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Rewriting lives: reading, sociability, and authority in  
women's literary biography, 1780-1820

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## Abstract

This dissertation assesses the contributions of three biographers – Hester Lynch Piozzi (1741-1821), Anna Seward (1742-1809), and Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849) – to the development of British life-writing in the period 1780-1820. This examination of their life-writings highlights how these authors contributed to the redefinition of literary biography by demonstrating that intellectual authority can emerge from intimate and gendered modes of writing a *Life*. By emphasising femininity and drawing on a domestic perspective, they aligned their life-writings with a cultural shift that privileged private, emotional, and moral insights over public accomplishments. This dissertation also explores how these writers increasingly leveraged their reputations as published authors in other genres to substantiate their status as literary biographers. In doing so, they positioned the biographer as an arbiter of literary-biographical knowledge, blending personal insight with intellectual rigour. Each biographer examined here had a complex relationship with her biographical subject, who was also her mentor. This dissertation establishes not how women were mentored but how they became biographers by negotiating, and at times disavowing, their mentors' influence. The textual influences of Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779–1781) and James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) were also significant in shaping their biographical methods. Additionally, this dissertation situates their work within the broader literary culture of the period, with particular attention to how intellectual and literary networks, especially those associated with Lichfield, shaped their life-writing. Through explorations of their reading practices, critical engagements with literature, and narrative innovations, this study contends that Piozzi, Seward, and Edgeworth were crucial in reshaping biographical conventions. Bridging feminist recovery projects with an integrationist approach, this dissertation offers new insights into the interplay of gender, genre, and literary authority in the late Georgian period. It seeks to reposition the life-writings of Piozzi, Seward, and Edgeworth as central to the development of literary biography.

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## List of Abbreviations

### Archives and Libraries

BL	British Library
CUL	Cambridge University Library
HOU	Houghton Library
HUN	Huntington Library
JRL	John Rylands Library
NA	National Archives
SJBM	Samuel Johnson Birthplace Museum

### Books

<i>Anecdotes</i>	Hester Lynch Piozzi, <i>Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D</i> (London: T. Cadell, 1786)
<i>BLJ</i>	James Boswell, <i>The Life of Samuel Johnson</i> , ed. David Womersley, (London: Penguin, 2008)
<i>LEP</i>	Samuel Johnson, <i>The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; with Critical Observations on their Works</i> , ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006)
<i>LSJ</i>	Hester Lynch Piozzi, <i>Letters to and from the Late Samuel Johnson</i> , 2 vols (London: T. Cadell, 1788)
<i>LAS</i>	Anna Seward, <i>Letters of Anna Seward: Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807</i> , ed. Archibald Constable, 6 vols (Edinburgh: George Ramsay & Company, 1811)



- MED* Anna Seward, *Anna Seward's Life of Erasmus Darwin*, ed. Philip K. Wilson, Elizabeth A. Dolan, and Malcolm Dick (Studley: Brewin Books, 2010)
- MLE* Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth*, vol. 1 (London: R. Hunter, 1820)
- MME* Maria Edgeworth, *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth*, vol. 2 (London: R. Hunter, 1820)
- PWS* Anna Seward, *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward*, ed. Walter Scott, 3 vols (Edinburgh: John Ballantyne and Co., 1810)

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- 1.3 James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*: page proofs (1791), 302, HOU/2003JM-135
- 1.4 Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: T. Cadell, 1786), flyleaves, SJBM/2001.55.251
- 1.5 Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: T. Cadell, 1786), 144, SJBM/2001.55.251
- 1.6 James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 4 vols (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1807), vol. 1, 45, HOU/2003J-TP61
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- 1.11 Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: T. Cadell, 1786), 137, SJBM/2001.55.251
- 1.12 Joshua Reynolds, 'Portrait of Samuel Johnson ("Blinking Sam")' (1775), HUN/2006.22

- 1.13 Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Letters to and from the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, 2 vols (London: T. Cadell, 1788), vol. 2, 105, SJBM/2001.55.111.2
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## Introduction

### Life-Writing and Lichfield Literary Culture

Hester Lynch Piozzi first visited Lichfield in July 1774.<sup>1</sup> Accompanied by Samuel Johnson and her husband, Henry Thrale, the trio paid visits to Lichfield locals, including Johnson's stepdaughter, Lucy Porter; the physician, inventor, and poet, Erasmus Darwin; and the poet, Anna Seward. They also made visits to Mr. Greene's Museum, Lichfield Cathedral, and Johnson's birthplace. The outing to Johnson's former family residence made a strong impression on Piozzi. She records in her diary that the Johnson's house 'filled my mind with emotion, so tender and so pleasing, that I would have been sorry to quit it for the sake of seeing the Vatican till I had reiterated every image it gave me as often as I could feel the impression'.<sup>2</sup> Though Piozzi's literary biography, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson* (1786), is primarily concerned with imparting domestic anecdotes during the twenty years he spent visiting and residing at the Thrale's family home, Streatham Park, *Anecdotes* often gravitates back to episodes from Johnson's birthplace.

While Johnson lists a visit to Anna Seward among the day's activities on 9 July 1774, Piozzi does not. Piozzi later recalled that 'Dr. Johnson would not suffer me to speak to Miss Seward'.<sup>3</sup> Seward later corroborates this in a letter to Piozzi, in which she laments

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<sup>1</sup> 'Piozzi' is often used interchangeably with 'Thrale'. In this dissertation, I favour 'Piozzi', the name under which she published.

<sup>2</sup> 'Journal of a Tour in Wales with Dr. Johnson', in *Dr. Johnson & Mrs. Thrale's Tour in North Wales 1774* (Wrexham: Bridge Books, 1995), ed. Adrian Bristow, 87-126, 90.

<sup>3</sup> Hester Thrale Piozzi, cited in *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D. by James Boswell*, ed. John Wilson Croker, 6 vols (London: John Murray, 1831), vol. 3, 124. *A Diary of a Journey in North Wales, in the Year 1774* was originally edited and published by Richard Duppa in 1816. Piozzi supplied Duppa with notes but, as Croker states, these 'came too late for Mr Duppa's use' (125). Croker incorporated Duppa's edition of *A Diary* into his edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and included Piozzi's notes. For a detailed account of Piozzi's supplication of details see Croker, 124-125.

In a 1775 letter, Piozzi questioned Johnson as to why 'Miss Seward never find[s] a place in the letters from Lichfield. I thought her a mighty elegant amiable country lady', Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Letters to and from the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, 2 vols (London: T. Cadell, 1788), vol. 1, 246, SJBM/2001.55.111.1.

that Johnson ‘deprived me of the desired pleasure of being introduced to you’.<sup>4</sup> After Johnson’s death in 1784, Piozzi and Seward maintained a regular correspondence, and Piozzi visited Seward in Lichfield in 1787, with her new husband, Gabriel. Though Seward describes the ‘radiant hours’ in which she enjoyed the Piozzi’s company, Seward herself was renowned for the literary salon she presided over in Lichfield.<sup>5</sup> Seward’s residence, the Bishop’s Palace, was ‘the resort of every person in that neighbourhood, who had any taste for letters. Every stranger, who came well recommended to Lichfield, brought letters to the palace’.<sup>6</sup> The Scottish writer Thomas Christie was one such stranger. In 1787, Christie undertook a six-month tour of Britain and wrote an account of his travels to his friend, the editor of the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, John Nichols.<sup>7</sup> Christie proceeded ‘thence to LICHFIELD, where [...] we went to the Episcopal Palace do to honour unto the Muse of Lichfield, and the aged Rector of Eyam’. Christie describes the sociable evening he enjoyed with Seward but acknowledges that Nichols, ‘who knowest the heart of Anna Seward, will be able to form an estimate of the value of this evening’.<sup>8</sup>

A number of important biographical works were produced by members of the Lichfield set, which Seward sits at the heart of, in the wake of Johnson’s death. This dissertation draws attention to a literary network operating in, or associated with, Lichfield. In the eighteenth century, the West Midlands of England ‘was developing a set of characteristics which marked it out as an area of special significance in the history of industrial and intellectual development’. By the end of the century, Lichfield in particular

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<sup>4</sup> Anna Seward to Hester Thrale Piozzi, 14 March 1788, JRL/GB 133/Eng MS 565/5.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Seward, *Letters of Anna Seward: Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807*, ed. Archibald Constable, 6 vols (Edinburgh: George Ramsay & Company, 1811), vol. 1, 335.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth*, 2 vols (London: R. Hunter, 1820), vol. 1, 237. Jenny Uglow notes that Lichfield attracted a number of visitors because it ‘was an important staging post on the London-Holyhead route’, *The Lunar Men: The Friends Who Made the Future* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Christie’s account was later published in John Nichols’s *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, 9 vols (London, 1812-1815), vol. 9, 366-390.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Christie to John Nichols, 24 July 1787, SJB/2001.77.17.

had acquired status as ‘a place of intellectual and cultural exchange’.<sup>9</sup> Jenny Uglow similarly notes that Lichfield was ‘the cultural centre of the region’.<sup>10</sup> Peter Jones expands upon this, showing that Lichfield concentrated ‘on its status as an ecclesiastic capital and on its capacity to cater for the needs of the well-to-do’ and the town ‘boasted a range of clubs and societies’.<sup>11</sup> The Lichfield Botanical Society, established by Erasmus Darwin in the 1780s is one such example.<sup>12</sup> The Lunar Society, a group of Enlightenment intellectuals in Birmingham, which included Darwin, are another example that have attracted scholarly attention, most notably in Uglow’s *The Lunar Men*. Thus far, studies of intellectual sociability in Lichfield and the Midlands have focussed on the activities of Enlightenment and industrial networks. This dissertation acknowledges more specifically the literary culture in Lichfield, which Seward recognised had a longstanding history in the town. In a letter, Seward writes that ‘it is true I dwell on classic ground’.<sup>13</sup> Teresa Barnard notes that Seward was ‘fascinated by Lichfield’s literary hierarchy: Joseph Addison, whose father, Lancelot, was dean of Lichfield, Gilbert Walmesley, David Garrick, Samuel Johnson, Elias Ashmole and Erasmus Darwin’.<sup>14</sup> The literary network presented in this dissertation occasionally overlaps with the more formalised, masculine membership of other recognised societies and networks (not least in the case of Darwin, the subject of Seward’s *Memoirs*, examined in Chapter Two) but is more fluid and inclusive in its associations: it consists of both men and women, is multi-generational, and cuts across geographical boundaries, reflecting the nature of provincial sociability, which could be irregular and also maintained by correspondence.

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Introduction’, in *Anna Seward’s Life of Erasmus Darwin*, ed. Philip K. Wilson, Elizabeth A. Dolan, and Malcolm Dick (Studley: Brewin Books, 2010), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Uglow, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Jones, *Industrial Enlightenment: Science, Technology, and Culture in Birmingham and the West Midlands, 1760-1820* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2008), 33.

<sup>12</sup> See Uglow, 379-389.

<sup>13</sup> Anna Seward, *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward*, ed. Walter Scott, 3 vols (Edinburgh: John Ballantyne and Co., 1810), vol. 1, lxix.

<sup>14</sup> Teresa Barnard, *Anna Seward: A Constructed Life: A Critical Biography* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 33.

Unlike the other writers examined in this thesis, Seward lived in Lichfield for almost her entire life. She was born in Eyam, Derbyshire in 1742. In 1749, the family moved to Lichfield when her father, Thomas, became Prebendary and Canon Residentiary at Lichfield cathedral. Seward's mother, Elizabeth Hunter, was from Lichfield and her father had been the headmaster at Lichfield Grammar School and counted Samuel Johnson among his pupils. Seward was thirteen when the family moved into the Bishop's Palace and she lived there until her death in 1809, aged sixty-seven. While Seward complained that 'I live in the mill-horse round of a provincial city's diurnal society', she admits that 'the local spells of the Close of Lichfield, formed by the remembrance of past happiness, are too powerful for me to break'.<sup>15</sup> Naturally for Seward, Lichfield is central to her life-writing, and her biographical publications are, in part, attempts to memorialise the literary-intellectual creativity of the network living in, or associated with, the provincial town.

Meanwhile, Maria Edgeworth's connection to Lichfield is more tenuous. There is no evidence to suggest that Edgeworth visited Lichfield. Her connection is via her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, who was a regular visitor to the salons hosted at the Bishop's Palace and to his fellow Lunar Society colleagues, Erasmus Darwin and Thomas Day. Though authors' individual ties to Lichfield differ, their subjects were Lichfield regulars, and the direct and indirect literary and sociable exchanges within that network influence their contributions to the life-writing of the late Georgian period. A final point of connection to Lichfield are the manuscript and print sources held by the Samuel Johnson Birthplace Museum. The building Piozzi was once enchanted by is now home to the rare books and manuscripts that constitute the foundation of this dissertation.

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<sup>15</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, 112; vol. 3, 6.

This dissertation examines the generic innovations made in British life-writing by women writers at the end of the long eighteenth century. It offers four chapters discussing three biographers — Hester Piozzi, Anna Seward, and Maria Edgeworth — who wrote biographies of their literary mentors across a thirty-six-year period from 1786 to 1820. Though I present a number of manuscript sources from the period, I use the earliest and latest print texts as this dissertation’s bookends, which are Piozzi’s *Anecdotes* (1786) and Edgeworth’s *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth* (1820). The organisation is also guided by the need for the exploration of understudied material, particularly where opportunities for original contributions are most apparent.

A second rationale for the organisation of materials is that this dissertation is a historical approach to the evolution of a genre, literary biography, which adopts a capacious understanding of that genre, analysing memoirs, anecdotes, editions of letters, and life-and-times biographies as distinctive forms of life-writing in a crucially important period for this genre’s development in Britain. As such, I favour the modern term, ‘life-writing’, because it acknowledges that auto/biography is often ‘impure, multi-layered and multi-resourced’.<sup>16</sup> As Linda Anderson notes, the term ‘acknowledges how hard it is to draw a rigid distinction between different genres’ of auto/biographical writing.<sup>17</sup> Many examples of life-writing exist within the literary biographies this dissertation presents; they consist of letters, anecdotes, diaries, and marginalia. The term ‘life-writing’ is therefore useful because of its inclusivity.

Furthermore, I define these life-writings as ‘literary’ not only because their auto/biographical subjects are literary figures but also because they are literary-artistic endeavours. Paula Backscheider contends that ‘modern biography is not regarded as a

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<sup>16</sup> Hermione Lee, ‘From Memory’: Literary Encounters and Life-Writing’, in *On Life-Writing*, ed. Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 124-141, 125.

<sup>17</sup> Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2010), 144.



literary genre' because it is not artistic; she argues that biographers, 'rather than literary artists or even 'writers' [...] too often see themselves as slaves to documentary fact, 'the surviving evidence', or the subject'.<sup>18</sup> Backscheider refers to modern biographies of historical subjects (she wrote a biography of Daniel Defoe, for instance), rather than 'modern' indicating those composed since Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779–1781), but the point remains that biographers can be seen as dutiful celebrants of an important person, taking a secondary position to their subject, diminishing recognition of their artistry. The biographies examined in this dissertation represent acts of rewriting the lives of the respective subjects, as these biographers sought to publish alternative accounts that aggregated gender to biographic authority, emphasising a more intimate, domestic literary sociability and personal knowledge of the subject. This required these biographers to devise innovative ways to respond to detractors and their male competitors, establishing their presence in the literary marketplace. These biographers are not 'slaves' to fact and evidence, but develop narrative, pay attention to minutiae, and invoke personal anecdote to signal a new, intimate relationship between biographer and subject that is different to the mainstream of eighteenth-century biography, which tends toward the impersonal. They demonstrate great command over the presentation of their biographical subjects, establishing their authority through emphases on critical and shared reading, intellectual sociability, and psychological understanding borne of intimacy and personal connection.

This study offers an original contribution to eighteenth-century studies by drawing together the work of these writers, whose biographies were composed in the wake of Johnson's influential *Lives of the Poets*. While their life-writings are connected through varying associations to Lichfield, this is only the beginning of their overlapping interests. Each author's life-writings engage with questions of literary authority, examine the

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<sup>18</sup> Paula R. Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 234.

dynamics between the female biographer and male subject, experiment with ways of narrating a literary and intellectual life, and represent literary sociability through shared reading and collaborative writing and editing processes. By drawing these connections between the life-writings of Piozzi, Seward, and Edgeworth, and back to Johnson himself, this dissertation contributes to critical dialogues between historical studies of women's reading, mentorship, and professional authorship. The remainder of this introduction, in addition to providing an overview of the dissertation's chapters, outlines these contexts and locates my position within critical debates. First, I set out the relationship between women's reading and biographical writing in the period and demonstrate that the women writers examined in this dissertation used their critical reading and knowledge of literature to legitimise their status as authoritative literary biographers. Their engagement with literature and reading practices also shaped their approach to intimacy in biographical writing. Crucially, these women privilege intimacy in new ways, incorporating personal anecdotes, domestic perspectives, and emotional insight into their biographical narratives. In doing so, they reframe the biographical subject not as a distant, public figure, but as a more humanised and familiar figure. This shift not only challenges the prevailing norms of detached, formal biography but also enables these writers to claim a unique form of literary authority rooted in personal knowledge. The effect is a more inclusive and personal model of life-writing that redefines how literary lives are narrated. Second, I assess eighteenth-century mentor relationships between male writers and female protégées and trace these women writers' respective transitions from mentee to author, and how their inheritance and ambivalent disavowal of their mentor's influence creates an impetus for generic experiment and innovation in life-writing.

## Reading and Writing

An exploration of women authors' transitions from reader to writer are central to this dissertation, which argues that these biographers established their authority not only by aggregating it to their gender, but by foregrounding their literary knowledge and sociability in these biographies. In *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), James Boswell records Johnson's declaration that reading underpins knowledge. Johnson 'combated the idle superficial notion, that knowledge enough may be required in conversation. "The foundation (said he,) must be laid by reading"'.<sup>19</sup> For Johnson, one could become enlightened by studying the experience of human life recorded in literature over the centuries. Indeed, all of Johnson's reading, Sir John Hawkins contends in his *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1787), was directed toward 'the study of human life'.<sup>20</sup> While it is generally acknowledged that Johnson was a prolific reader throughout his life, his attitude towards his own reading practice was equivocal. Boswell's and Hawkins's *Lives* document Johnson's enjoyment of and aversion to reading in equal measure.<sup>21</sup> Johnson claimed that reading could be both a pleasurable and painful undertaking. Universalising his experience, he maintained that 'people in general do not willingly read, if they can have anything else to amuse them', because 'the progress which the understanding makes through a book, has more pain than pleasure in it'. According to Johnson, whether pain or pleasure is experienced is largely dependent on genre; for instance, 'no man reads a book of science from pure inclination', he opines.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin, 2008), 454. Further references to this edition are abbreviated to *BLJ*.

