she might not like it,” and so now wonders if somehow she learned his estimate and was stung to retaliate “on her venerable townsman since his decease” (74:1011). What else could have motivated her various disguised attacks (he clearly intends the Benvolio letters) or the publication of her letters to Hayley, “impotently attempting to undermine the noble pedestal on which the public opinion has placed Dr. Johnson?” (74:1011). In a final flourish, Boswell renounces any effort to expose “the little arts which have been employed by a cabal of minor poets and poetesses, who are sadly mortified that Dr. Johnson, by his powerful sentence, assigned their proper station to writers of this description” (74:1011).

Boswell’s rejoinder is worth describing in detail not only because his wit is amusing but because he employs rhetorical strategies intended to destroy Seward’s credibility. In her Benvolio letters, she relied on textual examples of Johnson’s cruelty and falsehood, but Boswell implies that she either misunderstood the irony of his remarks, was motivated by malice, or both. Since wit or intelligence as well as learning were required to engage in ironic wordplay, a literary and conversational technique much admired in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Seward has unmasked herself as an unworthy commentator on Johnson and his circle. Boswell sneers at Mrs. Seward and Lucy Porter as credulous old women retailing old traditions; his witnesses, the sophisticated Thrale-Piozzi and learned Hector, are, he implies, necessarily preferable. He regards their evidence as proof and Seward’s anecdotes as worthless tales. Finally, Boswell confirms Seward’s worst fears about Johnson’s potential to destroy the reputations of British poets, living or dead. His reflection on the cabal of minor poets impotently trying to lower Johnson from his pedestal responds to her repeated warnings, as Benvolio and in the “scraps of letters” to Hayley, that Johnson would succeed in lowering the public’s estimate of the poets he dismissed, however wittily, in his publications and conversations.

Boswell’s letter was, as Seward declared in her next and final published letter on the subject, “too invidious not to require some comments” (74:1098). The December Gentleman’s Magazine carried her lengthy retort. She denies either embellishing any facts or expressing resentment at his suppression but just observes she merely asked that her reasons for accepting the anecdotes be acknowledged. In her view, “they all convey as strong internal evidence of their verity, from characteristic turn of expression, as any that can be found” in Boswell’s Life (74:1098). In his emendations, for example, Boswell had said that the story of the duck, although discredited, had invited the “ingenious and fanciful reflections” of Seward (Boswell 1:40–41n3). After quoting her reflections on the creative poten-
tial manifested in the four-line poem, Boswell concludes that Seward’s ideas were too “beautifully imagined” to omit, but as they were based on fiction, they could not be included in the biography proper. In her letter, Seward explains that, urged by friends who resented Boswell’s rude introduction of her remarks, she requested only that he state her grounds for accepting such anecdotes as genuine, instead of presenting her comments as mere “fanciful reflections” on fictional events. She reiterates her belief that Johnson wrote the verses to a lady with a myrtle sprig for Lucy Porter, having “too great a respect for Mrs. Porter’s, and for my mother’s, long and unvarying testimony, to resign it” (74:1098). Since, as Boswell admits, Johnson often asserted falsehoods purely to win conversational disputes, there is no reason to accept as true his explanation that he wrote the verses for Hector. She defends herself against Boswell’s charge that her version attempts to disparage Johnson by assigning the poem to his youth. In fact, the verses are more admirable as juvenilia than as inferior mature work. Seward also defends the story of the duck verses as related by Johnson’s mother herself to Porter: “It is more likely he should have forgotten what he said at three years old, than that either of those good women should invent a falsehood” (74:1099). After confronting Boswell’s patronizing dismissal of her chief witnesses, however, Seward admits that the origins of certain anecdotes are uncertain because she heard them repeated by various people, such as “the late Mrs. Cobb.” She accepted such stories because of their “Johnsonian spirit” (74:1099). As for Johnson’s veracity, one has only to compare his praises of Thrale-Piozzi in his published letters with his insulting remarks about her in the Life. She protests that she has always defended Johnson’s superior prose style but has equally inveighed against his injustice toward other writers (74:1099); in other words, she has adhered to the “praise and blame” structure of classical criticism. It is not presumptuous to speak of a person as he really was.

