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# Anna Seward and the Poetics of Sensibility and Control

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*Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century* by Claudia Thomas Kairoff. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Pp. 328. \$58 cloth.

At the 2011 meeting of the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism, Anne K. Mellor reflected on how the field has changed since her foundational 1993 study *Romanticism and Gender*. She commented that, though women writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, and Mary Shelley have cemented themselves as legitimate objects of study, this has largely been at the expense of a broader understanding of how women writers were working during the period. In addition to the Big Six male Romantics, we have in many cases simply added the Big Three female Romantics.<sup>1</sup> Though this has begun to change in the last ten years, with important studies appearing about women like Anna Letitia Barbauld, Mary Robinson, Joanna Baillie, and Hannah More, we still know shockingly little about women writers' lives, cultural contexts, and works.

A case in point is Anna Seward, a poet and critic well known and respected in her own lifetime, but whose critical neglect in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has largely shaped how recent critics interact with her work. An eighteenth-century poet trained to imitate Alexander Pope and John Milton, Seward published during the period that William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Percy Bysshe Shelley were beginning their revolution in poetic diction.

Seward's work was misunderstood in her own time and, in a critical milieu strongly informed by Romanticism, continues to be overlooked today. Claudia Thompson Kairoff's *Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century* aims to correct some of these misreadings by joining a growing number of scholarly publications dedicated to restoring Seward to her place as an important transitional figure in eighteenth-century poetry.<sup>2</sup> Key to Kairoff's study is evoking the historical and cultural contexts whereby contemporary readers would have understood Seward's poetry. In doing so, Kairoff aims to "return her poems to view and even to admiration, not like the dusty contents of a neglected *Wunderkammer* [chamber of wonder] but as distinguished examples of a rich poetic tradition" (14). In large part, Kairoff succeeds by using a dizzying array of primary sources, clear readings of Seward's texts, and a critical grasp of Seward's contexts. Though we may question the usefulness of the categories of "eighteenth century" and "Romantic" altogether in considering Seward's work, *Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century* is nevertheless a valuable contribution to our understanding of the period and women's contributions to poetry.

Anna Seward was the only surviving daughter of Lichfield canon Thomas Seward, who administered the Bishop's Palace,

where Seward lived throughout her adult life. Mentored by fellow Lichfield resident Erasmus Darwin, Seward early developed a propensity for poetry, which she later displayed at the famous and much-mocked Batheaston salon of Anna Miller. Though she never married, Seward carried on a scandalous, if chaste, relationship with the married Lichfield clergyman John Saville—a connection that was later broken off by her father. She also was passionately attached to her younger foster sister Honora Sneyd to whom she wrote many of her best sonnets, a fact that has generated much speculation by scholars like Paula Backscheider as to the nature of Seward's sexuality. Nevertheless, the main source of her fame during her lifetime was a series of patriotic elegies celebrating British heroes like Captain Cook and her collection of *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects* (1799), which stood in stark contrast to the contemporaneous sonnets of Charlotte Smith in that they exalted the Miltonic sonnet over the Shakespearean.

Given the level of recognition and notoriety Seward enjoyed during her lifetime, Kairoff's impressive and wide-ranging book begins with a consideration of Seward's critical neglect or what she calls her "critical disappearance" (15). This disappearance is grounded in the work of Seward's first nineteenth-century editor and biographer,

her friend, protégé, and literary executor Sir Walter Scott. Though Scott respected Seward as a mentor, he did not deem it a sound decision financially or careerwise to tie himself too closely to a poet whose style was quickly growing outdated. He thus quickly edited a three-volume collection of Seward's works and appended a preface that exalted his mentor as an exemplary woman of virtue but cast her as a mediocre poet. This estimation of her works has colored most subsequent criticism and, as Kairoff argues, "Because Seward's poetry does not quite fit the stylistic paradigms of Augustan or Romantic verse, or even of the verse that has until recently been called 'pre-Romantic,' she has simply been excluded from most critical discussions except as a name in lists of late-century women poets" (16). It is this liminal quality, this ability to work in between established categories, that distinguishes Seward's work but also consigned it to critical oblivion.

With this critical disappearance as her organizing framework, Kairoff proceeds to analyze almost all of Seward's major works, focusing on the historical and cultural contexts that would have made them comprehensible to eighteenth-century audiences but ended up offending Romantic sensibilities. Key to understanding her work, according to Kairoff, are the recurring themes of sensibility and

control. Raised in the era where the cult of sensibility was ascendant as evidenced in contemporary novels, plays, and music, Seward imbibed it along with her training in the poetic diction of Milton and Pope. To her, the ability to feel deeply and finely was instrumental in creating great art. As a result, her work is replete with the language of sensibility, a language that, though influential to Romanticism, was rapidly going out of style when most of her major works were published.

Along with sensibility, control operates as a restraining force throughout Seward's work—poetic control of diction, emotional control of sensibility, and personal control of life and reputation. As a woman writing in a field still dominated by "great men" like Samuel Johnson, Seward had to carefully control her entry into the public sphere and then, once there, her subsequent literary reputation. As Kairoff argues in chapters 11 and 12 of the book, it was actually Seward's complicated relationships with her literary fathers Erasmus Darwin and Samuel Johnson that precipitated her desire to control her own literary reputation in a climate that was rapidly shifting away from her poetic sensibilities. Thus, I would argue that Seward's genius lies in her ability to balance sensibility and control throughout her work—marking out a territory for herself as a woman poet that was previously unexplored.