<sup>20</sup> John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. O M Brack Jr. (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2009), 157.

<sup>21</sup> The quantity of Johnson's reading was often the requirement of his literary projects, including *Lives of the Poets*, his periodicals, and the *Dictionary*. Lynda Mugglestone demonstrates that the lexicographical process undertaken for the *Dictionary* required the accumulation of texts used for illustrating word definitions. See *Samuel Johnson and the Journey into Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 60.

<sup>22</sup> *BLJ*, 883. Robert DeMaria's *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (1997) offers the most comprehensive analysis of Johnson's reading practices and demonstrates that Johnson's reading for pleasure and for study is largely based on genre. See, for instance, 151.

Given the influence he had on the reading and writing practices of the women writers evaluated in this dissertation, it is helpful to dwell on Johnson's approach. Reading for study and pleasure was, for Johnson, usually desultory and partial.<sup>23</sup> Boswell recalls that Adam Smith remarked that 'Johnson knew more books than any man alive', but Boswell qualifies this by saying that Johnson had an 'irregular mode of study' that meant he hardly read any work 'to an end'. Instead, Johnson 'had a peculiar facility in seizing at once what was valuable in any book, without submitting to the labour of perusing it from beginning to end'.<sup>24</sup> Abigail Williams notes that the status of partial reading was – and perhaps still is – considered 'less valuable [...] than a "deeper," more sustained, engagement with the whole of a text'.<sup>25</sup> However, Hawkins defends Johnson's desultory reading, linking it to his impressive 'power of memory' in retaining all he read, for 'whatever he read, became his own for ever'. Hawkins demonstrates that Johnson's partial reading facilitated his writing of the *Lives of the Poets*:

one instance of the greatness of his retentive faculty himself has thought fit to give, in his life of the Earl of Rochester, where may be seen a Latin poem upon Nothing, written by Passerat; for the insertion whereof he had, as it is said, no other aid than his own recollection.<sup>26</sup>

Partial reading was valuable for Johnson, then, because it allowed him to accumulate and synthesise a range of texts, which later facilitated the writing of literary history. For the female biographers examined in this dissertation, this approach is significant. By promoting themselves as disseminators of literary knowledge, they could claim

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<sup>23</sup> Hawkins, 126.

<sup>24</sup> *BLJ*, 44.

<sup>25</sup> Abigail Williams, *The Social Life of Books: Reading Together in the Eighteenth-Century Home* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 77. The reading of anthologies promoted, and responded to desires for, partial reading. Barbara M. Benedict suggests that the partial reading facilitated by anthologies resulted from the commodification of literature. See *Making the Modern Reader: Cultural Mediation in Early Modern Literary Anthologies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 17-18.

<sup>26</sup> Hawkins, 11.

intellectual authority; drawing upon a vast literary canon attained through, albeit selective, reading, enabled them to reinforce their credibility as literary biographers.

Johnson was anxious about the influence of new literature on the reading public. When Allan Ramsay claimed that Alexander Pope's 'poetry was highly admired in his life-time, more a great deal than after his death', Johnson argues that Pope has not 'been less admired' but rather 'not been as much talked of'. He contends that while 'we must read what the world reads at the moment', the 'teeming of the press in modern times, is prejudicial to good literature, because it obliges us read so much of what is inferior in value, in order to be in the fashion'. The reading public prefers to 'read modern books' than 'the best works of antiquity' so as to 'have more gratification of [...] vanity in conversation'.<sup>27</sup> Though Boswell emphasises Johnson's anxieties about the reading public's judgement, in the *Life* of Thomas Gray, Johnson praised the 'common reader' for their 'common sense [...] uncorrupted by literary prejudices'.<sup>28</sup> However, Williams demonstrates that there were increasing opportunities for readers in the eighteenth century to become critical readers, as opposed to the 'hasty, inaccurate, and superficial' reader that Virginia Woolf sees Johnson insinuate in the *Life* of Gray.<sup>29</sup> Following F. R. Leavis and Habermas, Williams maintains that 'the burgeoning commercial print culture of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century saw the emergence of generalist literary criticism – the art of amateur appreciation of the world of letters'. This was facilitated by 'essays, newsletters, and instructional guides', which 'offered frameworks and a language with which non-specialist readers could articulate their judgement of literary works'. However, Williams shows that, despite these publications, issues of 'accessibility and restriction' persisted, and so 'not everyone knew how to understand or evaluate what they

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<sup>27</sup> *BLJ*, 703.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; with Critical Observations on their Works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), vol. 4, 176-184, 184.

<sup>29</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962), 11.

read’ and ‘a group of readers wanted more literary knowledge on easier terms’. Though Williams demonstrates that some ‘common’ readers did have access to resources that enabled them to become critical readers, this is within the context of reading Augustan literature, an age characterised by teasing readers ‘with offering and withholding comprehension’.<sup>30</sup>

Johnson’s specific concern, though, is with the influence of modern literature, especially the novel. In the *Rambler*, he argued that some readers are likely victims of their reading, for ‘these books are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life. They are the entertainment of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions’.<sup>31</sup> Women were perceived to be the most susceptible of readers to the influence of the novel. Johnsons’ distinction between ideas (reasoned thoughts formed through critical engagement with literature) and impressions (responses – often emotional – easily absorbed by ‘unfurnished’ minds) underpins an anxiety about women’s ability to read critically. This context is relevant to this dissertation, which traces the trajectories of women readers who become writers, because it highlights that their emergence as biographers not only challenged existing notions of women’s intellectual engagement but also of women’s literary authority.

In his response to Ramsay, Johnson notes that ‘all our ladies read now’. In claiming that this is a ‘great extension’ to the knowledge of literature ‘diffused’ by the reading public, he implicitly betrays concerns about women’s reading in the period, particularly in relation to modern literature that might be ‘inferior in value’.<sup>32</sup> The

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<sup>30</sup> Abigail Williams, *Reading it Wrong: An Alternative History of Early Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 98, 124, 98.

<sup>31</sup> Samuel Johnson, ‘No. 4. Saturday, 31 March 1750’, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Volume III, The Rambler*, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), 19-25, 21.

<sup>32</sup> *BLJ*, 703.

anxieties surrounding women's novel reading have been well-rehearsed in, and contested by, modern feminist scholarship. Though my reflection on this scholarship is brief for this reason, it is necessary — first to establish the context of women's reading in the period, and second, to invite discussion of women's engagement with genres other than the novel. Perceptions of the woman reader in the eighteenth century were, Jacqueline Pearson demonstrates, ambivalent. While on the one hand 'reading was felt to be a potentially seditious employment for women', on the other, it was construed in some accounts as women's 'most rational employment'.<sup>33</sup> However, in line with Johnson's distinction between impressions and ideas, it was perceived that women's reading 'tended to be located in the body, represented as a physical act', whereas 'men's reading was shown to facilitate intellectual development'.<sup>34</sup> Kate Flint notes this preoccupation with women's 'bodily and mental fitness' for reading, which she establishes had been perpetuated since the Renaissance. Flint notes that too much 'light reading might lead her sexually astray, either in imagination or reality', but that it might also 'distract' the female reader from 'developing intellectually'.<sup>35</sup> If women's response to their consumption of literature was located in the body, then they could not be critical readers and so, resultantly, 'misreading' was 'gendered as feminine'. Instructional reading was permissible because it merely required the reader to follow the advice, whereas reading that required reflection and application of situations to themselves were not desirable.

Pearson states that 'the novel was the form most rigorously censored and policed' and so 'ideologies of reading met their fiercest challenge from the novel'.<sup>36</sup> Jane Spencer argues that this is particularly evident in romances which perpetuated fantasies of female

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<sup>33</sup> Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>34</sup> Pearson, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 23.

<sup>36</sup> Pearson, 4, 5, 19.

power. Contemporary commentators ‘saw in the novel [...] dangers to chastity and subordination’ but also to women’s ‘sense of reality’. As a result of becoming ‘entranced by the novel’s version of love’, young women might become discontented with their own lives and ‘refuse real offers of marriage’.<sup>37</sup> Importantly, Jan Fergus reminds us that the fear of ‘female fantasy or sexual stimulation’ perpetuated by novel-reading is ‘the uncontrolled imagination’ of men.<sup>38</sup> However, in *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744), Sarah Fielding’s Cynthia, complains that

if I was pleased with any Book above the most silly Story or Romance, it was taken from me. For *Miss must not enquire too far into things, it would turn her Brain; she had better mind her Needle-work, and such Things as were useful for Women: reading and poring on Books, would never get me a Husband.*<sup>39</sup>

Here, the ‘silly Story of Romance’ is recommended *because* it prevents intellectual development, and so Fielding criticises the contradictory male regulation of women’s reading. In doing so, Fielding also demonstrates that such anxieties were not confined to the novel.

Though scholarship has recognised that women wrote in different genres, it has been comparatively less concerned with their reading in different genres; the main focus of scholarship has been women’s reading of novels and romances. Williams has given more attention to uncovering the range of genres purchased, borrowed, and read in the eighteenth century, including verse and drama. The consumption of sermons, histories, and travel writing, she demonstrates, ‘dwarfed that of literary works’.<sup>40</sup> Recent scholarly editions of the diaries and letters of Elizabeth Montagu, Sarah Scott, and Mary Hamilton

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<sup>37</sup> Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 186.

<sup>38</sup> Jan Fergus, ‘Women readers: a case study’, in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1700-1800*, ed. Vivien Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 155-176, 173.

<sup>39</sup> Sarah Fielding, *The Adventures of David Simple*, ed. Linda Bree (London: Penguin, 2002), 92.

<sup>40</sup> Williams, *Social Life of Books*, 239.



show these women read widely across genres and literary periods. A letter Scott wrote to Montagu, for instance, reveals the breadth of genres she read over the course of just one evening:

my reading does not seem all to correspond very well, since I came down I read the history of Florence & Lord Bacons Essays /& the old Plays; \, Christianity not founded on argument[, ] Randolphs answer to it, & Fontaines Tales; some M<sup>r</sup> Harris on art & happiness & some of David Simple's Life; & am now reading an account of the Government of Venice.<sup>41</sup>

Nicole Pohl notes that Scott's 'choice of reading material is pertinent' since she had 'a disdain for romance' and an interest in 'historical biography'.<sup>42</sup> Elite women's letters and diaries also show that their reading was almost always recorded critically.<sup>43</sup> This is true of the authors examined in this dissertation. Their letters, marginalia, and biographies themselves attest not only to their varied reading but also their studious engagement with texts. This dissertation therefore contributes to these discussions on women's reading by arguing that their critical reading not only enabled them to become skilled literary biographers but reinforced their authority to do so. In arguing that reading facilitated authorship, I heed Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton's assertion that, because reading is 'intended to give rise to something else', it is 'goal-oriented — an active, rather than passive pursuit', and envisages 'some other outcome of reading beyond accumulation of information'.<sup>44</sup> As aforementioned, Johnson's accumulation of literary knowledge is

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<sup>41</sup> Sarah Scott to Elizabeth Montagu, 5 June 1744, in Sarah Scott, *The Letters of Sarah Scott*, ed. Nicole Pohl, 2 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014), vol. 1, 65.

<sup>42</sup> *The Letters of Sarah Scott*, vol. 1, 67.

<sup>43</sup> This dissertation examines the tenets of critical reading and judgement more thoroughly in Chapter Two.

<sup>44</sup> Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton, "Studied for action": How Gabriel Harvey read his Livy', in *Gabriel Harvey and the History of Reading*, ed. Anthony Grafton, Nicholas Popper, and William Sherman (London: UCL Press, 2024), 21-76, 22.

evident in the *Lives of the Poets*, but his reading, undertaken in pursuit of understanding the human condition, also gave rise to the writing of those biographies.

How did readers become authors? More specifically, how does one become a literary biographer? Johnson identifies the desirability of a link between reading and writing when he questions why ‘there should be so little reading in the world, and so much writing’.<sup>45</sup> Johnson’s suggestion is that literary writing can only be produced by the assiduous reader. Indeed, Hawkins states: ‘that Johnson owed his excellence as a writer to the divines and others of the last century, myself can attest, who have been the witness of his course of reading, and heard him declare his sentiments of their works’.<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Montagu expressed similar concerns. In a letter to Benjamin Stillingfleet, she admits ‘I really love scribbling, but I do not think it an innocent amusement in /an\ age in which trifling books choak up & obstruct the road to real knowledge. The opinions of a Betsey thoughtless would make a worse book than y<sup>e</sup> history of her actions’.<sup>47</sup> Though Montagu is expressing modesty here in her self-deprecation, she demonstrates in her critique of Eliza Haywood’s *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751) that she, like Johnson, understands what constitutes literary writing. Furthermore, Montagu recognises the potential disadvantage for aspiring women writers: ‘a Womans education are not to be got over but by a force of talents & energy of soul which I am not bless’d with’.<sup>48</sup> Montagu

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<sup>45</sup> *BLJ*, 883.

<sup>46</sup> Hawkins, 163.

<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Montagu to Benjamin Stillingfleet, undated (c. 1760), HUN/MO 5116.

<sup>48</sup> HUN/MO 5116. Markman Ellis examines Montagu’s ambivalence toward becoming a published author, since ‘anxiety about the public propriety of authorship remained evident later in the century’ amongst women writers (418). See ‘“An Author in Form”: Women Writers, Print Publication, and Elizabeth Montagu’s *Dialogues of the Dead*’, *English Literary History*, 79:2 (2012), 417-445. Jennie Batchelor considers women writers’ awareness of ‘how women’s lives might be used against their works’ because ‘judgements upon women writers’ professional achievements and private reputations were [...] often inseparable and mutually informing’ (182). See ‘Jane Austen and Charlotte Smith: Biography, Autobiography and the Writing of Women’s Literary History’, in Daniel Cook and Amy Culley (eds.), *Women’s Life Writing, 1700-1850: Gender, Genre, Authorship* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 181-196. Matthew Sangster has also noted that some writers found the prospect of publication ‘unnerving’ because ‘to write was necessarily to self-fashion, and such self-fashioning could be ruthlessly contested by others seeking to exert control over culture and society’ (15). See *Living as an Author in the Romantic Period* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

suggests that genuine literary achievement requires not only innate talent but persistent intellectual engagement.

In exploring this transition from reading to authorship, scholarship has tended to focus on women's reading and writing novels. Spencer, for example, argues that some readers of novels 'became novelists', for, 'as a new form apparently easy to write and not guarded by classical tradition, it must have appealed to women without classical education'.<sup>49</sup> Betty A. Schellenberg's study follows in the same vein: the writer of any given genre is preceded by the reader of that genre.<sup>50</sup> Schellenberg demonstrates that Scott's reading of historical genres enabled her to write *The History of Gustavus Ericson* (1761) and *The Life of Theodore Agrippa d'Aubigné* (1772) because by reading history she 'acquired familiarity with its detail and certain documentary sources'. Schellenberg also shows that 'discussing this knowledge conversationally or in private writings' enabled Scott's professional writing of history.<sup>51</sup> However, to become a literary biographer – and validate their status as one – the writer need not only demonstrate their familiarity with the literary works of the biographical subject, but exhibit a capacious understanding of canonical literature, as Johnson did. The authority of the biographers examined in this dissertation, I will argue, is reinforced by their emphases on scholarly and critical reading. Ascension to professional authorship, particularly for a woman, is dependent on writing that appeals to the general reader but is underpinned by scholarly, literary knowledge. Piozzi emphasises her reading of travelogues, biography, and history; Seward's biographical writing rests on her criticism of the works of ancient and modern

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<sup>49</sup> Spencer, 6-7.

<sup>50</sup> Pearson has nuanced this, noting that Frances Burney, for instance, did not have a great interest in reading novels despite being a novelist herself, 136.

<sup>51</sup> Betty A. Schellenberg, *The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 82.

poets; and Edgeworth draws on poetry and philosophical writings in addition to her own published novels.

The transition from reader to author took time; this dissertation tracks the development of the writers' literary criticism that underpins their later biographical practices, recorded in private correspondence and in the margins of the books they owned. Edgeworth is different from the other two writers here; I argue that her biographical practice is developed from her experience as a novelist. This dissertation explicates the links between the reader, the amateur writer of literary criticism, and the published author, and it shows that each practice facilitated the next. Recent scholarship has shown reading and writing in the period were sociable practices, providing a counterpoint to the legacy left by Romantic writers who, Williams states 'were influential in shaping a model of literature as a form of individual self-expression, and reading as a source of personal inspiration and self-discovery'.<sup>52</sup> It is therefore also through the sharing of literature – their books and their own scribal manuscripts – that women readers in particular were able to hone their writing practice. Chapter Two reflects at greater length on scholarship (including that by Terry Castle, Markman Ellis, and Mark Towsey) that recognises the role sociability played in facilitating this transition from reader to writer. However, more work is required better to understand how life-writing was pursued through reading and writing as sociable endeavours offered through participation in literary and intellectual networks. As such, this dissertation takes into account how people were reading and engaging with collaborative practices and productions, such as editing, to understand how this sociability effected developments in biography during the late Georgian period.

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<sup>52</sup> Williams, *Social Life of Books*, 2.

Why did these woman writers become literary biographers? Piozzi felt obliged to set the record straight by providing a new account of Johnson, while Edgeworth sought to continue the work of establishing her father's legacy. Seward had both objectives in mind: she sought to establish Darwin's legacy and provide an alternative account of Lichfield literary culture to the one (which she saw as offensive) diffused by Johnson's letters to Piozzi.

Whether biography offered a route into professional authorship (Piozzi) or to diversify an established literary career hitherto constituted mainly of poetry (Seward) or fiction (Edgeworth), the genre also crucially promised the title 'biographer', which offered a unique opportunity for literary self-fashioning. Spencer's discussion of the transition from novel reader to writer suggests that it was a form relatively open to women in an exclusionary world of letters. The eighteenth century witnessed a blossoming interest in biographies, not only of the public actions of historical figures, but of private lives of contemporaneous people. Publishers welcomed proposals for new biographies that gave unprecedented insight into famous writers' lives. Thomas Cadell, for instance, leapt at the chance to publish Piozzi's *Anecdotes* when she tentatively wrote to him. For the authors examined in this dissertation, the popularity of biography provided an opportunity to launch or advance their literary biographical careers by exploiting their privileged access to the lives of famous men.