Continuing her self-vindication, Seward maintains that her intention has been to serve as moral critic and dissuade less attentive readers from Johnson worship. She disputes Boswell’s argument that Johnson’s pronouncements against other writers were not untruths but witticisms: such “unjust depreciation” was beneath Johnson as it would be for any speaker (74:1099). She answers Boswell’s implication that she is presumptuous to criticize Johnson: “I have a better right to protest against the malignity of my intellectual superior, Johnson, upon recorded facts, than he had to degrade . . . the morality and piety of his superior, Milton” (74:1099). She calls Boswell’s bluff, so to speak, thanking him for suppressing Johnson’s negative comments about her, saving her from the fate of “many of my superiors, through Mr. Boswell’s rage of communication” (74:1099). Because she
often remonstrated with Johnson when he railed against deserving writers, she has always assumed that Johnson disliked her. Although Boswell thinks that minor poets resent Johnson because he put them in their place, she argues that Johnson too often elevated mediocre poets like Savage and Blackmore above genuinely gifted writers like Prior, Collins, Gray, and Akenside (74:1100). She recalls reading Johnson’s assertion that “[Isaac] Watts was one of the few poets who could look forward with rational hope to the mercy of their God,” a sentence she finds outrageous (74:1100). Johnson himself had praised imagination as the faculty that “exalts us in the scale of rational beings” (74:1100). Since poets, more than any other people, continually exercise their imaginations, they stand acquitted from Johnson’s supremely presumptuous remark. In fact, Johnson knew that others had surpassed him as a poet and was afflicted with “envious spleen” (74:1100). She, however, is free of envy. Warmly admiring Johnson’s style, many of his writings, and his Christian faith, she simply seeks to dissuade others from idolatry. She admits writing the Benvolio letters and encourages readers to reread them before believing Boswell’s characterization of her as malicious. When Johnson’s character is weighed, however, he fails in the balance described in Corinthians 13, St. Paul’s epistle enjoining charity (74:1101). She quotes Bishop Newton, who also found Johnson’s Lives of the Poets malevolent. Resting her case, she promises to write no more on the subject because any further assaults by Boswell “must ultimately redound more to his dishonor than hers” (74:1100).

Seward attempted a point-by-point rebuttal of Boswell’s letter. She answered his deprecation of her witnesses and his implication that she exaggerated her stories. She countered his logic regarding Johnson’s early compositions with her own logical suppositions. She questioned his excuse that Johnson’s insults were witticisms by remarking on the unworthiness of such conversation. She defended herself against the imputation of personal envy or spite, quoting a learned man (since Boswell had pointed out her lack of learning) to corroborate her accusation that Johnson’s criticism was often malicious. She reiterated Benvolio’s charge that Johnson was uncharitable, which rendered his literary judgments suspect. Having concluded her argument, she was unprepared for the vehemence with which Boswell responded in the Gentleman’s Magazine for January 1794. Boswell’s final letter is written in a sarcastic tone: he refers back to his original explanation about the verses with a myrtle sprig as sufficiently convincing to “all who are capable of reasoning and judging of evidence”—a group that does not, obviously, include Seward (75:32). He rebukes Seward for attacking “the great and good Dr. Johnson” on the basis of such an inconsiderable pretext (75:32). Boswell himself is not Seward’s enemy. In fact, after discarding such anecdotes as the verses on the duck
(“to which, for a woman’s reason, she still pertinaciously adheres”), he nevertheless included her “ingenious reflections . . . on that idle tale” (75:32–33). We have seen that Boswell’s note, in the Life, exposed Seward to ridicule, but Boswell insists his inclusion was gallant before repeating that “Miss Nancy Seward’s” criticism of Johnson was presumptuous, since no less an authority than Edmund Malone had styled him “the brightest ornament of the eighteenth century” (75:33). Seward’s “republican” preference of Milton over Johnson reveals her mistaken esteem for a “great poet, who was the most odious character . . . that ever lived” (75:33). He reiterates that he is not Seward’s enemy: “She never did me any harm, nor do I apprehend that she ever can” (75:33). He has no wish to combat with ladies, “and I really must complain that my old friend (if she will forgive me the expression) should represent me so unlike myself” (75:33). Here, Boswell resorts to outright insult, calling Seward by the name used by only her family and closest friends instead of the formal address appropriate to a public argument. After that breach of manners, he alludes to her age, implying that Seward’s bitterness emanates from her status as a fifty-two-year-old spinster. His gross familiarity reduces her from a worthy to a trivial antagonist and their contest from a public debate to a private quarrel. But Boswell’s italicized old friend might also be a veiled reference to their long acquaintance, including the attempted epistolary seduction of which only they were aware but that he might easily make public by producing her letters in his possession. Seward has never done Boswell any harm, but he might do her harm; at least, his private knowledge enables him to address her in a manner that suggests little regard for her dignity.