Kairoff presents a telling example of how Seward worked to control her literary reputation in chapter 2 by arguing that Seward's decision to debut her poetry at Lady Miller's much-maligned Batheaston salon did not indicate the inferiority or provinciality of her poetry but rather Seward's desire to manage her entry into public space. By relying on the norms of sociability and manuscript circulation common to her class, Seward shrewdly ensured that there was a market for her poetry when she decided to enter into print. Chapters 3–5 are thus devoted to examining how Seward managed this transition—first by working to break down the developing divisions between amateur and professional authors and then by using British national events like the death of Captain Cook to construct an image for herself as the British muse. As a middle-class woman, Seward did not think it proper to present herself as a professional poet in the sense that writers like Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding were beginning to establish. Instead, she used her status as an amateur who spoke for the nation to establish a position somewhere in between amateur and professional, as a woman who did not need to work but who provided inspiration and guidance to the nation. Her *Elegy on Captain Cook* and *Monody on Major Andre*, for

example, constructed a version of Britishness in the face of an American war that was not going well. As Linda Colley has detailed in *Britons: Forging the Nation* (1992), the experience of the American war deeply shook the newly formed British nation, forcing it to work to form its identity in the wake of the loss of the American colonies.<sup>3</sup> As Britain's Muse, Seward sought to do this poetically—giving voice to a new national consciousness.

Likewise, Seward's 1792 poetical novel *Louisa*, which is the subject of chapters 6 and 7, is an exercise in sensibility and control. Encompassing four books, *Louisa* adapts both Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (Julie, or the new Heloise, 1761) in order to construct the story of a young woman who is jilted by her lover after her lover's father convinces him to marry a rich heiress to save the family fortune. Predictably, the rich heiress eventually dies after living a life of debauchery, and Louisa is reunited with her lover. Crucial to the plot of *Louisa* is its emphasis on sensibility, a late example that illustrates the degree to which Seward was indebted to sensibility in forming her poetics. Ultimately, as Kairoff outlines in chapter 7, *Louisa* is an exercise in control. It is the father figure who convinces his son to marry for money instead of love, and it was Seward's own

father who at first discouraged her interest in writing, rejected two of her early suitors, and broke off her illicit relationship with John Saville. Thus, it is only by reconstructing these incidents through poetry that Seward is able to regain control of her own poetic destiny.

These key themes are also instrumental to understanding Seward's *Original Sonnets*, which Kairoff explores at length in chapters 8–10. Championing the Miltonic form as the only legitimate form of British sonnet, Seward occasionally composed her sonnets in part as a response to Charlotte Smith's wildly popular *Elegaic Sonnets* (1783), which Seward considered trivial and inferior. This critical disdain for Smith's work was due in part to Seward's role in helping to establish a British canon of authors and particularly the canonization of Milton. To this end, she occasionally wrote sonnets that imitated Milton's style, while nevertheless adding the culture of sensibility within which she was raised.

Of particular interest to Kairoff, and indeed to most modern commentators, are Seward's Honora sonnets, which she scattered throughout the collection. These sonnets detail her deep connection to her foster sister, Honora Sneyd, Honora's subsequent marriage to Richard Edgeworth, her alienation from Seward, and her death. Most commentators—most influentially

Paula Backscheider—have read these sonnets as evidence of transgressive same-sex desire and have viewed the break between the two women as caused by Honora's marriage to Edgeworth and move to Ireland.<sup>4</sup> Kairoff offers an alternative interpretation, arguing convincingly that the relationship that existed between the two was more of a maternal one, with the older Seward seeking to control in some measure Honora's life and choice of husband. When Sneyd ultimately chose someone of whom Seward disapproved, this precipitated the cooling of the friendship and Seward's subsequent sorrow at Honora's untimely death. Seward thus uses the sonnet form in an attempt to control her own conflicted emotions upon Honora's betrayal and death—a type of control that she could not ultimately exert over Honora herself.

Anna Seward is a writer located at the crossroads of the eighteenth century. Inheritor of the Miltonic tradition, she nevertheless employs a type of sensibility that anticipates the poetry of Wordsworth and John Keats. Though scornful of Charlotte Smith's sonnets, she composes sonnets to Honora Sneyd every bit as poignant as Smith's meditations on melancholy. She also successfully navigates the transition from oral and manuscript culture to print culture by using her amateur status as a salon poet to carefully

craft a public image—an image she would use to joust with men like James Boswell on the pages of the *Gentleman's Magazine*. It is for these reasons—within the proper context—that Anna Seward was a vitally important eighteenth-century writer, but it is also for these reasons that she suffered critical neglect both then and now.

Kairoff argues that a true understanding of Anna Seward's literary contexts is “pertinent to ongoing debates among current scholars as they distinguish eighteenth-century cultural, political, and literary beliefs from their Romantic-era counterparts” (3) and that her writings “illuminate the turn to Romanticism” (1). Furthermore, by exemplifying so many different facets of eighteenth-century and Romantic poetry and culture, Seward provides the grounds for assessing these categories and tracking the shifts in eighteenth-century culture. I would argue that this is in part correct; however, the fact that Seward fails to fit comfortably into any of these critical categories may ultimately argue against the usefulness of the categories themselves. Instead of clarifying the distinctions between the Augustan and the Romantic, Seward's poetry might illustrate the continuum of poetic sensibility across the century. As a poet who operated at the intersection of so many trends, Seward

helps us think through how critical attitudes toward poetry are formed and perpetuated and how these attitudes may occlude a clearer understanding of historical context. In this, Kairoff's study is exemplary in that it provides the context that enables a fuller understanding of Seward's life and work.

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#### NOTES

1. Anne Mellor and Devoney Looser, “Women” (seminar held at the 2011 North American Society for the Study of Romanticism [NASSR] Conference, Park City, UT, 12 August 2011).
2. See Teresa Barnard's recent critical biography, *Anna Seward: A Constructed Life* (London: Ashgate, 2009).
3. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).
4. Paula R. Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.