While Chapter One accounts for the anxieties about the publication of private lives, I here want to acknowledge the burgeoning popularity of biographical writing in the period and establish that it was a genre highly regarded by readers. The interest in private lives was perpetuated by developing notions of celebrity in the period, and the Johnsonian principle that biography can impart particular truths about individuals with whom the reader can identify and learn from (Paul Fussell notes that *Lives of the Poets* is

‘concerned with the nature and, more importantly, the limits of human achievement’, as it investigates ‘man’s ever-present impulse to delusion, triviality, incompetence, vanity, sloth, and plain stupidity’<sup>53</sup>) without resorting to distorting fictions, such as were associated with the novel.<sup>54</sup> Nora Nachumi and Kristina Straub have shown that ‘celebrity and biography in the long eighteenth century’ are ‘mutually constitutive’, because ‘the illusion of intimacy – the glimpsing of a celebrity’s private experience –’ is linked to ‘the appeal of life writing as it emerged during the century’. Biography facilitated ‘producing and sustaining celebrity culture’, and in turn, ‘celebrity culture incubated and nurtured [...] life writing’.<sup>55</sup> If emerging notions of ‘celebrity’ created anticipation for biography, how did biography produce celebrity and create anticipation among readers? Focussing specifically on *Lives* of authors, Eve Tavor Bannet shows that it was not simply a case of revealing intimate details from private life but that biography sought to establish writers’ reputations ‘by attaching their writings to an at once humanized and particularized image of the author as a person with a distinctive character, public presence, private life, and a personal history of celebrity, or success [...] to present that person and his works from being summarily dismissed or forgotten’. Bannet also highlights, which is crucial for this

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<sup>53</sup> Paul Fussell, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1972), 247.

<sup>54</sup> Hermione Lee suggests that biography sits somewhere between history and fiction as the genre attempts to give shape to a life but concludes that ‘whether we think of biography as more like history or more like fiction, what we want from it is a vivid sense of the person’ and that ‘we are always drawn to moments of intimacy, revelation, or particular inwardness’. This ‘insatiable appetite for detail and story’, Lee notes, was promulgated by Johnson and Boswell. See *Body Parts: Essays on Life-Writing* (London: Pimlico, 2008), 3.

<sup>55</sup> Nora Nachumi and Kristina Straub (eds.), ‘Introduction’, *Making Stars: Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2022), 1-13, 1-3.

It is also worth noting that, in terms of literary biography, not all authors were ‘celebrities’. As Eve Tavor Bannet points out, compilers of literary histories ‘had to “extend notice of Authors beyond celebrity to include some account of all those persons whose works still form part of the stock of general literature [...],” and to include the lives of people who had been “celebrated in their time” but who had “obtained only temporary distinction” and were celebrated no more’ (33). See “‘Modern Biography’: Form, Function, and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Genre Theory’, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 45:2 (2021), 24-55.

Julian North traces the growing tension between literary biography and celebrity in the Romantic period: the ‘uneasy conjunction’ of the Romantic genius with the domestic results from an attempt to ‘publish’ the poet for ‘the consumption of the reader’ (31). However, North only observes a certain echelon at a certain point in time. This dissertation is more concerned with the legacy of Johnsonian biography in the late Georgian period than the effect of the relationship between Romanticism and celebrity on the development of biographies of Romantic poets. See *The Domestication of Genius: Biography and the Romantic Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

dissertation, that biography simultaneously ‘sought to procure reputations for biographers as authors who themselves deserved well of posterity, by distinguishing each biographer’s voice and intellectual profile from those of his subjects and from those of previous biographers, and by claiming originality for judgements, instruction, and artfulness that each displayed as author of a life’.<sup>56</sup> Though Bannet complicates the narrative that Johnson was modern literary biography’s ‘principal, if not only, serious eighteenth-century proponent’, *Lives of the Poets* certainly set a major precedent for future biographical writing – not least for Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) and including those examined in this dissertation – in aligning biographical practice with the evolving expectations of readers, and by accounting for individual histories while asserting the biographer’s own significance.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, this dissertation engages with studies specifically concerned with Johnson’s life-writing, including those by Robert Folkenflik, Fussell, and Catherine Parke to contextualise how the biographers examined in this dissertation inherit aspects of Johnson’s approach to biography.<sup>58</sup> These studies highlight Johnson’s innovations in the genre, including moral and philosophical enquiry, the treatment of public and private lives, critical judgement, and assessment of character. While this dissertation draws on these studies to trace Johnson’s influence, my focus is not to reassess the *Lives of the Poets* but rather to understand how those biographies inform the works of Piozzi, Seward, and Edgeworth.

This dissertation thus contributes to studies of eighteenth-century life-writing by tracing the legacy of Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets* in late Georgian biography. It explores

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<sup>56</sup> Bannet, 47-48.

<sup>57</sup> John A. Vance clarifies that Boswell followed Johnson’s example in the ‘emphasis on character and characterizing particularity’, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson: New Questions, New Answers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 33.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Folkenflik, *Samuel Johnson, Biographer* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), Fussell, *Samuel Johnson & the Life of Writing*, and Catherine N. Parke, *Samuel Johnson and Biographical Thinking* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991).

the increasing recognition by biographers of the relationship between the individual and history by the time Seward's *Letters* were posthumously published in 1811 and Edgeworth wrote *Memoirs* (these texts are examined in Chapters Three and Four respectively), reflecting an Enlightenment shift toward individualism. As such, it examines how evolving notions of selfhood ('characterized by psychological depth, or interiority, which is the bedrock of unique, expressive individual identity'<sup>59</sup>) influenced the construction of biographical narratives within broader frameworks of contemporary historical events, such as the French Revolution (Seward) and the Act of Union (Edgeworth).<sup>60</sup> This dissertation specifically examines literary biography but broadens the scope of essay collections and studies of multiple authors by assessing experimental approaches to biography by female authors who have been overlooked in discussions dominated by male-authored texts and metropolitan networks.<sup>61</sup> It also draws together print and manuscript sources, treating those manuscripts not merely as repositories of biographical detail but as literary artefacts in their own right, allowing for a more nuanced understanding, not of the biographers' lives, but of the construction and development of the printed biographical works examined.<sup>62</sup> Finally, by moving beyond discourses on

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<sup>59</sup> Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), xi. Wahrman also observes this is reflected in developments in literary genres: departures in the novel from a 'privileging social performance' toward 'expressions of interiority' revolved 'around the broader transformation in the understanding of identity', which 'became personal, interiorized, essential, even innate' as identity was 'made synonymous with the self', 276.

<sup>60</sup> Wahrman connects the evolving notion of individual identity and broader historical contexts, arguing that the shift at the end of the century toward a sense of a more stable interior identity was catalysed by cultural changes in the period, characterised as a 'cultural revolution', xiii.

<sup>61</sup> Tanya Caldwell (ed.), *Writing Lives in the Eighteenth Century* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2020). This essay collection is important because it focuses exclusively on literary *Lives* but examines a metropolitan literary network centred around Johnson, Piozzi, Boswell, and the Burneys. Jane Darcy also examines literary biographies but within the specific context of melancholy and only considers male-authored biographies of male writers (with the exception of Godwin's *Memoirs of Wollstonecraft*). See *Melancholy and Literary Biography, 1640-1816* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

This dissertation follows and builds on work that examines multiple women life-writers, such as Amy Culley and Daniel Cook (ed.), *Women's Life Writing, 1700-1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012) and Culley, *British Women's Life Writing, 1760-1840: Friendship, Community, Collaboration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

<sup>62</sup> This dissertation differs from studies such as Barnard's *A Constructed Life*, which utilises Seward's unpublished letters to reveal insights into her own life.



celebrity in this period, this dissertation emphasises the role of biographers as arbiters of literary knowledge, examining the terms on which they engage with their subjects, and the innovative ways they contribute to the development of biographical genres, which are evident in the narrative modes adopted by these biographers. While they create space for themselves in literary discourses by aggregating their gender to modes of narration, the authoritative voice they adopt becomes significant not because of their personal relationship to their subject but because of the narrative style they develop to write biography. This approach positions this study at the intersection of gender studies, literary history, and life-writing theory, offering new insights into biographical practices in the late Georgian period.

This dissertation advances understandings of genre, gender, sociability, and medium relating to life-writing. It offers a fuller understanding of women writers' participation in the development of biographical practices. By examining the life-writings of Piozzi, Seward, and Edgeworth, it highlights how these authors used biography not only to document lives but also to explore personal relationships and assert literary-intellectual authority. This study rethinks the evolution of biographical form and content, particularly in relation to how personal relationships inform the construction of a biographical narrative. This dissertation also contributes to our understanding of how women writers, often marginalised either due to their provincial location or being overshadowed by male figures such as Johnson, leveraged their gender within their life-writing to assert literary authority and create intellectual space for themselves in the world of eighteenth-century letters. Furthermore, the dissertation contributes to the history of reading, emphasising the role of sociability, exchange, influence, and debate within literary networks. It shows how biography functioned not only as a personal literary document but as part of a broader intellectual culture where interactions and

relationships were crucial to the shaping of texts. Additionally, it explores the relationship between manuscript and print cultures, revealing the mutual dependencies and interactions between these mediums. By investigating how these three women engaged with manuscript and print, the study illuminates the ways in which life-writing could be used to gain authority in literary culture during this period.

### Mentorship and Authorship

The authors considered in this dissertation developed their authorial identity in the process of narrating the lives of men who stood in a mentorly relation to them. Accounts of Johnson's advocacy for women's writing, such as that by Frances Reynolds, augments evidence uncovered by scholars which demonstrates that, contrary to the depictions of Johnson's misogynistic treatment of women propagated in Boswell's *Life*, he was a patron and mentor of women writers.<sup>63</sup> Dustin Griffin defines 'literary patronage' as a 'systematic economic arrangement, a complex exchange of benefit to both patron and client'.<sup>64</sup> Johnson's patronage of women writers is not comparable to the more conventional monetary provision typically associated with patronage. As such, Isobel Grundy affirms that Johnson 'did not play Lord Chesterfield towards any writer, female or male'.<sup>65</sup> However, Griffin demonstrates that money 'is only one of the resources that patrons provided their clients'. Other resources included hospitality but also more intangible benefits; Griffin identifies familiarity, encouragement, protection, favour, and authority.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, Johnson defined the role of patron alternately as 'one who

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<sup>63</sup> In 1785, Elizabeth Montagu agreed to read Reynolds's manuscript draft of *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Taste* (1789). In a letter, Reynolds tells Montagu that Johnson had also encouraged her writing of the work and offered advice relating to the printing of it. Reynolds confesses that 'I had conceived of D<sup>r</sup>. Johnsons being strongly prejudiced against womens literary productions'. She found, though, that 'He was sincere, he judged justly of the work, and his opinion corresponded with yours!', Frances Reynolds to Elizabeth Montagu, 12 July 1785, HUN/MO 4650.

<sup>64</sup> Dustin Griffin, *Literary Patronage in England, 1650-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13.

<sup>65</sup> Isobel Grundy, 'Samuel Johnson as Patron of Women', *The Age of Johnson*, 1 (1987), 59-77, 59.

<sup>66</sup> Griffin, 18, 19.

countenances, supports or protects' and as an 'advocate; defender; vindicator'.<sup>67</sup>

Johnson's patronage of women is characterised by, Grundy specifies, his 'nourishing talent, by fostering confidence, and by insisting on professional standards'.<sup>68</sup> Studies of Johnson's sociability with women writers by, for instance Norma Clarke and Kate Chisholm, reveal that he supported Elizabeth Carter, Charlotte Lennox, Hannah More, and Frances Burney (to name but a few) in such ways.<sup>69</sup>

This dissertation examines the extent to which, and the ways in which, women writers disavowed the literary influence of their paternalistic mentors and their writing, including Johnson's, in order to produce innovative biographical works and thereby claim distinctive spaces in the world of letters. This dissertation is a literary study and while it does account for the influence of the paternal mentor on the female writer, it is more specifically interested in the influence of the mentor's biographical practice on the biographies produced by these women. Though the terms 'patron' and 'mentor' are somewhat analogous, 'mentorship' is more readily affiliated with 'influence'. It is therefore necessary first to distinguish the terms 'patronage' and 'mentorship', and their respective associations with 'influence' and 'authority', before outlining the particular relationships the women writers examined in this dissertation had with their respective mentors, in anticipation of discussions within the subsequent chapters of disavowals of influence in their biographical writing.

Anthony Lee's scholarship offers the most thorough analysis of the cultural significance of mentoring relationships in the eighteenth century, and he demonstrates that 'the general culture of the eighteenth century and its literary culture in particular, solicited the arousal of mentoring energies in a more pointed way than is evident in many

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<sup>67</sup> 'patron, n.s.', Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1773).

<sup>68</sup> Grundy, 61.

<sup>69</sup> Norma Clark, *Dr Johnson's Women* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000) and Kate Chisholm, *Wits and Wives: Dr. Johnson in the Company of Women* (London: Pimlico, 2012).

other eras'.<sup>70</sup> The proliferation of social and literary clubs facilitated opportunities for this transactional relationship. However, it is important to note that mentorship, pervasive as it became, did not supplant patronage. Griffin maintains that though 'the authority of the patron' was increasingly contested from the mid-century, 'such challenges did not mean that the patronage system had been overthrown'.<sup>71</sup> Arguably, the most momentous challenge to established systems of patronage was the rise of professional authorship. However, as Pat Rogers notes, 'aspiring authors hoped for patronage even as authorship emerged as a career possibility'.

Though the terms are kindred, and though there were points of intersection, the roles of patron and mentor are distinct. Rogers shows that Alexander Pope argued, albeit unsuccessfully, for 'his contemporaries to distinguish between mentor and patron'. As a Catholic, Pope was denied access to the formal courses of aristocratic or governmental patronage. Rogers demonstrates that, resultantly, Pope both 'sought out mentors' and willingly mentored others. Yet, Pope also undertook a more patron-like role in assisting 'other authors with their writing or through subscriptions and financial gifts'. It is in Pope's seeking the 'advice of senior literary figures' and the 'advice' he in turn passed on to other aspiring authors that the role of the mentor emerges in this case study.<sup>72</sup>

Patronage is largely characterised by the offering of financial, resource-based support: it is transactional (the patron receives something in return for their support, such as a dedication),<sup>73</sup> and it involves the promotion of the beneficiaries' work to enhance their public profile and presumably their material gain. By contrast, mentorship denotes the

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<sup>70</sup> Anthony W. Lee (ed.), *Mentoring in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 11.

<sup>71</sup> Griffin, 285.

<sup>72</sup> Pat Rogers, 'Alexander Pope: Perceived Patron, Misunderstood Mentor', in *Mentoring in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture*, 51-62.

<sup>73</sup> Griffin notes that patronage 'was in effect an "economic" arrangement that provided benefits to both parties', 10.

provision of advice and guidance; it is relational (the relationship between mentor and mentee is personal, as opposed to the pecuniary one that characterises patronage); and it supports the development of the mentee and their writing over a longer period. Clarifying these distinctions is necessary so as to better identify the idiosyncratic ways, that were not necessarily systematic, in which the female biographers examined in this dissertation were supported by their mentors.

Grundy's scholarship on Johnson's patronage of women incidentally shows that 'mentorship' has become the more pervasive term in scholarship that has sought to comprehend Johnson's – and others' – literary relationships with women writers. In her 1987 essay, Grundy exclusively uses the term 'patron', although she takes the term in its 'broadest sense', envisaging the tangible and non-tangible benefits that Griffin would later set out.<sup>74</sup> However, in her 2022 essay, Grundy favours the term 'mentor' when describing Johnson's offerings of 'energetic and generous support' to Lennox, Carter, and Mary Masters. Grundy seems to point back to her earlier understanding of Johnson as a patron, though, when she notes that he was 'less a mentor than ... an equal sharer in their circumstances and goals'. If patron and mentor are distinguished by whether the beneficiary's writing is published or not, Johnson's status as a patron or mentor is circumstantial. Acts of patronage are evident when, for instance, 'his hand can be seen' in a book's subscription list, which was the case for Masters.<sup>75</sup> Lee's argument that patronage is best understood as 'an important facet of the mentoring exchange' is a productive understanding for this dissertation because mentorship encompasses notions of textual influence in a way that patronage typically does not.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Grundy, 59.

<sup>75</sup> Grundy, 'Women', in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Jack Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 408-424, 411.

<sup>76</sup> Lee, 7.

The various embodiments of mentorship, from the more direct interpersonal exchanges to the more imaginative textual manifestations, are connected by the exertion of influence and authority. A patron's authority is naturally assumed, Griffin articulates, 'in theory by birth, education, taste, and leisure'. It is therefore assumed that a patron 'is better qualified than his inferiors or even nascent professionals to serve as the judge of literary merit'. The authority of the patron is 'convertible into material assets'; Griffin's example is that a book will tend to sell better if it 'comes complete with a dedication to a noble lord who has in some sense authorized it'.<sup>77</sup> The influence of authority in mentoring relationships, however, is relational and textual. Lee demonstrates that a mentor 'possesses authority by virtue of his enlarged range of experience'. This authority is conveyed to the mentee through both direct interpersonal exchanges as well as through a more impersonal textual mentorship.<sup>78</sup> As such, 'the prior text or author impacts and shapes the later one'. Piozzi knew Johnson personally and received literary mentorship from him. Seward also knew Johnson but, like Edgeworth, had no mentorly relationship with him; Seward was mentored by Darwin, and Edgeworth was mentored by her father, Lovell Edgeworth. Each of these women writers read Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* and so their own biographies were subject to its textual influence.<sup>79</sup> Chapter One shows that Piozzi revered the work, and her *Anecdotes* develop Johnson's own use of anecdote in the *Lives* to reveal particulars about the subject's character. For Piozzi, the textual relationship was not, however, 'impersonal'; this apparent deference to Johnson's authority in the *Lives* is complicated by her own personal relationship with him. Meanwhile, Seward found the authority of *Lives of the Poets* to be provoking. Chapter

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<sup>77</sup> Griffin, 23, 24.

<sup>78</sup> Lee, 3, 3-4.

<sup>79</sup> While he was not a mentor to these biographers, they were also subject to the influence of Boswell's *Journal and Life*; I acknowledge the ways in which Piozzi and Seward respond to this influence in Chapters One and Two.

Two demonstrates that though Seward was determined to be the literary-critical antithesis of Johnson, this becomes complicated in her *Memoirs* of Darwin as she adopts Johnson's methodology for using a poet's work to reveal or affirm truths about their life and character. In this way, Seward takes from Johnson the formal structure of biography while discarding the tone she disapproves of, thus crafting her own narrative voice that both critiques and builds upon his legacy. Though Edgeworth was less personally affronted by the *Lives* than Seward, her *Memoirs* evidence her objection to Johnson's giving narrative 'shape' to a life.<sup>80</sup> Chapter Four highlights Edgeworth's disavowal of Johnson's authoritative text by offering an alternative narrative trajectory of a life that is less focussed on mental and bodily decrepitude and melancholy in old age but continued learning, achievement, and happiness.