The rest of Boswell’s letter descends into an orgy of sarcasm. He mocks Seward’s failure to comprehend Johnson’s wit. He catches her in a misquotation of Johnson that she could easily have found recorded correctly in his book; this is an especially problematic blunder given Seward’s reliance on textual evidence. He reveals that he asked Moll Cobb, whom Seward had cited as a source, for confirmation of an anecdote and had been told she had no recollection of the event; moreover, Cobb told Boswell that if Boswell praised Johnson, “Miss Seward will not love you” (75:33). Of her recalling Johnson’s statement that Watt was among the few poets who need not fear meeting God, Boswell retorts “that poets, and poetesses also, have too often been not of the most exemplary lives, is universally known,” but Johnson never wrote or said anything of the kind about them (75:33). The statement certainly refers to Seward’s attachment to Saville and also perhaps to his own attempted seduction of the poet, undermining her critical authority by hinting at her vulnerable reputation. After that glancing blow, Boswell reverts to her intellectual poverty. He corrects Seward’s quotation of Bishop Newton, which
omitted Newton’s praise of Johnson’s genius, learning, and piety (75:34). Although Seward accused Boswell of implying her envy and prejudice, he protests he does “not even suspect that my fair antagonist, ‘herself all the Nine,’ envies any human being” (75:34). He next defends himself for having countered her accusations of his “Guide, Philosopher, and Friend.” Having compared himself and Johnson to Pope and Lord Bolingbroke, Boswell mocks Seward’s Benvolio as Drawcansir, the blustering hero of Lord Buckingham’s travesty of heroic drama, *The Rehearsal* (1671). He assures her that he has well considered her complaints; “the verdict of ineffective ill-nature will never be set aside” (75:34). To end her dispute over “the mighty points of the *Duck* and the *Myrtle*, which have been the causes of this war,” Boswell quotes Johnson himself, citing Porter as a witness, that his father and not he wrote the epitaph on a duck. He quotes a letter from Hector, who wonders why Seward will not “be convinced of her errors” but confirms that Johnson wrote the verses at his request (75:34). “Let the duck be changed into a swan, and the Myrtle into an Olive,” exclaims Boswell. Excusing himself from further contention, he hopes that Seward’s imagination “has men and things enough to employ itself upon, without vainly aspiring to be the judge of Johnson” (75:35).

Even if she had not promised to cease communicating on the subject, Seward would have found a response awkward if not impossible. A letter to Henry Cary thanks him for defending her from Boswell’s “impertinent and invidious spite” (*Letters* 3:346); Cary and others sent letters to the *Gentleman’s Magazine* vindicating her of Boswell’s charges. For Cary, Seward corrects Hector’s account of the origin of the myrtle-sprig verses, revealing to readers of her published correspondence that she had not completely denied herself the opportunity to rebuke Boswell. In his letter, quoted in full by Boswell, Hector stated that Johnson was acquainted with the Porter family until after he wrote the verses. Seward questions Hector’s “strange forgetfulness,” since Lucy Porter’s aunt was married to Seward’s grandfather, Johnson’s tutor, and Porter visited her Lichfield relatives. It is not at all unlikely, contrary to Hector’s belief, that the young Johnson wrote the verses for his teacher’s niece and later shared them with Hector (*Letters* 3:348). Not coincidentally, Seward’s cousin Henry White had also published a letter in the March *Gentleman’s Magazine* explaining Hector’s error using some of the same phrases in Seward’s letter to Cary (75:196–97). Seward either borrowed White’s description or, more likely, since the italicized phrases are typical of her style, White sent a letter by Seward to the magazine as his own. Most galling to Seward, however, was her inability to locate Johnson’s remark about Watts; she asks Cary’s help in finding the damning quotation that Boswell had categorically denied. At the close of her letter, she rejoices that another friend has located in *The Lives of
the Poets a similar statement at the close of Johnson’s biography of Gilbert West: “A stroke of palsy brought to the grave one of those few poets to whom the grave needed not be terrible” (Letters 3:349). If Johnson slandered poets thus in his praise of West, she sees no reason why he may not have uttered a similar remark about Watts. Such was Johnson’s pleasure in “malicious reflections” (Letters 3:350). Unsurprisingly, she avoids mentioning Boswell’s personal insults in her letters to supportive friends.

Seward evidently received her information about West from Anna Rogers Stokes, to whom she replied in a letter dated the same day as her letter to Cary. Before thanking her friend for the reference and assuring her that “it is sent to the Gentleman’s Magazine” (Letters 3:353), Seward replies to another of Stokes’s suggestions. Stokes and her husband had asked her to compile a sort of anti-Lives of the Poets, a positive companion to Johnson’s negative volumes. Seward declines, citing depression, poor health, and the fact that she foresees the critical result. Not only do more readers prefer “to see excellence degraded than exalted” but to what derision would I be exposed from a thousand quarters!—An unlearned female entering the lists of criticism against the mighty Johnson! No, I can never cease to protest against his envious injustice, but cannot be taught to hope that it is in my power to counteract its irreparable mischiefs to poetic literature. I saw the dark cloud descend, surcharged with pernicious coruscations and quench the golden day of its fame—I fear for ever. (Letters 3:351–52)

Seward proceeds to describe her “deep-seated malady” that precludes any intellectual or physical exertion. One wonders whether her illness, which resembles depression, resulted from the frustrating outcome of her contest with Boswell. Certainly his insults would have been grounds for a challenge if she had been a man. Seward is amazed to have found Boswell “capable of insulting any person who cannot inflict the punishment of corporal correction” (Letters 3:353). Fatherless and brotherless, Seward has nobody to avenge Boswell’s virtual assault. It must have added to her grief to recognize that not only could John Saville not properly undertake her vindication but that their relationship had given Boswell grounds for his snide reference to poetesses’ less-than-exemplary lives. In retrospect, she no doubt realized that by permitting Boswell’s seductive letters, she had not only failed to convert him into her platonic admirer but had illustrated her propensity for clandestine, if innocent, relationships. Seward’s letter to Stokes, although written during a flurry of published defenses on her behalf, describes a despairing state that could have resulted from loss of self-confidence following Boswell’s public drubbing. Seward had spoken with the authority of her lifelong
study of British poets and English translations, only to experience “derision” at
the temerity of an “unlearned female entering the lists of criticism against the
mighty Johnson.” The dark cloud she perceives descending on the reputation of
British poetry may have been reflected in the dark cloud shrouding her mind at
this time. Although we know from other letters that Seward feared she had de
veloped cancer following a blow to her breast, her mental torpor seems at least to
have been augmented by what she perceived as Boswell’s treachery.  

Seward, or White speaking for her, published a final reply to Boswell’s attack.
In September 1794, a well-intentioned writer who signed his name AE. V. wrote
to the Gentleman’s Magazine supposing that Seward’s ire had been raised by dis
paraging remarks about her father that Boswell attributed to Johnson in the Life.
To AE. V., it seemed understandable that Seward would have been angered by
Johnson’s description of her father bringing “himself to the state of a hog in a stye”
(75:815), Johnson’s witty reference to Mr. Seward’s annual spa treatments. Since
Boswell, like Seward, was a dutiful child, he should not have been surprised by
her reaction. In October 1794, Henry White wrote again on behalf of his cousin.
He explained that Seward’s anger had not been roused by Johnson’s recorded
remarks about her father, which merely confirmed the justice of her settled opin
ion. Her Benvolio letters had been composed long before the Life “generously
recorded” Johnson’s insulting remarks about a man whose hospitality he had
often enjoyed. Mr. Seward was “entirely free from grossness or indelicacy in his
manner”; Seward concluded that her father had simply shared the fate of many
Johnsonian acquaintances (75:876). White’s letter is a quiet denouement to the
Seward-Boswell exchange. One might have expected Seward to address, energeti
cally, this evidence of ingratitude, hypocrisy, and unfairness expressed against her
own father. Perhaps she realized that any retort would attract another Boswellian
charge of obtuseness or draw from him the threatened revelation of what Johnson
had said about herself. For whatever reason, Seward allowed this fairly terse ex
planation to close the battle. Boswell died in May 1795, preventing any possibility
of renewed conflict.

Seward felt humiliated by Boswell’s letters, and most writers have agreed he
bested her in their debate. Margaret Ashmun, for example, declares her “no sort
of match” for Boswell, “an easy and practiced writer and skilled disputant” (207).
Since Seward herself was nothing if not a practiced writer and keen disputant,
Ashmun’s verdict is not necessarily accurate. Looking objectively at their exchange,
we can see that theirs was partly an early example of the pitfalls of Johnson’s bio
graphical method. In Rambler 60, Johnson had declared that “the business of the
biographer is often to pass lightly over those performances and incidents, which
produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into domestick privacies, and display the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue” (Selected Essays 111). Because public achievements reveal little about a person’s character, “more knowledge may be gained . . . by a short conversation with one of his servants, than from a formal and studied narrative” (Selected Essays 112–13). In the opening pages of his Life, Boswell cites Plutarch’s opinion that “very often an action of small note, a short saying, or a jest, shall distinguish a person’s real character more than the greatest sieges” before quoting extensively from Johnson’s Rambler 60 essay (1:31–32). Indeed, Boswell boasts of not only recording Johnson’s conversation throughout their long friendship but of making every effort to obtain “materials concerning him, from every quarter where I could discover that they were to be found, and [I] have been favored with the most liberal communications by his friends” (1:26). Johnson’s model, however, created a number of problems. Eyewitness testimony is only as accurate as the memory or proximity of its source. No perfectly accurate version of Johnson’s conversations, even “a short saying, or a jest,” was possible. In his introduction to the Heritage Press edition of the Life, Edward G. Fletcher stresses the artfulness with which Boswell reconstituted Johnson’s conversations from shorthand notes and memories (1:x–xi). But others, such as Christopher Hibbert in his introduction to an abridged edition of the Life, have emphasized the degree to which Boswell edited Johnson’s conversation, refining his expressions and even suppressing incidents that revealed Johnson’s earthy or crude aspects (23–25).