The final point to consider regarding the relationship of these writer's mentorship relations to their authorship is one of genre and gender. Textual influences have been predominantly illustrated through examples taken from canonical Romantic poetry.<sup>81</sup> W. J. Bate contends that 'the critic, biographer, or historian, in his consideration of the arts, has by definition a different vocation' and so 'the accumulation of past work from which he may feel tempted or even forced to differ in order to secure identity [...] is chronologically far more limited'.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, modern literary biographers in the eighteenth century had a relatively short history of predecessor texts from which they could inherit. However, it is the genre of literary biography itself, and specifically the relationship between these biographers and subjects, that complicates disavowals of textual influence. Biography enacts a transference of authority to the biographer, who was once the mentee.

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<sup>80</sup> On biography as aspiring to give 'shape' to a life, see Hermione Lee, *Body Parts*, 2-3.

<sup>81</sup> For instance, W. Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971) and Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Bloom identifies 'Six Revisionary Ratios' to demonstrate the varying ways in which Romantic poets responded to earlier writers' works, 14-16.

<sup>82</sup> Bate, 7-8.

This transference is further complicated for the female biographer as they attempt to justify their position in the literary marketplace. This dissertation examines not how women were mentored, but how they became authors through disavowals of their mentors', and Johnson's, textual influence. It recognises that acts of textual disavowal in this context were complex. This complexity is particularly pertinent in biography because it reveals conflicts of allegiance, which required reconciling the benevolent treatment of their mentor as biographical subject with a desire to innovate by disavowing that mentor's textual legacy.

This dissertation is an integrationist literary historiography that reconsiders the relationship between gender and genre in the context of eighteenth-century women's biography. In tackling the question of how gender relates to genre in the field of women's biography, my study contributes to a body of scholarship that has sought to reevaluate the role of women in the eighteenth-century literary marketplace, challenging the notion that they were simply consumers of literature.<sup>83</sup> Catherine Gallagher, for instance, explores how women writers navigated a male-dominated literary culture, and shows that even when their identities were marginalised, they strategically utilised abstract aspects of authorship – such as fictional character, reputations, and personae – to gain cultural capital.<sup>84</sup> This dissertation extends this conversation by exploring how women biographers claimed space in the literary culture of the Georgian period through innovations in biographical writing. This study aligns with recent scholarship that views women as 'vital contributors to a vibrant literary culture', arguing that their 'literary

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<sup>83</sup> For further studies that trace the emergence of the novel and the establishing of the professional woman writer, see Jennie Batchelor, *Women's Work: Labour, Gender, Authorship, 1750-1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Spencer, *Rise of the Woman Novelist*, and Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing, and Fiction, 1660-1800* (London: Virago, 1989).

<sup>84</sup> Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).



activities were closely connected with those of their male colleagues'.<sup>85</sup> While other genres, such as the novel, have been more fully explored from an integrationist perspective, this dissertation brings biography into that conversation.<sup>86</sup> Ina Schabert's and Catherine Ingrassia's assessments of eighteenth-century women's writing highlight the trajectory of feminist scholarship, demonstrating a shift from twentieth-century recovery project to more recent integrationist studies that emphasise women writers' connectedness with male-dominated literary networks. Both Schabert and Ingrassia point to scholarship on Seward as an example of this trajectory. Schabert notes that Teresa Barnard's and Claudia Thomas Kairoff's respective monographs on Seward have challenged understandings of her work as derivative or marginal and generated a 'complex personality for her' and suggests that 'the revaluation' has been 'completed' in this case.<sup>87</sup> However, Ingrassia claims that Kairoff's study, among other studies of single authors, rather lays the foundation for further work, implying that much remains unexplored.<sup>88</sup>

This dissertation departs from previous integrationist scholarship in its focus on biography, a genre that has been overlooked in studies of eighteenth-century women's writing. Whereas studies of other genres, such as the novel, have moved beyond the recovery of those texts to deeper critical engagement, this has not been the case for life-writing. This is apparent in Schabert's and Ingrassia's assessments, which do not specifically list life-writing, although they come close by acknowledging travel writing and history. And while Ingrassia acknowledges the hybrid forms in which women wrote and calls for more of this work to be done, none of the essays in that collection explicitly

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<sup>85</sup> Catherine Ingrassia (ed.), 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion to Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1-18, 11. Ina Schabert, 'From Feminist to Integrationist Literary History: 18<sup>th</sup> Century Studies 2005-2013', *Literature Compass*, 11:10 (2014), 667-676, 667.

<sup>86</sup> See, for instance, Paula R. Backscheider, *Elizabeth Singer Rowe and the Development of the English Novel* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2013).

<sup>87</sup> Schabert, 668.

<sup>88</sup> Ingrassia, 9.

address how this hybridity manifests in life-writing. This dissertation argues that biography in this period offered women writers a form of self-expression and innovation as they blended fiction (Edgeworth), literary criticism and letters (Seward), and diary and anecdote (Piozzi) with biography. It is only more recently, in *Women's Life Writing 1700-1850* (2012) and *Writing Lives in the Eighteenth Century* (2020), that recovered texts have been read rather 'in relation to the wider culture than as a distinct tradition'.<sup>89</sup> However, as Amy Culley acknowledges in her critical survey of women's life writing in the long eighteenth century, more recent scholarly attention has been focussed upon analyses and explorations of scandalous memoirists, spiritual autobiographies, and slave narratives, while literary biography 'remains comparatively under-researched'.<sup>90</sup> While this dissertation incorporates under-utilised manuscripts and contributes to the recovery of these writings, it moves beyond mere recovery. It also seeks to demonstrate how women's biographies were not simply ancillary to male-dominated genres but were central to the development of literary culture in the late Georgian period. In this way, this dissertation bridges gaps between feminist recovery projects and integrationist approaches, offering new insights into how women biographers shaped literary culture in this period. This perspective is useful in understanding the complexities of mentorship, textual inheritance and disavowal, and innovation, as women biographers negotiated authority in a genre dominated by male authors.

## Overview of the Chapters

This dissertation contains four chapters. The first appraises Hester Lynch Piozzi's *Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson* (1786). By focusing specifically on Piozzi's

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<sup>89</sup> Amy Culley, 'Women's Life Writing in the Long 18<sup>th</sup> Century: A Critical Survey', *Literature Compass*, 12:1 (2015), 1-11, 5. See Cook and Culley (eds.), *Women's Life Writing, 1700-1850: Gender, Genre, Authorship* and Caldwell (ed.), *Writing Lives in the Eighteenth Century*.

<sup>90</sup> Culley, 5.

innovative use of anecdotal material derived from her intimate, domestic relationship with Johnson, I demonstrate that *Anecdotes* marks the beginning of a redefinition of biographical practices in the period 1780-1820. Piozzi's narrative approach not only offers a more personal and nuanced portrayal of Johnson but also challenges the formal, impersonal conventions of her male contemporaries. Furthermore, this chapter explores her engagement with both manuscript and print cultures, through an assessment of both anecdotes initially published in 1786 and those she added in the margins of her books in the nineteenth century, which serve as an extension of her biographical project. In these annotations, Piozzi emphasises literary sociability, shared reading, and intellectual exchange at Streatham Park. By placing personal insight at the forefront of *Anecdotes*, Piozzi asserts her authority as a biographer and affirms her place within Johnson's literary network.

Like Piozzi, Anna Seward also fashioned herself as an interlocutor in her biography of Erasmus Darwin, promoting herself as the authority on her biographical subject during a particular period in Darwin's life, valorised through the depiction of an intimate domesticity and literary sociability. While Chapter One examines how Piozzi contributed to the development of literary biography through an innovative use of anecdotal material, Chapter Two explores how Seward achieved authority on her biographical subject through presentations of reading, critical responses, and sociable literary exchange. Building on the discussion of Piozzi's sociable reading with Johnson, this chapter considers how Seward's engagement with literature informs her writing. By analysing Seward's marginalia, correspondence, and *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin* (1804), I demonstrate how her practices as a consumer and critic of literature shape her authoritative treatment of her biographical subject and also develops the role of the biographer as a disseminator of literary knowledge. Additionally, this chapter situates

Seward within the intellectual community of Lichfield, where her relationships with other writers and intellectuals helped cultivate her persona as a biographer and critic. In this context, Seward not only reinforces her own authority but also contributes to the broader literary discourse of her time, establishing Lichfield as a significant centre for the exchange of ideas and critical engagement.

The first two chapters examine how women writers established their authority in literary biographical writing through presentations of reading and literary knowledge. Their complex inheritance and disavowal of precedents led to experimentation and innovation within the biographical genres. Chapter Three continues the examination of Seward's life-writing but deals with a different biographical genre: editions of letters. It examines *Letters of Anna Seward*, a six-volume collection of letters she wrote between 1784-1807, published posthumously in 1811. I argue that Seward intended this collection as an autobiographical project, using the letters to consolidate her identities as a literary author, critic, and chronicler of British literary culture. Seward's *Letters* exemplifies an understanding of how collected correspondence could function as a coherent piece of life-writing and she conceives of herself as an individual shaped by, and contributing to, a specific moment in eighteenth-century literary sociability. Privileging a Romantic aesthetic of moments of insight into literature of the age and her own life, Seward uses her correspondence to memorialise not only her personal experiences, but also the intellectual and literary networks that defined her era.

In the fourth chapter, I trace the developments in literary biography to 1820, a period which saw readers' appetites for historical anecdotes of eighteenth-century literary sociability diminish. The chapter examines Richard and Maria Edgeworth's *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth* (1820), which marks a departure from the earlier biographical focus on the particulars of individual character. Instead, Edgeworth emphasises a unified

portrait of her father's character, reflecting, I argue, developing understandings of the interplay between the individual and history, which Seward had begun to explore in her edition of *Letters*, examined in Chapter Three. Edgeworth's biographical authority is aggregated to her established status as a novelist, but this is complicated by her identity as the daughter of her subject. Edgeworth's approach to biography imbibes Romantic and Enlightenment ideologies, advocating for a rationalist education philosophy to effect societal reform in Ireland while simultaneously adopting a Romantic, self-conscious approach to the individual's relationship with history. By using narrative structures from her fiction, Edgeworth's *Memoirs* underscores an increasing recognition that private histories can serve a larger public fiction – a vision of biography that extends beyond what Johnson envisaged in the *Lives of the Poets*.

## Chapter 1

### *Lives of Johnson: Hester Piozzi's Anecdotes*

In the preface to the *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson*, published in 1786, Hester Lynch Piozzi likens the ‘preface before a book’ to ‘the portico before a house’. Behind Piozzi’s literary portico is her account of Samuel Johnson’s life during the twenty years he spent with the Thrale family at their home, Streatham Park. Briefly catching ‘the attention of those who desire admission to the family within’, Piozzi offers her justification for publishing the biography.<sup>1</sup> When Piozzi wrote *Anecdotes*, she was abroad in Italy, travelling with her new husband, Gabriel Piozzi.<sup>2</sup> Though she concedes that being abroad, and therefore not being able to access her letters and diaries that had recorded *Johnsoniana*,<sup>3</sup> is no excuse ‘for the book’s being ill written’, it is an excuse for potentially printing ‘the same aphorisms and stories’ as other biographers. Piozzi also defends herself against potential criticism that she has ‘not spoken highly enough of Dr. Johnson’, arguing that no one could, in fact, ‘speak more highly’, since she has described ‘his manners as they were’. Finally, Piozzi notes that *Anecdotes* is the first book she ‘ever

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<sup>1</sup> Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D* (London: T. Cadell, 1786), 79. For references to the print text, I cite the first edition of *Anecdotes*. Later references to Piozzi’s manuscript notes in her own copy of *Anecdotes*, now held by the Samuel Johnson Birthplace Museum, will be cited as SJBM/2001.55.251.

<sup>2</sup> Piozzi married Gabriel Piozzi in 1784. Not only was this her second marriage, but the union was criticised because of what Michael Franklin terms ‘society’s prejudice against an Italian, Roman Catholic and professional singer’. See *Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi: Writers of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2020), 93. The marriage also came as a major blow to Johnson. For Johnson’s response to the news, see Frances Burney to Susanna Burney Phillips, 28 November 1784, in Stewart Cooke and Elaine Bander (eds.) *The Additional Journals and Letters of Frances Burney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 139.

<sup>3</sup> Piozzi had recorded *Johnsoniana* in her diary, *Thraliana*, since 1777 and had copied earlier entries on Johnson into it from the ‘table book’ she kept in the late 1760s. Writing to Samuel Lysons, from Italy, Piozzi fretted: ‘I think my *Anecdotes* too few, & am afraid of saucy Answers if I send to England for others’. Piozzi enlisted Lysons’s assistance, asking him to get ‘me all the *Anecdotes* you can of the *early* and *late* Parts of a Life, the *middle* of which no one knows as well as myself’. Lysons did not deliver, and so Piozzi was forced to concentrate her efforts on shaping the anecdotes from the years Johnson spent with her at Streatham, Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom (eds.), *The Piozzi Letters, Correspondence of Hester Lynch Piozzi, 1784-1821 (formerly Mrs. Thrale)* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989), vol. 1, 125. For an account of the exchange with Lysons, see Ian McIntyre, *Hester: The Remarkable Life of Dr Johnson’s ‘Dear Mistress’* (London: Constable, 2008), 211-213. William McCarthy has argued that, as a result of not having access to these materials, ‘*Anecdotes* is not the book that Piozzi meant to write’; *Hester Thrale Piozzi: Portrait of a Literary Woman* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 111.

presented before the public' and so desires to 'defend and conceal myself' and 'shew as little of myself as possible'.<sup>4</sup> Piozzi's preface follows a long-established tradition of women writers using the preface to assert their claims to modesty when entering the public arena of print.<sup>5</sup> However, Piozzi trades on a number of 'exchangeable tokens of modern authorship' (as defined by Catherine Gallagher) to gain cultural capital with *Anecdotes* in the world of eighteenth-century letters.

In *Nobody's Story*, Gallagher explores how women writers navigated a male-dominated literary culture, and shows that even when their identities were marginalised, they strategically utilised abstract aspects of authorship – such as fictional characters, reputations, and personae – to gain cultural capital, which is to say 'recognition and status'.<sup>6</sup> Though Gallagher's focus is the rise of the professional novelist, her identification of abstract aspects of authorship is productive for understanding how the female biographer could similarly accrue cultural capital from a typically marginal position. Of course, the 'tokens' Gallagher identifies are not necessarily applicable to a biographer. Biographers could not, for instance, utilise fictional forms or characters which could be reused, adapted, parodied, or even appropriated by other writers and therefore

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<sup>4</sup> *Anecdotes*, v-viii.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Seager notes that 'early-century prefaces to novels, from Congreve to Defoe, and including many female authors, vary between claiming artistic respectability, moral purpose, or actual truth'; *The Rise of the Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 131. Catherine Gallagher shows that throughout the eighteenth century, many female novelists, including Frances Burney, Charlotte Lennox, and Maria Edgeworth continued to compose seemingly humble prefaces (the preface to *The Female Quixote* was written by Samuel Johnson and many of Edgeworth's novels contain prefaces contributed by her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth). See *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 202, 222, 270. Janet Todd also discusses the various ways in which female novelists utilised prefaces and notes that prefaces usually contradict the work that follows. See *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing, and Fiction, 1660-1800* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). See also Cheryl Turner, *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1992), Betty A. Schellenberg, "To Renew Their Former Acquaintance": Print, Gender, and Some Eighteenth-Century Sequels', in Paul Budra and Betty A. Schellenberg (eds.), *Part Two: Reflections on the Sequel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 85-101, and Corrina Readloff, *Epigraphs in the English Novel 1750-1850: Seducing the Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Gallagher, xiii, 216. Leah Orr notes that, despite some criticism, *Nobody's Story* has 'remained influential in connecting women authors with a male-dominated print market'; *Publishing the Woman Writer in England, 1670-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 11-12.

extend the novelists' influence in the genre.<sup>7</sup> Biographers also did not, typically, publish anonymously (whereas many female novelists had either opted or been forced to do so) since biographical authority increasingly rested on the biographer's personal knowledge of their subject.<sup>8</sup>

What, then, did biographers have to exchange to secure authority and gain influence in the world of letters? Ultimately, biographers 'sought to procure reputations for biographers as authors who themselves deserved well of posterity, by distinguishing the biographer's voice and intellectual profile from those of his [/her] subjects and from those of previous biographers'.<sup>9</sup> The biographers examined in this dissertation exploited their personal connection to their subject and intimate knowledge of their private life to provide original insights and judgments about that life. They utilised their obligation to the readers of biography, who increasingly came to expect details of the subjects' 'private experience'. They also emphasised their femininity in biographical writing, thereby feminising the role of the biographer by drawing on their unique domestic perspective. Nancy Armstrong's argument that the modern individual was coded as feminine contextualises this particular strategy employed by these biographers.<sup>10</sup> By emphasising femininity and drawing on a domestic perspective, they aligned their life-writing with a cultural shift that privileged private, emotional, and moral insights over public

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<sup>7</sup> One example is Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*. See Gallagher, 176-193.

<sup>8</sup> Gallagher includes, for instance, Aphra Behn, Frances Burney, and Maria Edgeworth as examples of authors who occasionally, or initially, published anonymously. Of course, male authors also developed and utilised such strategies. Orr observes that while women writers have been treated 'separately from male writers', there has been an increasing desire in scholarship to integrate 'male and female writers to provide a more nuanced picture of early fiction that shows the person of the author in relation to the text', *Novel Ventures: Fiction and Print Culture in England, 1690-1730* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 13.

<sup>9</sup> Eve Tavor Bannet, "'Modern Biography': Form, Function, and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Genre Theory", *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 45:2 (2021), 24-55, 47-48.

<sup>10</sup> Armstrong argues that 'the modern individual was first and foremost, a woman'. Domestic fiction helped to shape a new model of individual subjectivity, where sensibility, morality, and an emphasis on private life and personal relationships became central to the construction of identity. See *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 16.



accomplishments. In doing so, they asserted a biographical authority that capitalised on the qualities Armstrong argues were central to defining the modern individual; the feminisation of biography reflected the broader cultural trends and means for women biographers to claim space in the literary marketplace. They also did so, in some cases, by leveraging their reputation as professional authors in other genres, as seen with Seward and Edgeworth. They not only supplied evidence of their literary knowledge to substantiate their status as literary biographers but defined the biographer as an arbiter of literary-biographical knowledge.