Concern about accurate witnesses and transcriptions made Boswell’s Life vulnerable despite his claim to have “almost entirely preserved” his friend (1:30). Boswell himself disparaged Sir John Hawkins and Thrale-Piozzi, his predecessors, for what he considered their use of indiscriminate, unfair, and inaccurate material (1:27–28; 3:343–347). Contemporary reactions, judging from those published in the Gentleman’s Magazine, ranged from mockery of Boswell’s idolatry to accusations that he portrayed Johnson too unfavorably. Few doubted the accuracy of his Johnsonian quotations, however; the myth of Boswell hovering behind Johnson with a notebook had probably already gained currency (Fletcher x). Johnson’s conversations as recorded in the Life were believed to reproduce his actual words; Seward, for example, never accused Boswell of distorting Johnson’s language but instead complained about the harshness of what she accepted as Johnson’s speech. Boswell, in turn, maintained his veracity and questioned the transcriptions of writers such as Seward. In his account of an evening in 1778 spent in company that included Seward and Mrs. Knowles, Boswell included a
previously mentioned conversation between Johnson and Knowles concerning
the conversion of Jenny Harry to the Quaker religion. In Boswell’s account, John-
son holds forth, overwhelming Knowles’s few interjections with his powerful de-
fense of filial obedience and orthodox faith (Boswell 3:298–99). Seward, as we
have seen, became angry when she read this published version because Boswell
omitted her own transcription of the conversation, in which Knowles argued per-
suasively on Harry’s behalf. Seward promptly sent her record to the Gentleman’s
Magazine, signed from “A Constant Reader of the GM” (70:798–99), but in his
supplementary notes to the second edition, Boswell sarcastically dismissed her
transcription. Although crediting Knowles “with the fame of reasoning better than
women usually do,” Boswell rejected the idea that the conversation had taken
place as she suggested. He invites readers of the Gentleman’s Magazine to decide
“from internal evidence” whether her minutes, written “after many years had
elapsed,” were plausible, since he had no recollection of her rejoinders in his own
notes (Boswell 3:299n)). Both Boswell and Seward claim throughout their argu-
ment to draw from textual evidence, yet all of their evidence is reconstructed and
revised and thus flawed.

Boswell, as he admitted to Seward, destroyed most of the copious materials
sent him by Johnson’s acquaintances. We must assume that he deemed much of
this evidence apocryphal or inaccurate, but some must have been simply too
unflattering for inclusion. The problem with trying to reconstitute a human per-
sonality through reported speech is that humans are more complicated than even
a large conversational sample can represent. From a vast number of examples,
Boswell chose ones that if they did not invariably show his hero to advantage at
least never portrayed him as irrationally cruel or harsh. Boswell’s Johnson was,
as he admitted, his “Guide, Philosopher, and Friend,” “the brightest ornament of
the eighteenth century”; he selected and polished Johnson’s remarks to present
him as such to others. Seward’s Johnson, on the other hand, was a “gloomy ty-
rant,” “the old literary Colossus” barring the gates of fame to fellow writers. Her
most vivid memories of Johnson were of peremptory literary judgments that she
rarely contradicted for fear of becoming the object of his wrath. Familiar since
childhood with tales of Johnson’s literary precocity, youthful poverty, rash mar-
rriage, and rise to national prominence, Seward sent Boswell information consist-
tent with her vivid but partial image. Both Seward and Boswell had evidence for
their versions, but the “paper war” episode reveals the impossibility of “almost
entirely preserving” a person even using reams of evidence. If Boswell had suc-
cceeded, generations of writers would not have gone on to attempt more accurate
portrayals of the multidimensional Johnson. Seward’s Johnson, although far less
nuanced than Boswell’s, is not fictional. In his twentieth-century biography, W. Jackson Bate describes Johnson’s remorse for his harsh, overbearing, contradictory habits of speech (586–87). Although she viewed Johnson only from this perspective, Seward might be credited with trying to add this acknowledged dimension of Johnson’s personality to Boswell’s portrait. His assertion that only malice could have evoked her anecdotes has decoyed succeeding critics from considering the degree to which her accusations were justified. Instead, scholars debate whether she was motivated by malice or merely by snobbery.4