Though performing modesty, Piozzi's preface identifies the tokens of authorship which she trades for biographical authority. Her most significant assertion is her promise to describe Johnson's 'manners as they were', signalling her unique insight to his private, domestic, life. While she also professes a desire to 'shew as little of myself as possible', this is self-effacing deflection, as she is the source of this insight, and the series of anecdotes that follow present her as an interlocutor with Johnson. This differs to other biographies – most notably Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) – which compiled copious amounts of manuscripts and ephemeral evidence, in addition to personal recollections, to construct a *Life*.<sup>11</sup> Invited into Streatham Park, the reader will witness the intellectual and literary sociability of the milieu that gathered in that domestic space, in which Johnson and Piozzi are centrally positioned. *Anecdotes* is not simply an account of Johnson's life from a unique personal and domestic perspective, but the biography is also a textual extension of Streatham Park, and thereby an assertion of Piozzi's authority and influence. Armstrong argues that 'by the time the eighteenth century was well underway, the general categories of a domestic domain had been established and linked to qualities in the

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<sup>11</sup> I discuss the biographer's editorial role as they are required to assemble and shape manuscript evidence in Chapter Four, in the context of Frances Burney's and Maria Edgeworth's respective *Memoirs* of their fathers.

female'.<sup>12</sup> Since then, Amanda Vickery has shown that domestic spaces represented arenas of power for women in which they could assert influence through household management, social networking, aesthetic control, moral and educational authority, patronage, and in negotiating family alliances.<sup>13</sup> Piozzi exemplifies these understandings of the Georgian home and women's influence within it, as she depicts Streatham Park in *Anecdotes* as a site of intellectual activity alongside her feminine domestic roles as wife, mother, friend, and caretaker, thereby aggregating her authority as a biographer to the domestic space over which she exerted influence.

This chapter contributes to burgeoning scholarship on Piozzi that has sought to secure her position in the canon of eighteenth-century women's writing. My analysis of *Anecdotes*, however, moves beyond readings of the work as a fraught, personal account of her relationship with Johnson or as a tentative, amateurish foray into professional authorship. McCarthy has argued that, to some degree, Piozzi's modesty about *Anecdotes* is genuine: 'confronted with the task of writing her first book, she fell deeply into disclaiming her own competence and authority' and so her claims are 'a plea for toleration by a frightened author'.<sup>14</sup> By focussing specifically on Piozzi's experimentation with a narrative composed entirely of anecdotal material assembled from her privileged domestic insights as Johnson's hostess, I demonstrate that *Anecdotes* is an innovative work of literary biography. Through her utilisation of the anecdote, Piozzi not only gives unprecedented insight into Johnson's character but replicates the sociability at Streatham Park, allowing herself to figure in the biography alongside Johnson. As a formal generic innovation, *Anecdotes* departs from traditional biographical forms in two significant ways. First, Piozzi constructs Johnson's identity through snippets of personal

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<sup>12</sup> Armstrong, 91.

<sup>13</sup> Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> McCarthy, 114.

conversation, offering a unique, intimate portrait that foregrounds his private life rather than his public accomplishments. This innovative focus on the domestic – an access which was unparalleled by predecessor and successor biographers – grants her biographical authority. Second, despite Piozzi's self-effacing claim to 'shew as little of myself as possible', the narrative is shaped by her perspective. Her presence as an interlocutor is innovative because it allows her to maintain the illusion of objectivity while ensuring that her own voice is central to the construction of Johnson's life, distinguishing it from more removed biographical accounts.<sup>15</sup>

The first part of the chapter shows that, fundamentally, Piozzi employed the anecdote form to convey the minutiae of Johnson's character, as Johnson had done in *Lives of the Poets* (1779–1781). Piozzi also saw potential in the device's conversational qualities, which could not only effectively depict authentic character, but be used to replicate the domestic, social, milieu in which she interacted with Johnson. The second part of this chapter argues that, by presenting a collection of Johnsonian anecdotes gleaned from the Streatham Park years, Piozzi sought to emphasise her home as a site of intellectual sociability that is disregarded in early *Lives* of Johnson, and in the more substantial biographical works by James Boswell and Sir John Hawkins, as the male authors favour reporting his participation in more formal, masculine, metropolitan literary clubs. By representing Johnson's involvement in an alternative arena of sociability, Piozzi not only nuances understandings of his life, but asserts her authority as an interlocutor and participant in Johnson's intellectual network. I also examine overlooked evidence that

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<sup>15</sup> This chapter echoes the work of Felicity Nussbaum, who argues that Piozzi 'transformed her close friendship with Samuel Johnson into cultural capital through innovative literary forms that challenged the [...] boundaries between public and private' (57). However, Nussbaum traces the lines of influence between Piozzi's and Boswell's life-writing (62) and argues that Piozzi aimed to derive a literary identity separate to Johnson (58). While this chapter similarly promotes Piozzi as an innovator, it explores Johnson's influence on her biographical writing as complex, rather than as a straightforward rejection, as portrayed in *Anecdotes*. See 'Sociability and Life Writing: Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi' in *Women's Life Writing, 1700-1850: Gender, Genre, Authorship*, ed. Daniel Cook and Amy Culley (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 55-70.

indicates Piozzi intended to continue developing the representation of sociability in *Anecdotes*. Piozzi's own annotated copies of *Anecdotes* and her edition of *Letters to and from the Late Samuel Johnson* (1788) provide additional anecdotal material which, several decades after their original publication, foreground her own literary identity as the biography's author, signalling a transition from character in, to writer of, the biography. I argue that Piozzi's marginalia demonstrate her view of biography not as a fixed, authoritative account of a life, but as an accretive form enabled by anecdote, capable of altering and reinventing the legacies of both subject and author.

### 'A candle-light picture': Character and Conversation in *Anecdotes*<sup>16</sup>

The playwright Arthur Murphy, an acquaintance of Henry Thrale, introduced Johnson to Piozzi in 1765. As William McCarthy tells it, 'they liked each other at once and became friends'. As a result of their meeting, 'Johnson soon engaged Mrs. Thrale in literary projects' and was responsible for the publication of her translation of Boileau, 'The Three Warnings', which appeared in Anna Williams's *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* (1766). When Johnson became unwell in 1766, the Thrales cared for him at Streatham Park and 'during the next sixteen years Johnson lived as much with the Thrales as he did by himself'. McCarthy also notes that the singularity of their domestic but literary friendship has relegated understandings of that relationship to 'an archetype' of 'male-female "intimacy"', which is 'variously tormented, passionate, or leering'.<sup>17</sup> This was perpetuated in the twentieth century by Katharine Balderston, who proposed that the relationship was not only sexual but sadomasochistic.<sup>18</sup> While the evidence to support Balderston's claim is not entirely convincing, it has prompted interest in the exact nature

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<sup>16</sup> *Anecdotes*, 244.

<sup>17</sup> McCarthy, 23, 24, 99.

<sup>18</sup> Katharine Balderston, 'Johnson's Vile Melancholy', in *The Age of Johnson*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), 3-14.

of that relationship, and *Anecdotes* has been mined for evidence that might define it. The early critical reception, and the subsequent scholarly treatment, of *Anecdotes* has been sullied by the personal dimension. Here, I focus on the literary dimension of this relationship to open the discussion up to lines of textual influence between Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* and Piozzi's *Anecdotes*. While Piozzi and Johnson's intimate relationship has, naturally, influenced a long critical tradition of reading the *Anecdotes* as a personal account of that relationship, *Anecdotes* merits a reading as an innovative work of literary biography, particularly of women's life-writing, that transcends the particular relationship it discloses.

Johnson's influence on Piozzi is more constructive, less overbearing, than scholars have tended to assume. Anthony Lee notes that 'any close scrutiny of his mentoring relations, especially with those of his major protégés—Goldsmith, Boswell, Thrale, Frances Burney—reveals a darker subtext, where his aid and assistance are poised by oppressive, thwarting forces'.<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Hedrick has also noted that, while he was alive, Johnson was a stifling force upon Piozzi's literary ambition because 'he drew heavily upon her for emotional sympathy, psychological support, and domestic comfort'.<sup>20</sup> The issue that Lee and Hedrick highlight is that Johnson essentially prevented Piozzi from pursuing professional authorship after the publication of 'The Three Warnings', while Martine Watson Brownley claims that, even in the wake of his death, Johnson's influence was detrimental to Piozzi's writing. While Watson Brownley maintains that Johnson and Piozzi's 'friendship shaped not just one publishing career, but two', she also acknowledges that Piozzi's literary career 'is a problematic one, with opportunities seized

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<sup>19</sup> Anthony Lee, *Dead Masters: Mentoring and Intertextuality in Samuel Johnson* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2011), 33.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Hedrick, 'The Duties of a Scholar: Samuel Johnson in Piozzi's *Anecdotes*', in *Mentoring in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture*, ed. Anthony Lee (London: Routledge, 2016), 211-224, 211.

and ignored, ambitions foiled and realized, talents developed and misused'. The 'unevenness of her achievement', as Watson Brownley sees it, is the fault of her ambivalent relationship with Johnson; her works 'reflected continuing Johnsonian influence along with an increasing desire for authorial independence'.<sup>21</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft noticed the same issue of influence as stifling to originality. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft singled Piozzi out as one 'who often repeated by rote, what she did not understand, comes forward with Johnsonian periods'.<sup>22</sup> In *Thraliana*, Piozzi herself comments on the dominance of Johnson's influence on her own creative thinking, reflecting that he 'has fastened many of his own Notions so on my Mind before this Time, that I am not sure whether they grew there originally or no'. Yet, the whole entry shows that Piozzi did not see this fastening of 'Notions' as detrimental to her literary creativity, since she continues:

I love the Author of them [the 'Notions'] with a firm Affection: such is my tenderness for Johnson, when he is out of my Sight I always keep his Books about me [...] for in *them* he is often scrupulous of opening his heart & has an Idea they will be seen sometime.<sup>23</sup>

Piozzi acknowledges that Johnson's ideas held influence over her own.<sup>24</sup> *Anecdotes* shows this to be true, at least insofar as her biographical writing is concerned. Even

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<sup>21</sup> Martine Watson Brownley, 'Samuel Johnson and the Printing Career of Hester Lynch Piozzi', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 67 (1985), 623-640, 623.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Janet Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 176.

<sup>23</sup> Hester Lynch Thrale [Piozzi], *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs. Piozzi) 1776-1809*, ed. Katharine C. Balderston, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), vol. 1: 1776-1784, 445, 445-446.

<sup>24</sup> Jane Spencer's study shows that influence could be productive and collaborative, not always an oppressive diminution of another's originality. See *Literary Relations: Kinship and the Canon 1660-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

though, as we will see, *Anecdotes* disavows Johnson's influence in certain ways, it also reveres the biographical practice he mentored her in.<sup>25</sup>

It is inevitable that Johnson would have been a literary influence on Piozzi. Their letters document their shared reading (this is examined later in the chapter), they worked collaboratively on literary projects, and there is also evidence to suggest that Piozzi occasionally assisted Johnson with the *Lives of the Poets*.<sup>26</sup> When Johnson wrote *Lives of the Poets*, he had help. Johnson often consulted John Nichols, George Steevens, and Isaac Reed, whom Roger Lonsdale suggests were his 'most important 'assistants'', although 'there seems to be a discreet agreement that the exact nature and extent of their contributions should never be specified'. There is evidence from the surviving manuscript of the *Life* of Alexander Pope that Piozzi also provided assistance as an amanuensis: 'Hester Thrale made many of the transcriptions from Pope's corrected drafts of his translation [of the *Iliad*] included in 'Pope', and Mrs Thrale also copied out long quotations from other sources'.<sup>27</sup> Piozzi's diary, *Thraliana*, also reveals that she read the manuscripts of 'Rowe' and 'Prior', perhaps with the intention of providing feedback, although she does not confirm whether she told Johnson that she thought he 'is too hard on Prior's Alma'.<sup>28</sup> Like Nichols, Steevens, and Reed, Piozzi's 'contribution, however hard to quantify, is also hard to overestimate'. Lonsdale also notes that Piozzi also provided assistance by other, non-quantifiable means, notably that her 'friendship and other intelligent interest were also important, as his letter to her of 25 May 1780 will sufficiently suggest: "Congreve [...] is one of the best little lives; but then I had your

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Wendorf reads *Anecdotes* largely as a disavowal of influence, arguing that of all Johnson's 'biographical heirs', Piozzi 'learned the least from his example'. See *The Elements of Life: Biography and Portrait-Painting in Stuart and Georgian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 191.

<sup>26</sup> Piozzi and Johnson also collaborated on other genres of writing, including, for instance, a translation of Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. See *LSJ*, vol. 2, 418-424.

<sup>27</sup> *LEP*, vol. 1, 53, 46.

<sup>28</sup> *Thraliana*, vol. 1, 448.

conversation”<sup>29</sup> Watson Brownley argues that perhaps the best way to consider Piozzi’s assistance to Johnson’s writing is ‘that of an enabler rather than a determiner. She created an environment which fostered his work, and her company stimulated him’.<sup>30</sup> Piozzi’s involvement in *Lives of the Poets* not only positions her as a supporter of his work but allowed her to observe, and participate in, his writing of biography. Some scholars have offered evidence to counter a more totalising sense of Johnson’s influence on Piozzi. Michael Franklin notes that McCarthy was the first convincingly to confute ‘the idea that Hester’s literary career was entirely dependent on the commanding influence of Samuel Johnson’, and Franklin also continues in that vein.<sup>31</sup> However, given her involvement, it is inevitable that Johnson’s biographies would influence Piozzi’s own biographical practice.<sup>32</sup>

Johnson’s influence on, and active interest in, Piozzi’s early, unpublished life-writing can be traced via her marginalia. Writing in 1815 next to Johnson’s letter of 6 September 1777 in her copy of *Letters*, Piozzi claims that she ‘never read them since the Time of their Publication’ and is ‘astonished’ that almost thirty years have passed without the resurfacing of the ‘bitter’ memories that these letters contain; she wonders ‘how I was preserved [...] to this enormous Distance of Time!’ (**Figure 1.1**).<sup>33</sup> In his letter, Johnson

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<sup>29</sup> *LEP*, vol. 1, 53.

<sup>30</sup> Watson Brownley, 627.

<sup>31</sup> Franklin, 15. Franklin’s *Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi* nuances McCarthy’s insight, claiming a greater extent of autonomy in Piozzi’s life and works. In *Portrait of a Literary Woman*, McCarthy concedes that Piozzi does ‘recapitulate’ Johnson’s interventions in various genres (50). Indeed, as Watson Brownley notes, ‘having produced her own version of a Life of a Poet in *Anecdotes*, she proceeded to become an editor in the *Letters*, a writer of travels in the *Observations and Reflections*, a dictionary maker of sorts in the *British Synonymy*, and a political pamphleteer in *Three Warnings to John Bull Before He Dies*’, 633. Meanwhile, Rebecca Bullard argues that Piozzi’s publications after Johnson’s death incited a rebellion against him; ‘Samuel Johnson’s Houses’, in *Lives of Houses*, ed. Kate Kennedy and Hermione Lee (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 133-145, 139. McCarthy, however, argues that Piozzi ‘carried an internalized Johnson’ for the first half of her writing career’, until the 1790s, when ‘she took a new direction’ toward originality (50).

<sup>32</sup> Lee points to the inevitability of influence when he describes it as ‘a force, a virus-like energy, which dynamically transfers from mentor to protégé the articles of authority and tradition, thus charismatically reshaping and refashioning the protégé’s outlook and identity’. See *Dead Masters*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> *SJBM*/2001.55.111.1, 363.



laments that ‘time runs’, while, for Piozzi, time is stretched to the expanse of an ‘enormous Distance’. Though they experience time differently, both emphasise the importance of preserving the present in a detailed record for posterity. Johnson not only urges Piozzi formally to record time by being ‘very punctual in annexing the dates’ in *Thraliana* but also to write down ‘occurrences as they arise, of whatever kind’. This anticipates his anxiety in the *Life* of Joseph Addison that ‘lives can only be written from personal knowledge, which is growing every day less, and in a short time is lost forever’.<sup>34</sup> Whereas in ‘Addison’, Johnson advocated for the omission of ‘caprice, obstinacy, frolick, and folly’ on the basis of maintaining a charitable treatment of the subject, in his letter to Piozzi, he encourages the inclusion of ‘painful casualties, or unpleasing passages’, because it is these very moments which ‘make the variegation of existence’.<sup>35</sup> By taking care to reflect and comment on even the most ‘bitter Recollections’ in the margin, Piozzi acknowledges Johnson’s influence on her own biographical practice. In doing so, she demonstrates her commitment to capturing not the significant cornerstones of a life but the everyday details that Johnson believed crucial to an authentic account. This approach is the foundation of *Anecdotes*, in which she records Johnson’s ‘manners as they were’ and includes anecdotes that do not always show Johnson in a virtuous light, alongside the trivialities that constitute the fabric of daily life but which contemporaries thought threatened to diminish the grandeur of such an esteemed person. *Anecdotes* shows, therefore, that Piozzi was not only heeding Johnson’s advice but also embracing his philosophy that the presentation of the ‘variegation of existence’ constitutes an authentic *Life*.

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<sup>34</sup> *LEP*, vol. 3, 18. Johnson started work on ‘Addison’ in 1780.

<sup>35</sup> *LEP*, vol. 3, 18, SJBM/2001.55.111.1, 363.

be spent in writing the history of the rest. Every day perhaps has something to be noted, but in a settled and uniform course few days can have much.

Why do I write all this, which I had no thought of when I began? The Thraliana drove it all into my head. It deserves however an hour's reflection, to consider how, with the least loss of time, the loss of what we wish to retain may be prevented.

Do not neglect to write to me, for when a post comes empty, I am really disappointed.

Boswell, I believe, will meet me here.

I am, dearest Lady,

Your, &c.

*The letters  
retain many  
Gilted Recollections.  
I now  
read them  
since the  
Time of their  
Publication till  
I looked them over  
for Dear Sir James  
Fellows - - 1815 - -  
& I now wonder  
how I was preserved  
thru' such Afflic-  
tions to this  
enormous Dis-  
tance of Time!  
God give me grace  
to be thankful!  
I really feel  
quite Abolished.*

Figure 1.1. Hester Lynch Piozzi, Letters to and from the late Samuel Johnson, LL.D. (London: T. Cadell, 1788), 363, SJBM/2001.55.111.1. Annotations in Hester Piozzi's hand.