Boswell’s dismissal of Seward’s testimony returns us to the gendered nature of Seward criticism, reviewed in my first chapter. Seward was courageous in seeking public critical authority because her chaste but unconventional relationship with Saville, and her effort to dissuade Boswell without insulting him, might easily have been used to destroy her moral, and therefore critical, credibility. But gender influenced other important aspects of Boswell’s rebuttal. Boswell sneers at Seward’s witnesses because they were “credulous” old women rather than a learned gentleman or cultured lady. Seward retorts that Johnson’s mother, her own mother, and Lucy Porter had known Johnson far longer than Hector or Thrale-Piozzi and that their veracity was unquestionable. Since Boswell cannot call the ladies’ veracity into question, Boswell must rely on his readers’ assumption that the memories of old women, especially old women proud of their distinguished relative, cannot be trusted. Johnson himself had ascribed the duck epitaph to his father, thereby settling that dispute. As Seward observes, his own memory of an event that took place when he was three years old may not have been as accurate as his mother’s, but Boswell declares the matter settled, and most scholars have accepted his “proof.”5 Seward offers plausible alternatives to explain why Hector may have been mistaken about the myrtle sprig poem, but Boswell rejects her reasoning, even though her point that Johnson may not have wanted to acknowledge his earlier composition of the poem for Porter is not incompatible with Hector’s explanation. My point is not that Johnson probably wrote the myrtle poem for Porter as Seward claims but only that her version has been judged improbable based on Boswell’s manifestly hostile objection. Seward’s persistence and Boswell’s public rejection suggest their competition for access to Johnson’s private life. Boswell seems especially threatened by women’s claims to such knowledge. Having disparaged Thrale-Piozzi’s accounts, Boswell was not disposed to validate Seward’s. Seward, in turn, was an ideal opponent because rather than acknowledge her arguments, he could dismiss her as an “unlearned,” irrational woman.

Some of Boswell’s gendered insults are more obviously unfair today. His ad feminam remark about the less-than-pristine lives of poetesses assumes that
Seward’s devotion to John Saville invalidates her critique of Johnson’s failings. His apology for a Latin expression ignores whether a classical education is needed for Seward’s observations; Boswell assumes many readers will agree that an unlearned woman is ill qualified to accuse Johnson of literary injustice. Boswell’s remark also disparages Seward’s boasted knowledge of English poetry: since she has no classical training, with what authority can she speak, even of English verse? Although we can see that Latin is a rhetorical red herring, contemporaries who shared Boswell’s ideology probably found it convincing. Another obviously gendered insult is Boswell’s accusation that Seward failed to grasp Johnson’s wit. Like late twentieth-century feminists, Seward is to be considered humorless, in her case because she takes Johnson’s pronouncements too seriously. She must suffer a “defect in the reasoning faculty” because she mistakes for slander or untruth what was meant in jest (74:1011). Boswell berates Seward even for misquoting Johnson’s sarcasms; if she is going to assault Johnson for his bon mots, she should at least remember them correctly (75:33). Why cannot Seward, a minor poet, appreciate Johnson’s witticisms at the expense of minor poets? Boswell’s rejoinder resembles the response of those who tell modern ethnic and gendered jokes to the victims of such jokes who object to them; then as now, the victim was accused of a poor sense of humor, or at least a failure to grasp irony, because she took Johnson’s remarks as insults instead of as conversational gambits. Boswell’s jeers call attention to similar gender biases implicit even in some recent references to Seward.

Boswell’s insistence on Seward’s humorlessness also recalls us to her position as a poet molded by both early and midcentury poetic values. Her moral emphasis and “beauties and faults” approach were derived from earlier models, but sensibility was characteristic of her generation. Boswell himself was not void of sentiment, but his irony at the expense of Seward’s failure to appreciate witty raillery revealed his own failure to credit Seward’s repulsion of such harsh tactics. Seward framed her criticism in terms of sensibility. In her second Benvolio letter, for example, she asks how Thrale-Piozzi could have praised as exemplary a man who repaid his interlocutors with “rude retorts, which an amiable mind, if it could repay with equal severity, would, for the sake of the surrounding company, rather suffer than imitate;—who knew not how to pity the yearnings of affection which had lost its object; or allow for the infirmities of slow oppressive disease” (59:304). Her emphasis on courteous self-restraint, on sympathy for the sick and bereft, marks Seward as a proponent of sensibility and explains her inability to find humor in such remarks as “that ill-health generally made a man a scoundrel” (59:304). Today, we might find Johnson’s wit a tonic against the mid-eighteenth century’s
taste for sympathetic tears, but Seward’s recoil from his harshness was more typical of the era’s ideal response to embarrassment, bereavement, and illness. When, in her next letter, Seward declares that “Sensibility must be disgusted” by Johnson’s expressions of contempt for Scotland even while enjoying Scottish hospitality, her readers understood her reference to Johnson’s failure to empathize with his hosts and to refrain accordingly from making rude comments at their nation’s expense. Thirty years older and so less influenced by sensibility’s dictates, Johnson persists in the conversational habits of an earlier generation that Boswell, loving him, records as faithfully as he can and that Seward, in turn, finds inexcusably cruel.