Johnson's biographers heeded *avant la lettre* his warning in 'Addison' about the transient nature of personal knowledge. Boswell kept a journal and 'loose notes of his meetings with and conversations with Johnson' to substantiate his two biographies of Johnson, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785) and *Life of Samuel Johnson*.<sup>36</sup> Frances Reynolds laments she was too negligent in recording Johnsonian anecdotes when she came to write her 'Recollections of Dr. Johnson'.<sup>37</sup> Piozzi also confesses to writing down passages from Johnson's conversation 'as soon as I had heard them'.<sup>38</sup> As previously noted, Piozzi had recorded *Johnsoniana* in her diary, *Thraliana*, since 1777 and had copied earlier entries on Johnson into it from the 'table book' she kept in the late 1760s. Aware of Johnson's distinction in the world of letters, and of the interest a biography of him would stir among the reading public, prospective biographers began avidly to collect materials to compose it. William Rider published the first biography in 1762, twenty-two years before Johnson's death. Johnson himself was also alert to an increasing interest in his life. One thing that Piozzi did record was Johnson's own musings over his biographical fate:

I doubt not but this story will be told by many of his biographers, and said so to him when he told it me on the 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1773. "And who will be my biographer," said he, "do you think?" "Goldsmith, no doubt," replied I, "and he will do it the best among us." "The dog would write it best, to be sure," replied he; "but his particular malice towards me, and general disregard for truth would make the book useless to all, and injurious to my character."

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<sup>36</sup> Marshall Waingrow (ed.), *The Correspondence and Other Papers of James Boswell, Relating to the Making of the Life of Johnson* (London: Heinemann, 1969), xxiv. See also Adam Sisman, *Boswell's Presumptuous Task* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000), 159, 173.

<sup>37</sup> Frances Reynolds, 'Recollections of Dr. Johnson' in James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.: including a Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. John Wilson Croker, 5 vols (London: John Murray, 1831), vol. 5, 383-398, 393. Croker states that *Recollections* was 'communicated, in 1829, to me by Mr. Palmer, grand-nephew of Sir Joshua Reynolds', vol. 1, xix. It was subsequently republished in Robina Napier's *Johnsoniana* (1884) and in George Birkbeck Hill's *Johnsonian Miscellanies* (1897).

<sup>38</sup> *Anecdotes*, 79.

Later in this same anecdote, he pleads with Piozzi to ‘see how the world is gaping for a wonder!’<sup>39</sup> Boswell, Piozzi, and Reynolds also understood that it was vital to collect personal anecdotes, which could be used to capture the particulars of his character.

Johnson himself used anecdotes in *Lives of the Poets* to, as Julian North articulates, ‘bring genius home to the reader’.<sup>40</sup> Though Johnson for the most part could not supply any ‘personal’ anecdotes acquired from first-hand encounters, as Boswell, Piozzi, and Reynolds had, Johnson established the use of anecdote not to ‘show up’ but to give a penetrating insight into an author’s character, which he referred to as writing ‘trifles with dignity’.<sup>41</sup> Johnson’s *Lives* largely follow a tripartite structure whereby a section on biography and a section on literary criticism are bridged by a character sketch. Johnson’s character sketches in the *Lives* abound with anecdote because of the device’s capacity to enhance the interest of character sketches by realising an authentic biographical subject. As Johnson proposed in *Rambler* 60, ‘more knowledge may be gained of a man’s real character, by a short conversation with one of his servants, than from a formal and studied narrative, begun with his pedigree, and ended with his funeral’.<sup>42</sup> Richard Terry affirms this, stating Johnson’s ‘love of anecdotes [...] is a conviction that the true understanding of a life lies in its unstated domestic minutiae rather than in its official or public actions’.<sup>43</sup> The ‘domestic minutiae’ Johnson

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<sup>39</sup> *Anecdotes*, 31-32.

<sup>40</sup> Julian North, *The Domestication of Genius: Biography and the Romantic Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6. Though North is specifically discussing Romantic poets here, it aptly describes the increasing desire to do this in literary biography in the Georgian period more broadly.

<sup>41</sup> Johnson did know some of his biographical subjects, including Richard Savage and William Collins.

Robert Folkenflik notes that the anecdote was disapproved of by the eighteenth-century historian and it ‘occupies the very lowest place in the hierarchy of historical genres’ because the kinds of information they impart, to quote Voltaire, is ‘derogatory to the dignity of history’. Johnson, however, defended the use of anecdote in biography because of the specificity of detail they could reveal about the subject. Johnson caveats this, however, arguing that anecdotes should be deployed sensitively. See *Samuel Johnson, Biographer* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 43, 35.

<sup>42</sup> Samuel Johnson, ‘No. 60. Saturday, 13 October 1750’, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Volume III, The Rambler*, ed. W. J. Bate, and Albrecht B. Strauss, (eds.), (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), 318-323, 322.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Terry, *Poetry and the Making of the English Literary Past, 1660-1781* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 235.

emphasises in the character sketches, Watson Brownley observes, particularise ‘in order to humanize, portraying the living man and his “behaviour in the lighter parts of life,” “the private life and domestic manners,” “social qualities,” “familiar practices,” “petty peculiarities,” “slight amusements”’.<sup>44</sup> The ‘surface of life’ details such as John Philips’s predilection for tobacco or Matthew Prior’s proclivity for unsavoury conversation certainly humanise the authors, and reveal ‘the hidden idiosyncrasies and fallibilities that even the great possess’.<sup>45</sup> Johnson’s imparting of these particulars serves larger aims, as identified by Nicholas Seager, to ‘provide crucial insights into a man’s character or else present a universally applicable lesson’.<sup>46</sup> Boswell, Piozzi, and Reynolds all took their cue from Johnson’s approach to utilising anecdotes to not only reveal the particulars of Johnson’s character but truths about human existence. Before examining where Piozzi upholds and diverges from Johnson’s precedent to uncover these particulars – and the boundaries she navigates in doing so – I now briefly provide an account of the history and status of anecdotal material in biographical writing in the period, and consider the reception of Piozzi’s use of the device to highlight why this reassessment of *Anecdotes*, as a literary work, is necessary.<sup>47</sup>

The anecdote form enjoyed an increasing popularity among readers in the later eighteenth century. In his 1728 *Cyclopædia*, Ephriam Chambers defined the anecdote as ‘a term used by some Authors, for the Titles of Secret Histories’, associating the anecdote

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<sup>44</sup> Martine Watson Brownley, ‘Johnson’s *Lives of the English Poets* and Earlier Traditions of the Character Sketch in England’, in *Johnson and His Age*, ed. James Engell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 29-53, 49.

<sup>45</sup> Terry, 234-235.

<sup>46</sup> Nicholas Seager, ‘Biography’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Jack Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 268.

<sup>47</sup> In my discussion of the reception of *Anecdotes*, I avoid recounting the rivalry between Piozzi and Boswell because it has been well-rehearsed in scholarship. For discussions of this, see Mary Hyde, *The Impossible Friendship: Boswell and Mrs. Thrale* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), James L. Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs. Thrale)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 255-276, McCarthy, *Hester Thrale Piozzi*, 109, Lisa Berglund, ‘Hester Lynch Piozzi’s *Anecdotes* Versus The Editors’, *Age of Johnson*, 18 (2007), 273-290, and Berglund, ‘Oysters for Hodge, or, Ordering Society, Writing Biography and Feeding the Cat’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 33:4 (2010), 631-645.

with disreputable exposés of political malfeasance.<sup>48</sup> James Robert Wood notes that a shift in the eighteenth century bought the term ‘closer to its present signification as a narrative of an interesting but incidental event’.<sup>49</sup> This transition can be traced in Johnson’s own definition of the term, which in 1755 he defined as ‘something yet unpublished; secret history’.<sup>50</sup> However, by the fourth edition of the *Dictionary* in 1773, it is defined as ‘a biographical incident; a minute passage of private life’.<sup>51</sup> In his *Dissertation on Anecdotes* (1793), Isaac Disraeli recognised the anecdote’s increasing ‘signification to biography’, suggesting that the anecdote was a distinctive epistemological unit suited to biographical genres; Disraeli states that ‘literary biography cannot be accomplished without a copious amount of anecdote’. In fact, Disraeli claimed that ‘without the use of literary anecdote, it is in vain to attempt literary biography’.<sup>52</sup> William Hazlitt was also among the genre’s supporters. In his review of Joseph Spence’s *Anecdotes, Observations, and Characters, of Books and Men*, he states that

there is no species of composition, perhaps, so delightful as that which presents us with personal anecdotes of eminent men; and if its chief charm be in the gratification of our curiosity, it is a curiosity at least that has its origin in enthusiasm [...] to look into the minute details, to detect incidental foibles, and to be satisfied what qualities they have in common with ourselves, as well as distinct from us.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ephriam Chambers, *Cyclopædia*, (London: D. Midwinter et al., 1728), 87. For further discussion on scandalous secret histories, see Rebecca Bullard and Rachel Carnell (eds.), *The Secret History in Literature, 1660-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>49</sup> James Robert Wood, *Anecdotes of Enlightenment: Human Nature from Locke to Wordsworth* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 20.

<sup>50</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1<sup>st</sup> edn. (London: W. Strahan, 1755).

<sup>51</sup> *Dictionary*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (1773).

<sup>52</sup> Isaac Disraeli, *Dissertation on Anecdotes* (London: C. & G. Kearsley and J. Murray, 1793), vi, 55.

<sup>53</sup> William Hazlitt, ‘Review of Spence, *Anecdotes*’, *Edinburgh Review*, ed. Francis Jeffrey, vol. 33 (Edinburgh: Constable, 1820), 302-330, 302.

Hazlitt affirms that satisfaction from reading anecdotes does not simply derive from their capacity for entertainment, but rather their promotion of the idea of a shared humanity, even with an eminent man, through the detection of ‘incidental foibles’. Personal anecdotes of eminent men, then, bridge the ordinary and extraordinary and reinforce an appreciation of human achievement.

While the anecdote was valued for gaining insights into character, its use in biography to satisfy curiosity by divulging the private details of domestic life sparked concerns among readers about the propriety of such candour. The anecdote cited earlier, in which Piozzi records Johnson’s speculation of his biographical fate also reveals his concern as to whether the biographies produced would be ‘injurious’ to his character. The reconciliation of a representation that was true but also charitable was one Johnson grappled with in his *Life of Addison*. Johnson’s desire to record the truth conflicts with his concern about moral duty: ‘the delicate features of the mind, the nice discriminations of character, and the minute peculiarities of conduct, are soon obliterated; and it is surely better that caprice, obstinacy, frolick, and folly, however they might delight the description, should be silently forgotten’. Johnson emphasises the necessity for discretion and sensitivity when recording personal knowledge of the deceased, admitting that it is preferable for certain traits to be omitted rather than exposed. As Johnson imagines himself ‘*walking upon ashes under which the fire is not extinguished*, and coming to the time of which it will be proper rather, to say *nothing that is false, than all that is true*’, he concludes that warts-and-all truth must give way to charity.<sup>54</sup> Even if Johnson reflected in ‘Addison’ that he could have practised this ideal better himself, he knew that others, such as Oliver Goldsmith, could not be trusted to aspire to the same discretion. For Johnson, candour is important for producing insight. In *The Rambler*, he criticises the ‘little regard’

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<sup>54</sup> *LEP*, vol. 3, 18.

biographers have for the ‘manners or behaviour of their heroes’ as they reproduce accounts that ‘might be collected from publick papers’.<sup>55</sup> However, it must be balanced with charity. While Johnson’s focus in ‘Addison’ is on fulfilling a duty to the living, his reflections on his own biographical fate reveal a concern that exposing particulars in certain ways could damage the subject’s public reputation. Furthermore, Piozzi’s inclusion of the anecdote of Johnson pondering his biographical fate is tactical: it situates *Anecdotes* as the ideal combination of candour and compassion, which Johnson aimed to practise himself as a biographer, promoted in his essays on biography, and wished for in his own commemoration. The *Anecdotes* consciously aims to satisfy the Johnsonian desiderata for biography in an intimate portrait that is candid, but never cruel.

Domestic space could also be a useful setting through which to glean a certain authenticity in biography. Laetitia-Matilda Hawkins, daughter of another of Johnson’s biographers, John Hawkins, praised the portrayal of domestic scenes in biography. Though Hawkins disapproved of ‘the greedy craving for portrait and anecdote’, in *Letters on the Female Mind* (1793), she concedes that ‘any hero’s private character appears in a point of view that can enable us to judge what he was as a man: he must be followed into his retirements’.<sup>56</sup> Less concerned with Johnson’s literary achievements than the short, early *Lives*, Piozzi’s *Anecdotes* stimulated an appetite for curiosity through its imparting of domestic minutiae that promised to present the foibles of humanity in Johnson.<sup>57</sup> Rather than a unified portrait, Piozzi presents the contradictoriness of human nature in Johnson. This is evident, for instance, in anecdotes that display Johnson’s moral virtue

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<sup>55</sup> Johnson, ‘No. 60. Saturday, 13 October 1750’, 322.

<sup>56</sup> Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, *Anecdotes, Biographical Sketches, and Memoirs*, 2 vols (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1822), 198. Hawkins, *Letters on the Female Mind*, 2 vols (London: Hookham, 1793), vol. 2, 33-34.

<sup>57</sup> I am referring to short biographies of Johnson published before 1786 in periodicals, newspapers, *Beauties*, and *Companions*, which are collected in *The Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson*, ed. OM Brack Jr., and Robert E. Kelley (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1974).



working against ones that show his harsh manners. According to Piozzi, ‘he loved the poor as I never yet saw anyone else do, with an earnest desire to make them happy’. When questioned as to ‘what signifies, says some one, giving halfpence to common beggars? they only lay it out in gin or tobacco’, Johnson argues: ‘and why should they be denied such sweeteners of their existence?’. The benevolent Johnson, who ‘in consequence of these principles [...] nursed whole nests of people in his house, where the lame, the blind, the sick, and the sorrowful found a sure retreat’, is quite apart from the Johnson who, with his harsh manners, rudely told a ‘Lincolnshire lady who showed him a grotto she had been making’ that it would be better suited to a ‘toad’. In the book, this directly contrasts with an anecdote in which Piozzi recounts a playful moment in which when ‘comparing all our acquaintance to some animal or other, we pitched upon the elephant for his [Johnson’s] resemblance’, revealing Johnson was ‘good humouredly willing to join in childish amusements’. By juxtaposing these anecdotes, Piozzi mitigates Johnson’s harshness with his capacity for self-deprecation, showing that ‘however roughly he might be provoked to treat a harmless exertion of vanity, he did not wish to inflict the pain he gave’.<sup>58</sup> By revealing but mollifying his shortcomings, Piozzi shows that Johnson’s character could be exemplary, despite his flaws. The apparent incoherence in her portrayal reflects the ‘variegation of existence’.<sup>59</sup> As candlelight flickers and shifts, casting shadows and revealing various aspects of a face, Piozzi’s anecdotes illuminate by turns different aspects of Johnson’s character, hence a ‘*candle-light picture*’.<sup>60</sup> This nuanced depiction goes beyond mere contradiction, offering a more complex and humanising view of Johnson that acknowledges his moral virtue while also confronting his imperfections.

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<sup>58</sup> *Anecdotes*, 84, 204, 205, 203.

<sup>59</sup> *LSJ*, vol. 1, 363.

<sup>60</sup> *Anecdotes*, 244.

It was for these insights that *Anecdotes* was an immensely popular book. Lisa Berglund states that ‘in its first edition of 1,000 copies, her *Anecdotes* [...] sold out by dinnertime on the day it appeared [...] and three further editions (or impressions) were printed by the end of that year’.<sup>61</sup> Piozzi’s candour fed into emerging debates about the relationship between literary biography and celebrity.<sup>62</sup> Despite the book’s popularity, Piozzi’s attempt to satisfy the reading public’s interest in Johnson’s domestic life did not elude criticism. The problem for readers who knew Johnson personally, such as Frances Burney, was that Piozzi had overstepped the boundaries of propriety, failing to balance her candour with sufficient compassion by suppressing some of the more personal details. Indeed, Piozzi had also revealed more intimate details relating to Johnson’s health and eccentricities, less trivial than these more entertaining anecdotes. Piozzi tells her reader that ‘Mr. Johnson’s health had been always extremely bad since I first knew him, and his over-anxious care to retain without blemish the perfect sanity of his mind contributed much to disturb it’. One anecdote, for example, describes Johnson bursting ‘into a passion of tears one day’. The intimacy of that anecdote is heightened when Piozzi adds that ‘the family and Mr. Scott only were present’.<sup>63</sup> In anticipation of the details she guessed *Anecdotes* would impart, Burney exclaimed in one letter: “what will she not say!’ is precisely my question to myself, whenever I consider the subject of this threatened life’.<sup>64</sup> This intrusion into the domestic realm is problematic for Burney because it jeopardises a respectable portrait of Johnson’s public-professional identity. Burney’s complaint anticipates that of the reviewer for *The Monthly Review*, who protested that, although

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<sup>61</sup> Berglund, ‘*Anecdotes Versus The Editors*’, 273.

<sup>62</sup> I outline the relationship between biography and celebrity in the Introduction. For further discussion, see Nora Nachumi and Kristina Straub (eds.), *Making Stars: Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2022), Bannet, “‘Modern Biography’: Form, Function, and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Genre Theory”, and North, *The Domestication of Genius*.

<sup>63</sup> *Anecdotes*, 77, 50.

<sup>64</sup> Frances Burney to Hester Maria Thrale, 8 July 1785, in Frances Burney, *The Additional Journals and Letters of Frances Burney, Volume I: 1784-1786*, ed. Stewart Cooke and Elaine Bander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 258.

readers ‘could expect great entertainment’ from *Anecdotes*, the biography contained ‘much that ought to have been suppressed’.<sup>65</sup> The tension here lies in the nature of domestic anecdotes: while they provide ‘entertainment’ and satisfy public curiosity, they also threaten to undermine the subject’s constructed public persona. The behind-the-curtain anecdotes, where the subject’s guard is down, risk dismantling their reputation rather than adding nuance. The problem, as Burney saw it, was that such revelations could go beyond the insignificant ‘surface of life’ details (to borrow Richard Terry’s term), and instead expose vulnerabilities that might diminish Johnson in the eyes of the public, rather than humanise him.