Seward was caught between the early eighteenth-century taste for wit and the early nineteenth-century rejection of sensibility’s excesses, between early eighteenth-century preference for formal verse satire in heroic couplets and the Romantic turn to meditative lyrics in what Wordsworth called “the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society” (“Adverstisment”). Leigh Hunt may as well have mentioned Seward, Darwin’s pupil who gloried in her refinement of Pope’s musicality, when he decried Darwin’s “poetical music” as “extreme” and affected (Reiman xiii)—epithets that, as Susan J. Wolfson has observed, would soon be applied to his protégé, John Keats (216–18). Seward was a late eighteenth-century poet in the sense both of her definitive allegiance and because she embraced Pope’s Augustan principles as the vehicle to express sensibility. Her published criticism, surveyed objectively, is neither malicious nor naïve but expressive of her generation’s tastes and concerns. Seward’s argument, in the case of Johnson, is limited to exposing his wanton cruelty toward others, particularly poets, support of whom was a patriotic enterprise. When Boswell replied that Johnson was being facetious, Seward was not persuaded, because to speak what was not true in jest was still to lie, and moreover, Johnson’s epigrammatic jests were memorable and influential. Such wit offended her sensibility because at best it needlessly embarrassed Johnson’s victim; at worst it threatened the reputations of those assaulted. When Seward belabored her criticism, especially on behalf of British poets, Boswell accused her of malice and envy. But a good deal of his retaliatory argument is rhetorical sleight of hand: tactical maneuvers that defend his hero by making Seward appear unchaste, incompetent, malicious, and presumptuous. That both Seward and Boswell argued from unreliable (selective, reconstituted, revised) evidence meant that neither could definitively prove the other wrong, but Boswell’s sarcasm has often been judged victorious over Seward’s sensibility by later critics who ignore her premises but appreciate Boswell’s manipulative prose.
At times, Boswell’s attacks on Seward read like a nasty older brother’s efforts to show up a rebellious sister, particularly when he resorts to using her family nickname as a way of undermining her dignity. The “brother” appears to battle for recognition of his superior, intimate knowledge of Johnson. Boswell revered Johnson as a father substitute, one of a succession of such figures in his life. Particularly after Johnson’s death, Boswell sought to defend his mentor from criticism derived from his remarks quoted in the *Life*, no doubt aware that critical objections to Johnson’s manner partly owed to his own re-creation of Johnson’s speech (Bate 365). Boswell thus had to rescue Johnson without admitting the degree to which Johnson’s reported conversation was in fact his version of Johnson’s style. Seward, in turn, believed Johnson’s brusque judgments confirmed his dismissive remarks about some of Britain’s greatest writers in the *Lives of the Poets*. Her personal memories of Johnson’s conversation resembled Boswell’s; she believed one bon mot valid because of its “Johnsonian spirit” and lamented that the *Life* contained so many “recorded proofs of his unprovoked personal rudeness” (*Gentleman’s Magazine* 74:1099). When an anonymous contributor speculated that Seward resented Johnson’s disparagement of her father, she denied the explanation except to allow that Johnson’s insult confirmed her general complaint, published in her Benvolio letters years before publication of the *Life*, when Boswell’s *Tour of the Hebrides* and Thrale-Piozzi’s *Anecdotes* had inspired her to call attention to Johnson’s reported flaws. Seward’s readers today must account for both Seward’s and Boswell’s vehemence, especially when discussing her criticism, or her observations will continue to be dismissed.

If Seward was not driven to expose Johnson on behalf of her father, perhaps it was because Johnson was a father figure himself, one whom she particularly needed to confront. We have seen her expose the damage caused by a controlling father in *Louisa* and assert technical mastery in reviewing the work of her poetic “father” in *Memoirs of Dr. Darwin*. Of all the “fathers” controlling aspects of Seward’s life, however, Johnson was professionally the most important. We have seen, for example, that she employed Johnsonian precedents, such as relying on living witnesses and including critical analysis, in her biography of Darwin. Nevertheless, as opposed to Boswell’s “great and good” figure, Seward’s Johnson was a malign patriarch guarding the portals of the literary canon. Unlike Johnson’s other “daughters” such as Hester Thrale-Piozzi (who was one year older than Seward), Frances Burney, and Hannah More, Seward was never acknowledged as such and certainly never sought Johnson’s approval. Instead, she expressed relief that Johnson rarely mentioned her poems while admitting that he had complimented her “Elegy on Cook” and had “spoke very handsomely” of her writings.
to a gathering at Porter’s. She thanked Thrale-Piozzi for suppressing Johnson’s remarks about her in her Anecdotes, disbelieving he had “[passed her] over in total silence” (Letters 2:44). Seward’s letter seems contradictory: she is glad Johnson took no notice of her poems, although he did, even praising them, and happy not to find herself discussed in the Anecdotes, although she feels sure Johnson talked harshly about her. Perhaps Seward feared that Johnson had condemned her on account of her relationship with Saville, as Boswell insinuated in the Gentleman’s Magazine when he claimed that if she knew Johnson’s opinion, “she might not like it” (74:1011). But Seward implies that she wishes Johnson had paid more, equally favorable, attention to her poems and granted her the consequence of talking about her. Having achieved some renown for her verse, Seward apparently wished for approval by the other literary star of Lichfield—the patriarch of British letters. Failing to attract his sustained notice, Seward protested his overbearing manner in her correspondence and, after Johnson’s death, published her objections to the literary colossus in an effort to overthrow his authority. Her gesture was pyrrhic, pulling down on herself the ridicule of succeeding critics instead of rallying the British public on behalf of their poets. Johnson approved of few living poets, and Seward warmly admired many. Since Johnson and Seward shared many poetic principles, especially those prevalent in the earlier part of their century, there is rich irony both in their different conclusions and the fact that Seward’s opinions have been virtually ignored. Today, with renewed critical interest in Ossian, Chatterton, Southey, and other Seward contemporaries, she does not look quite so foolish for defending British verse. But as British taste evolved in the early nineteenth century, her defense was ignored.