Even the anecdotes that are intended to entertain could also be perceived as potentially injurious to Johnson’s public character. Recalling Johnson’s fondness for chemistry, for instance, Piozzi recounts that Johnson ‘made up a sort of laboratory at Streatham one summer’. However, an end was put to the entertainment because Henry Thrale was ‘persuaded that his [Johnson’s] short sight would have been his destruction in a moment, by bringing him close to a fierce and violent flame’. On Johnson’s short-sightedness, Piozzi further reflects that

it was a perpetual miracle that he did not set himself on fire reading a-bed [...] when exceedingly unable even to keep clear of mischief with our best help; and accordingly the fore-top of all his wigs were burned by the candle down to the very net work.<sup>66</sup>

While Johnson himself praised the delight biography imparts, enchaining the reader’s ‘heart by irresistible interest’, he also feared the ‘invention’ of entertaining and ‘artful

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<sup>65</sup> ‘Art VIII. *Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*’, in *The Monthly Review; or Literary Journal*, ed. Richard Griffiths (London: R. Griffiths, 1786), vol. 74, 373-383, 379.

<sup>66</sup> *Anecdotes*, 236-237.

tale[s]’ by biographers catering to readers’ prurience.<sup>67</sup> A review of Piozzi’s *Letters to and from the Late Samuel Johnson* reiterates the problem of Piozzi’s disclosure of potentially amusing tales that revealed Johnson’s frailties in unguarded moments: ‘we here see Dr Johnson, as it were, behind the curtain [...] retired from the eye of the world, and not knowing that what was then doing would ever be brought to light’.<sup>68</sup>

These candid tales are hardly comparable to the risqué ones that Boswell intended to include in the *Life*. Both of Boswell’s accounts of Johnson, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* and *Life of Johnson* were annotated by others before they were published. Edmond Malone (with whom Boswell collaborated on both the *Journal* and *Life*) annotated the *Journal* for Boswell ahead of the release of the second edition in 1786. Malone notes in the margin that a comment about Kenneth M’Aulay in an earlier draft of the *Journal*, in which Johnson stated (in Latin) that he was ‘a fat man’ was ‘struck out by Mr Boswell from good nature’.<sup>69</sup> Other manuscripts and books reveal Boswell’s own suppression of anecdotes relating to Johnson in the *Journal* and *Life*. John Wilkes’s copy of *Life*, which was gifted to him by Boswell upon its publication demonstrates Boswell’s softening of an anecdote to protect Johnson’s reputation. In the *Life*, Johnson tells David Garrick, “‘I’ll come no more behind your scenes, David; for the silk stockings and white bosoms of your actresses excite my amorous propensities.’” According to Wilkes’s annotation, however, Johnson’s original remark was more explicit (**Figure 1.2**).<sup>70</sup> Piozzi defends Johnson here, noting in her copy of *Life* that this remark was ‘apparently said in

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<sup>67</sup> Johnson, ‘No. 60. Saturday, 13 October 1750’, 319. Johnson, ‘No. 84. Saturday, 24 November 1759’ in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Volume II, The Idler and The Adventurer*, ed. W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, and L. F. Powell (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), 261-264, 262.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Art XIII. *Letters to and from the late Samuel Johnson*’, in *The Monthly Review; or Literary Journal*, ed. Richard Griffiths (London: R. Griffiths, 1788), vol. 78, 324-331, 326.

<sup>69</sup> Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, (London: Charles Dilly, 1785), HOU/2003J-JB52, 126.

<sup>70</sup> According to Garrick, Wilkes notes, ‘make my genitals to quiver, was Johnson’s phrase’. See Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, 2 vols (London: Charles Dilly, 1791), HOU/2003J-JBL3, vol. 1, 108.

jest by Johnson, and certainly related in jest by Garrick'.<sup>71</sup> Boswell's corrected page proofs for the first edition of the *Life* also demonstrate that he heavily edited a conversation with Johnson on marital infidelity (**Figure 1.3**). In it, Johnson claims that 'married women don't trouble themselves about infidelity in their husbands; they detest a mistress, but don't mind a whore', and he asserts that his wife, Tetty, 'told me I might lye with as many women as I pleased, provided I *loved* her alone.' Boswell asks whether a woman with 'a very cold constitution' has 'any right to complain of her husband's infidelity', to which Johnson responds that 'if she refuses, she has no right to complain'.<sup>72</sup> Though he changes his mind about some excerpts of the passage, evident from the 'stet' direction to the printer, Boswell ultimately made the decision to withdraw the leaf entirely from the proof copy. This is confirmed in his letter to Malone, where he proposes,

I must have a cancelled leaf in Vol. II of that passage where there is a conversation as to conjugal infidelity on the husband's side, and his wife saying she did not care how many women he went to if he *loved* her alone; with my proposing to mark in a pocket book every time a wife *refuses*.<sup>73</sup>

Boswell continues, 'I wonder how you and I admitted this to the publick eye for Windham etc. were struck with its indelicacy and it might hurt the Book much. It is however mighty good stuff'.<sup>74</sup> While Boswell's portrayal of Johnson is largely unabridged (even when apparently softened, Boswell's detailing of Johnson's sexual desires is frankly candid), the disparities between the page proofs and published edition show his restraint as he accedes to those early readers' concerns.

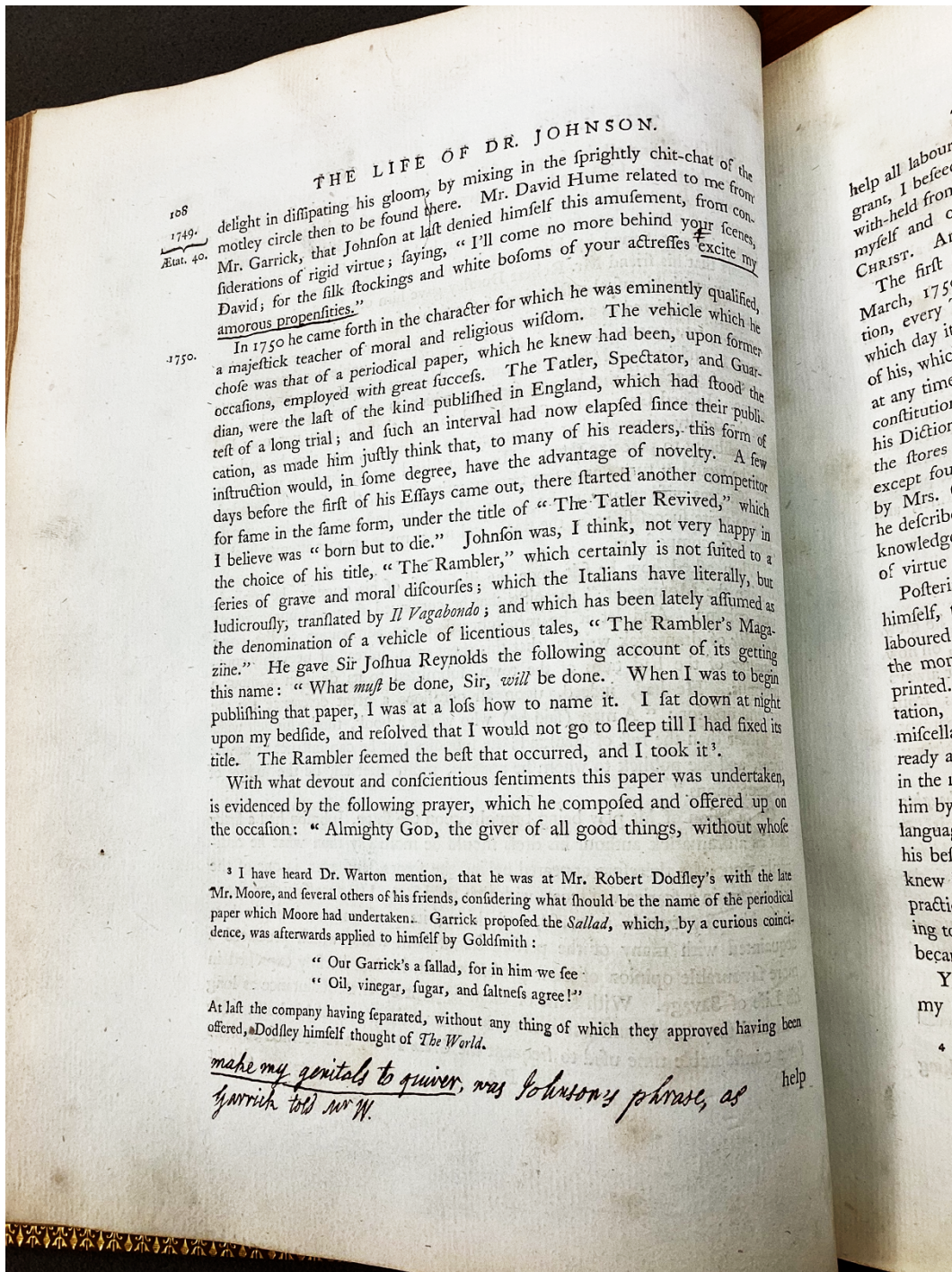
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<sup>71</sup> Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1807), HOU/2003J-TP61, vol. 1, 177.

<sup>72</sup> Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*: page proofs (1791), HOU/2003JM-135, 302.

<sup>73</sup> Boswell to Malone, 10 February 1791, in *The Correspondence of James Boswell, with David Garrick, Edmund Burke, and Edmond Malone*, ed. George M. Kahrl and Rachel McClellan (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1987), 398-401, 400.

<sup>74</sup> Boswell to Malone, 400-401.



THE LIFE OF DR. JOHNSON.

108  
1749  
Æt. 40.

delight in dissipating his gloom, by mixing in the sprightly chit-chat of the motley circle then to be found there. Mr. David Hume related to me from Mr. Garrick, that Johnson at last denied himself this amusement, from considerations of rigid virtue; saying, "I'll come no more behind your scenes, David; for the silk stockings and white bosoms of your actresses excite my amorous propensities."

In 1750 he came forth in the character for which he was eminently qualified, a majestick teacher of moral and religious wisdom. The vehicle which he chose was that of a periodical paper, which he knew had been, upon former occasions, employed with great success. The Tatler, Spectator, and Guardian, were the last of the kind published in England, which had stood the test of a long trial; and such an interval had now elapsed since their publication, as made him justly think that, to many of his readers, this form of instruction would, in some degree, have the advantage of novelty. A few days before the first of his Essays came out, there started another competitor for fame in the same form, under the title of "The Tatler Revived," which I believe was "born but to die." Johnson was, I think, not very happy in the choice of his title, "The Rambler," which certainly is not suited to a series of grave and moral discourses; which the Italians have literally, but ludicrously, translated by *Il Vagabondo*; and which has been lately assumed as the denomination of a vehicle of licentious tales, "The Rambler's Magazine." He gave Sir Joshua Reynolds the following account of its getting this name: "What *must* be done, Sir, *will* be done. When I was to begin publishing that paper, I was at a loss how to name it. I sat down at night upon my bedside, and resolved that I would not go to sleep till I had fixed its title. The Rambler seemed the best that occurred, and I took it."

With what devout and conscientious sentiments this paper was undertaken, is evidenced by the following prayer, which he composed and offered up on the occasion: "Almighty God, the giver of all good things, without whose

<sup>3</sup> I have heard Dr. Warton mention, that he was at Mr. Robert Doddsley's with the late Mr. Moore, and several others of his friends, considering what should be the name of the periodical paper which Moore had undertaken. Garrick proposed the *Sallad*, which, by a curious coincidence, was afterwards applied to himself by Goldsmith:

"Our Garrick's a fallad, for in him we see  
"Oil, vinegar, sugar, and saltnefs agree!"

At last the company having separated, without any thing of which they approved having been offered, Doddsley himself thought of *The World*.

*make my genitals to quiver, was Johnson's phrase, as Garrick told Mr W.* help

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Figure 1.2. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* 2 vols (London: Charles Dilly, 1791), vol. 1, 108, HOU/2003J-JBL3. Annotations in John Wilkes's hand.

Cancel

him to give me an exact list of his places of residence, since he entered the metropolis as an authour, which I subjoin in a note<sup>o</sup>.

rad / 31

I mentioned to him a dispute between a friend of mine and his lady, concerning conjugal infidelity, which my friend maintained was by no means so bad in the husband as in the wife. JOHNSON. "Your friend was in the right, Sir. Between a man and his maker it is a different question; but between a man and his wife, a husband's infidelity is nothing. They are connected by children, by fortune, by serious considerations of community. Wife married women don't trouble themselves about infidelity in their husbands; they detect a mistress, but don't mind a whore. My wife told me I might be with as many as I pleased, provided I loved her alone." BOSWELL. "She was not in earnest." JOHNSON. "But she was, consider, Sir, how gross it is in a wife to complain of her husband's going to other women, merely as women; it is that she has not enough of what she would be ashamed to avow." BOSWELL. "And was Mrs. Johnson then so liberal, Sir?" To be sure there is a great difference between the offence of infidelity in a man and that of his wife." JOHNSON. "The difference is boundless."

Plot: the man imposes

~~The man imposes no bastards upon his wife. BOSWELL. "Suppose, Sir, a woman to be of a very cold constitution, has she any right to complain of her husband's infidelity?" JOHNSON. "Sir, if she refuses, she has no right to complain." BOSWELL. "Then, Sir, according to your doctrine, upon every such occasion a man may make a note in his pocket-book, and do as he pleases with a~~

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1. Exeter-street, off Catherine-street, Strand.
2. Greenwich.
3. Woodstock-street, near Hanover-square.
4. Castle-street, Cavendish-square.
5. Strand.
6. Boswell-court.
7. Strand, again.
8. Bow-street.
9. Holborn.
10. Fetter-lane.
11. Holborn, again.
12. Gough-square.
13. Staple Inn.
14. Gray's Inn.
15. Inner Temple-lane, No. 1.
16. Johnson's-court, No. 7.
17. Bolt-court, No. 8.

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Figure 1.3. James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*: page proofs (1791), 302, HOU/2003JM-135. Annotations in James Boswell's hand.

In *Anecdotes*, Johnson is portrayed as dependent on the Thrales' care, as they sought to keep him 'clear of mischief with our best help'; and, as we will see, Piozzi further frames herself as his nurse and companion. In such anecdotes, the biography exemplifies what North describes as a literary biography that 'disrupted the autonomy of the subject' by usurping 'his self-possession'. Such intrusions into private domesticity, as North argues, 'threatened the autonomy of the author and the writer's life became contested property', meaning it could be exploited by others. By exposing Johnson's frailties in an attempt to bring Johnson 'home to the reader', Piozzi resultantly risks diminishing his stature as the acclaimed author.<sup>75</sup> While Johnson's concern is with biographical truth, the criticisms levelled at *Anecdotes* are rooted in a perceived impropriety in the disclosure of domestic details from private incidents that occur from 'behind the curtain'. Piozzi enjoyed an access that she should not now be exploiting to abase a venerated figure.

The potential impropriety of intruding into Johnson's domestic life was not the only issue reviewers took with *Anecdotes*. They also complained that it could not be considered a literary work because the anecdote was not considered a literary-artistic device. Burney's scepticism of Boswell as 'that Biographical, anecdotal memorandummer' helps to illuminate the issue here.<sup>76</sup> Burney implies that a reliance on scribbling incidents down almost as they are happening has the effect of 'dumming' down, and so the issue with the anecdote was that it was an unsystematic biographical form, one which was more journalistic than artistic, and so it could be easily deployed by anyone who had associated with the subject in question because it is a regurgitation of specific details via eavesdropping, not revelation of general truths via artistic synthesis. It

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<sup>75</sup> North, 31, 31, 6.

<sup>76</sup> Burney to Susanna Burney Philips, 26 February 1787, in Frances Burney, *The Court Journals and Letters of Frances Burney, Volume II: 1787*, ed. Stewart Cooke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 97.



produced reiteration of fragmentary incident or comment, not original insight, systematic wisdom, or coherent personality. Horace Walpole, one of the first to respond to Piozzi, wrote ‘this new book is wretched; a high-varnished preface to a heap of rubbish, in a very vulgar style, and too void of method even for such a farrago’.<sup>77</sup> Walpole found the book devoid of biographical value due to its lack of sophistication and refinement in terms of the disorganised narrative structure and the triviality of content. However, Walpole’s criticism exemplifies an anxiety surrounding the anecdote form itself, which extends beyond Burney’s disapproval of the form as unartistic journalism: the individual personal perspective was too subjective and was not delivered by a publicly recognised and credible authority. For Walpole, the structure and focus on seemingly trivial detail indicated that *Anecdotes* lacked the depth and authority expected of a literary biography. His critique underscores an unease with anecdotal writing’s ability to convey meaningful insights into a subject’s character, particularly when those anecdotes are filtered through a personal perspective.

Since its publication, *Anecdotes* has been perceived by readers and critics as a fragmentary and incoherent work. However, the charges levelled at Piozzi for deviation from typical biographical structures – adherence to chronology, significance, and propriety – are misguided. The problem is that anecdotes seem digressive, even when they are the essence of an artwork. McCarthy observes that *Anecdotes* operates with a ‘looseness of structure’ and notes that ‘uncertainty as to the form she wanted [...] marks the book. At first it promises to be a sort of biography-with-digressions, but soon the digressions choke the biography’.<sup>78</sup> McCarthy suggests that this reflects an uneasiness in Piozzi’s reconciliation of the anecdote with a more established method of biographical

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<sup>77</sup> Horace Walpole to Sir Horace Mann, 28 March 1786, in Horace Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole, Fourth Earl of Orford*, ed. Peter Cunningham, 9 vols (London: R. Bentley, 1891), vol. 9, 46.

<sup>78</sup> McCarthy, 115, 114.

writing, which is to say that the looseness with which *Anecdotes* operates reflects a tension between the tendency of anecdotes towards divagation and the linear and chronological structure expected in biography, as Piozzi presents a series of anecdotes linked by the subjective association of her memory. The anecdote, by its nature, resists traditional conventions on linearity, and so Piozzi's deployment of them should be understood as a deliberate choice through which to explore character in a way that is more fragmented but also more intimate, therefore privileging, rather than seeking to occlude, a mnemonic, associative, and subjective engagement with the subject.<sup>79</sup> Instead of understanding these deviations as flaws, they can be read as part of the unique value of *Anecdotes*, offering an alternative insight that is personal and intimate, that traditional biography might not capture. *Anecdotes* shows that biography composed of such original perceptions can be artistically intricate, transcending mere journalistic reporting, and challenge the notion that a chronological structure is requisite to systematic wisdom or coherent personality.