Today it is also easier to appreciate Seward’s struggle to impose her critical views in a culture that did not easily accept women authorities (one thinks of Catharine Macaulay Graham and of Mary Wollstonecraft as other examples of women who were ridiculed for their iconoclastic opinions). Following Nancy Chodorow, scholars have examined different eras’ acculturation of women and the effects on women writers’ personalities and careers. In Their Father’s Daughters, Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace has examined the consequences of the eighteenth-century maturation process for women, when severe restrictions on gender roles made attaining adulthood even more difficult. Women who overcame their mother identification, often because their mothers had died when they were very young, and strove for a role their society gendered “masculine”—that is, women who identified with their father’s role—faced nearly insurmountable challenges. Kowaleski-Wallace examines the careers of Hannah More and Maria Edgeworth, women very different from Seward, who adhered to their fathers, figuratively in More’s case,
literally in Edgeworth’s, “to obtain what [they] needed” (33). From Seward, we hear little of her mother, who seems to have been gracious and loving but who acquiesced in her husband’s repression of their daughter’s literary interests (Ashmun 83). We hear a great deal more of Mr. Seward, and much of what we learn must have created resentment (Barnard, Anna Seward 33–38). When finally permitted at last to devote herself to poetry, Seward spent the rest of her life establishing her literary reputation and living as much as she could on her own terms. She replaced her mother and, eventually, her father as host of the Bishop’s Palace salon. It was important to Seward that she maintained her social as well as literary status, owing to her need to take over her parents’ roles. That she did so while also maintaining her relationship with John Saville attests to Seward’s strong will in carrying on her life as British muse and Lichfield social doyenne. Far from the shy provincial lady, Seward actively resisted the constraints on her behavior and, perhaps because she chose to remain in the town where her address and connections somewhat protected her status, overcame many of the obstacles erected by the father and “fathers” in her life.

Samuel Johnson might have been surprised to learn that Seward responded to him like a rebellious daughter. Johnson probably did not think or speak much about his Lichfield compatriot, as her half-expressed wish to have been included among his conversational topics intuits. Despite his occasional compliments, he was not generally impressed by the generation of poets to which Seward belonged and that she passionately defended. And, as Seward acknowledged, Johnson was not fond of those who contradicted his opinions. Johnson, of course, was soon canonized, and much of her generation’s poetry was dismissed by the next. But her self-elected status as Johnson’s rebellious daughter remains intriguing. Today, however, we can admire Johnson and his “son” Boswell without disparaging Seward. We can applaud her for trying to free herself, as far as she dared, from certain patriarchal restrictions and to control some of the circumstances of her personal life and literary career. In this she resembles Hester Thrale-Piozzi, Frances Burney, Mary Wollstonecraft, and other late-century women who made agonizing choices in order to fulfill themselves personally and as artists. As a poet, Seward imagined herself part of a great chain including Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, and Pope, successively building on their achievements until the present day. She incorporated midcentury sensibility into the heritage of refined, public-minded verse, asserting, in a patriotic era, her generation’s place as the current gems adorning that glittering chain. Critically, Seward tried to refine the practices of Johnson and Boswell, which they in turn inherited from predecessors who insisted on literature’s moral imperative and the inextricable link between biography and criti-
cism. Creatively, Seward embraced her role as “Queen Muse,” protector of a tradition she strove to maintain and, within the limits of its poetics and adherence to sensibility, to expand. Seward’s liminal status, born in the middle and writing at the end of the eighteenth century, made her an invaluable commentator on the turn to Romanticism. I hope that my readings have opened fresh perspectives on the writings of this dynamic woman, whose poetry and prose illuminate her precursors, her contemporaries, and those who followed her.