The seemingly arbitrary organisation of *Anecdotes* reflects the nature of conversation, which can be repetitive, contradictory, and digressive. Since, for Piozzi, conversations become the means through which the particulars of Johnson's character are revealed, this structure mirrors the complexities and nuances of human character, which is revealed through these inconsistencies. Johnson's attitude toward conversation itself exemplifies this: at one point, Piozzi tells the reader that 'a story (says he) is a specimen of human manners, and derives its sole value from its truth', while at another, she notes

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<sup>79</sup> Berglund has also more recently, and more perceptively, reflected on the fragmentary nature of *Anecdotes*, and concluded that the biography derives 'energy from the tension between fugitive, fragmentary, and discursive genres', which reflect 'Piozzi's own creative impulses'. See '*Anecdotes* Versus The Editors', 278. This confutes W. K. Wimsatt's argument that *Anecdotes* has no substance on account of its style: the reader encounters 'Mrs. Thrale-Piozzi looking inward, to memory, trying to catch her impressions and recollections in a deliberate tissue of words – Mrs. Piozzi in short trying to be a writer'. See 'Images of Johnson', *ELH (English Literary History)*, 41 (1974), 359-374, 364. Wimsatt follows Disraeli's definition of 'idle biography' whereby one attempts to write 'the life of another, merely to shew that they were themselves fine writers', *Dissertation on Anecdotes*, 55-56.

that Johnson did not ‘much delight in that kind of conversation which consists in telling stories’. These contradictions highlight the nature not only of Johnson’s character but of human nature more generally, which can only be captured through the replication of conversation. Piozzi also stresses that her relationship with Johnson was rooted in conversation, and accordingly *Anecdotes* is built upon this foundation. Each anecdote she includes represents a snippet of conversation or captures a Johnsonian observation or aphorism. Piozzi defends her decision to produce a biography consisting solely of these conversational moments, stating that, ‘to repeat the sayings of Dr. Johnson, is almost all that can be done by the writers of his life,’ because ‘his life, at least since my acquaintance with him, consisted in little else than talking’.<sup>80</sup> Although intending to be critical, Leonard Chappelow attested to the authenticity of Piozzi’s replication of conversation, remarking that ‘to read twenty pages and hear Mrs. Piozzi’s talk for twenty minutes is the same thing’.<sup>81</sup> This attests to the coherence between Piozzi’s narrative structure and the natural structures of conversation itself, which is disjointed but revealing and therefore essential for gaining insight into the nuances of character. In this way, Piozzi abides by Johnson’s own biographical practice, recognising that more is to be gained ‘by a short conversation’ than ‘from a formal and studied narrative’.<sup>82</sup>

While Johnson’s use of anecdote aimed to humanise by revealing details of particular experience, Piozzi goes a step further, since her personal acquaintance with Johnson allowed her to capture his conversation and domestic habits in a way that Johnson’s own biographical writing (except perhaps in his *Life* of Richard Savage) could not. Reflecting on Johnson’s ‘Life of Pope’, Catherine Parke notices that ‘Johnson’s biographical curiosity was frustrated by a lack of recorded conversation of so great a

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<sup>80</sup> *Anecdotes*, 166, 172, 27.

<sup>81</sup> Hyde, 139-140.

<sup>82</sup> Johnson, ‘No. 60. Saturday, 13 October 1750’, 322.

writer'.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, Johnson laments that 'so much should be known of what he [Pope] has written, and so little of what he has said'.<sup>84</sup> Piozzi's domestic proximity to Johnson enabled her to bring the reader into their intimate circle of social interactions. Focusing on these domestic anecdotes, she expanded the scope of biography to include not only the private, but every day, life of the subject to offer a more detailed portrayal of character. The following parts of this chapter examine how Piozzi's emphasis on intimate conversation feminised the role of the biographer. First, I examine the presentation of Johnson's sociability in early and male-authored *Lives* of Johnson before analysing the 1786 edition of *Anecdotes* alongside her 1816 marginalia in her copies of *Anecdotes* and *Letters* to trace her ongoing effort to balance her personal authority with readers' expectations of literary-biographical writing. In doing so, it explores how her depiction of domestic sociability at Streatham Park solidified her place as a central figure in Johnson biography.

### Sociability in *Anecdotes*

Piozzi foregrounds her domestic identities as wife, mother, and caretaker of Johnson in *Anecdotes*, and by relating details from her experience as Johnson's caretaker, aggregates her authority as biographer to this domestic, intimate setting. The vulnerability with which Piozzi renders Johnson is comparable to Johnson's treatment of Alexander Pope. Anecdotes in the *Life* of Pope do not share the 'lighter parts of life' with the examples that Watson Brownley selects from other lives. Pope's 'petty peculiarities' are dominated by an account of his disability in middle-age. Johnson tells his reader that Pope was

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<sup>83</sup> Catherine Parke, 'Johnson and the Arts of Conversation' in *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 18-33, 25.

<sup>84</sup> *LEP*, vol. 4, 56.

then so weak as to stand in perpetual need of female attendance; extremely sensible of cold, so that he wore a kind of fur doublet, under a shirt of very coarse warm linen with fine sleeves. When he rose, he was invested in a boddice made of stiff canvass, being scarce able to hold himself erect till they were laced, and he then put on a flannel waistcoat. One side was contracted. His legs were so slender, that he enlarged their bulk with three pair of stockings, which were drawn on and off by the maid; for he was not able to dress or undress himself, and neither went to bed nor rose without help. His weakness made it very difficult for him to be clean.<sup>85</sup>

Johnson not only reveals a private, domestic Pope seen behind closed doors, but the man in a state of dishabille which emphasises his effeminate frailty. A reading of the anecdotes Johnson collates to piece together a collective impression, which Piozzi similarly does, as an instance of cruelty on Johnson's part, though, is unwarranted. The flatness of Johnson's prose as he articulates how the 'female domestick' systematically dresses Pope to transform him into the impression of a man elicits an emotional response. This anecdote is part of Johnson's larger aim in *Lives* to humanise the poets (or at least the ones Johnson felt to be geniuses); Johnson shows that greatness is subject to corruption and decay. Piozzi's treatment of Johnson, however, is less than sympathetic, and borders on resentment. Though Piozzi is not a servant, she often figures herself as a domestic attendant. Piozzi reports that in the small hours Johnson 'used to shock me from quitting his company, till I hurt my own health not a little by sitting up with him when I was myself far from well'. Recalling the 'anxiety and pain' Johnson suffered when 'retiring to

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<sup>85</sup> *LEP*, vol. 4, 54-55.

bed', Piozzi was required to 'sit quietly and make tea for him', which she 'often did till four o'clock in the morning'.<sup>86</sup>

Piozzi is using Johnson's own biographical method to her own end, and by foregrounding anecdotes of moments of vulnerability, she is able to figure as an interlocutor alongside him. Both Johnson and Piozzi's anecdotes are derived from female domestic figures. Piozzi, Rebecca Bullard states, 'goes a significant step further than Johnson' because, 'as the word "anecdotes" suggests', Piozzi unveils 'a secret history of Johnson's literary career that gains power through its appropriation of Johnsonian domestic biography'.<sup>87</sup> That is to say, while Piozzi cultivates a domestic intimacy comparable to Johnson's *Life of Pope*, seen through the perspective of female labour, Piozzi ultimately rejects the anonymity of Pope's nameless servant by foregrounding her own presence beside Johnson. The anecdote, a form which 'straddled the worlds of speech and writing', imbuing 'written texts with the ambience of face-to-face interaction', naturally operates with more than one participant.<sup>88</sup> In *Anecdotes*, the written and spoken word converge, enabling Piozzi to cast herself as both narrator and conversational participant, assuring the reader of her place beside Johnson and reinforcing her authority on the subject. This represents an artistically innovative approach to biography, as Piozzi integrates conversational intimacy into the narrative. Positioning herself as an interlocutor, she offers a more personal model of biography that foregrounds the biographer's presence in shaping the subject's legacy.

Anecdotes, as Piozzi employs them, invite the reader to imaginatively recreate the wider social milieu that gathered at Streatham Park and see it not only as a domestic space but one of literary and intellectual sociability. In this way, Piozzi's biography is less

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<sup>86</sup> *Anecdotes*, 123-124.

<sup>87</sup> Bullard, 'Samuel Johnson's Houses', 140.

<sup>88</sup> Wood, 17.

insular than critics have tended to assume, particularly in comparison to other biographers' *Johnsoniana*, which assembled copious amounts of ephemeral material. For instance, Piozzi's anecdote on Johnson's relationship with Hill Boothby initially begins as a discussion between herself and Johnson. Piozzi writes, "'You may see,'" said he [Johnson] to me, when the "Poet's Lives" were printed, "that dear B—thby is at my heart still"'. However, upon narrating Johnson's response to Boothby's death, Piozzi invites Giuseppe Baretti (critic and writer) and John Taylor (chaplain and Johnson's friend) into the narrative. Piozzi includes Baretti's claim that 'Dr. Johnson was almost distracted with grief' and adds Taylor's own disclosure of a related anecdote, which depicts Johnson 'calming the disorder' after his [Taylor's] wife died.<sup>89</sup> Piozzi presents a myriad of voices which feature alongside her own and Johnson's, to represent the wider social milieu they inhabited and to transform the anecdote into an intricately constructed piece of literature that surpasses other journalistic publications. Through the voices Piozzi focuses on, and the incoherence through which these are presented, *Anecdotes* subverts ideals of regulated sociability, and in turn subverts a 'grand' narrative of Johnson's life from one, authoritative perspective. Rather than presenting a singular, stable portrait of Johnson, Piozzi curates a portrait to reflect the complexities of her subject's character, and indeed human nature, observed through his own words. To this end, Piozzi's depiction implicitly acknowledges David Hume's reckoning in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) that 'we are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement'.<sup>90</sup> Hume also offers another interpretation of Piozzi's metaphor of the 'candle-light picture' here: his notion of perpetual movement describes the flame of the candle, representing those

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<sup>89</sup> *Anecdotes*, 161-162.

<sup>90</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Longman & Co, 1878), 534.

‘different perceptions’ that are in ‘perpetual movement’, even if the differences in those anecdotal perceptions are only slight. The discursive nature of the *Anecdotes*, as a ‘genre that works to both break apart and to build up grand narratives of history in a potentially endless cycle’, embodies this notion of a ‘collection of different perceptions’.<sup>91</sup> As such, by displaying varying apprehensions of various figures’ interactions with Johnson, Piozzi eschews a ‘grand’ depiction and, instead of constructing a monolithic portrait, offers a more nuanced portrayal of her subject and his sociability, which differs from other biographical depictions that sought to present a more unified narrative.

Early *Lives* of Johnson set a precedent for depicting Johnsonian sociability, a theme that would persist in the more substantial biographies by Hawkins and Boswell. In them, Johnson’s public image was of a conversationalist who liked to hold forth. However, this focus came at the expense of recognising his ability to satisfy his conversational urges at home, which Piozzi would reveal in *Anecdotes*. After suffering a period of depression in 1763, Johnson accepted an invitation from Sir Joshua Reynolds to form a new club. ‘The Club’ as it was simply known, met regularly at the Turk’s Head in Soho to enjoy enlightened conversation. Johnson had previously participated in gatherings at the Ivy Lane Club in 1749 and would go on to attend similar assemblies, most notably the Essex Head Club in 1783. As Peter Clark points out, there is ‘nothing exceptional’ in Johnson’s numerous associations with London clubs over his lifetime since ‘members of the educated, professional, and bourgeois classes in the Georgian capital regularly belonged to several clubs and societies’. In return for their subscriptions, members of both metropolitan and provincial clubs received an array of benefits and opportunities. Clark lists ‘conviviality, entertainment, [and] even fun’ among

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<sup>91</sup> Wood, 18. Wood cites Joel Fineman, ‘The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction’, *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 49-76, 61. Hume, 534.



opportunities for ‘solidarity’, ‘advice’, ‘employment’, ‘business deals’, ‘mutual aid’, ‘status’, ‘credibility’, obtaining ‘the latest news’, as well as forming ‘new social networks’. Since such clubs largely excluded women on the basis of their meeting places in alehouses, taverns, and inns, ‘the club also provided a relaxed place to gather in male company away from women’.<sup>92</sup> The three clubs in which Johnson’s participation is documented between 1749 and 1784 offered company and conversation. Membership, particularly to the Literary Club was highly selective so as to uphold the quality and diversity of conversation. Johnson sees himself as champion of this aspect at club culture. In 1784, for instance, during a period of sickness, Johnson writes that his ‘inability to attend the Essex head makes the club droop’, and hopes that his ‘return to it will invigorate and establish it’.<sup>93</sup> The effect of Johnson’s presence in such company is remarked upon by Boswell. Boswell recalls Johnson, at the Literary Club in 1775, being ‘in high spirits this evening’ and talking ‘with great animation and success.’<sup>94</sup> Biographical accounts reflecting on Johnson’s associations with the Ivy Lane, Literary, and Essex Head clubs also indicate that these opportunities for conversation offered Johnson a mental stimulation capable of distracting him from his melancholy. Such accounts underscore the public image of Johnson, whose conversational prowess was a key part of that identity. However, *Anecdotes* presents a contrasting portrayal of Johnson’s conversation, rooted in the domestic sphere rather than the public, male-dominated space of the metropolitan club. This shift in setting allows for a more intimate understanding of Johnson’s sociability that complicates the image established by early *Lives*, Hawkins, and later, Boswell.

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<sup>92</sup> Peter Clark, ‘Clubs’, in *Samuel Johnson in Context*, ed. Jack Lynch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 143-150, 143, 149, 149. For an account of the proliferation of clubs and societies in England, see 144, and for an account of factors that excluded women from clubs and societies, see 146-147.

<sup>93</sup> Samuel Johnson to Hester Maria Thrale, 31 January 1784, in Samuel Johnson, *The Letters of Samuel Johnson, Vol. IV, 1782-1784*, ed. Bruce Redford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 279.

<sup>94</sup> *BLJ*, 433.

In his 1787 biography of Johnson, Hawkins emphasises the balm the Ivy Lane Club provided to remedy Johnson's melancholy. 'The great delight of his life', Hawkins states, 'was conversation and mental intercourse', and so in 1749 Johnson 'indulge[d] himself in this' by forming 'a club that met weekly at the King's head [...] every Tuesday evening'. Here Johnson 'constantly resorted, and with a disposition to please and be pleased, would pass those hours in a free and unrestrained interchange of sentiments, which otherwise had been spent at home in painful reflection'.<sup>95</sup> Boswell takes up the same narrative in his 1791 biography of Johnson. While Boswell concedes that the employment of composing the *Dictionary* was 'the best preventative of that constitutional melancholy which was ever lurking about him, reading to trouble his quiet', Johnson's 'enlarged and lively mind could not be satisfied without more diversity of employment' and so he 'formed a club in Ivy-lane, Paternoster-row, with a view to enjoy literary discussion, and amuse his evening hours'.<sup>96</sup> These biographies are emphasising a palliative view of sociability, which excludes women and frames time apart from the homosocial collective as solitary gloom. Piozzi's book resisted that impression.

Another sociable space which would be similarly necessary to uplifting Johnson's spirits, Damrosch argues, was the Thrales' Streatham Park home. Damrosch states that it was the Thrales 'more than any of Johnson's other friends or the Club itself, who rescued him from depression', since the social circle they offered there 'formed a kind of shadow club, overlapping with the one at the Turk's Head'.<sup>97</sup> And yet, while Damrosch and others have emphasised the presence of the 'shadow club' at Streatham Park, this social circle is indistinct from the homosocial original in Hawkins's and Boswell's accounts of Johnson's

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<sup>95</sup> John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. OM Brack Jr. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 134.

<sup>96</sup> *BLJ*, 107.

<sup>97</sup> Leo Damrosch, *The Club: Johnson, Boswell, and the Friends Who Shaped an Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 7.

club participation. The centrality of the Park, as somewhere Johnson spent large portions of his time, is recorded in both biographies. Hawkins notes that to Streatham ‘Johnson was invited, not as a guest, but as a resi[d]ant’. In short, ‘when at Streatham, he was at home’.<sup>98</sup> Boswell makes a similar remark about the home Johnson was welcomed into, stating that, in 1765, ‘Johnson accepted of an invitation to dinner at Thrale’s, and was so much pleased with his reception, both by Mr. and Mrs. Thrale, and they so much pleased with him, that his invitations to their house were more and more frequent, till at last he became one of the family, and an apartment was appropriated to him’.<sup>99</sup> Boswell inches closer than Hawkins to conceding that Streatham represented a ‘shadow club’ in his *Life*: he writes that ‘in the course of this year Dr. Burney informs me, that “he very frequently met Dr. Johnson at Mr. Thrale’s, at Streatham, where they had many long conversations, often sitting up as long as the fire and candles lasted”’.<sup>100</sup> The apparent ambiguity between the home and the salon at Streatham highlights the unique social environment that it offered Johnson, where the lines between public intellectual exchange and private domestic life are blurred in ways distinct from the other gentlemanly, metropolitan clubs Johnson frequented.

Studies since have shown that Streatham Park was a place of fervid intellectual and literary sociability. Amy Prendergast notes that, at the early salon she established, Piozzi (then Thrale) hosted a number of acquaintances, who were also ‘Literary Club’ members, including David Garrick, Charles Burney, Edmund Burke, Oliver Goldsmith, and Joshua Reynolds.<sup>101</sup> Since the salon was less formal in comparison to ‘The Club’,

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<sup>98</sup> Hawkins, 274.

<sup>99</sup> *BLJ*, 259.

<sup>100</sup> *BLJ* (quoting Charles Burney), 480; the year 1775.

<sup>101</sup> Amy Prendergast, *Literary Salons Across Britain and Ireland in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 66-69.

invitations were also extended to women, such as Frances Burney.<sup>102</sup> Johnson's interactions with women in such spaces, John Wiltshire observes, were largely ignored by Boswell.<sup>103</sup> Yet, though Prendergast reflects that while the salon was indeed popular because 'London's literati [...] were attracted to Streatham by Johnson's semi-permanent residence at the Thrales', it attracted a particularly 'masculine attendance' because 'there were also several business and political acquaintances of Henry Thrale's present'. While this salon offered similar opportunities to those clubs, as described by Clark, for profitable exchanges, the main topics of conversation were, *Thraliana* reveals, literature and art, and unpublished manuscript material regularly circulated among guests.<sup>104</sup> While the Streatham salon operated differently in terms of its gender inclusivity, rather than exclusivity, and domestic, rather than public, setting, it did not produce essentially dissimilar outcomes to those formal London clubs. Streatham offered intellectual literary conversation among a predominantly masculine company, with additional opportunities for manuscript and business exchange.

Yet, Streatham, as a hub of such activity, is disregarded in Boswell's and Hawkins's accounts of the sociable club culture Johnson participated in. Of course, Boswell's hostility towards Piozzi accounts for this. Meanwhile, Hawkins claims that, for Johnson, the company at Streatham was onerous. Hawkins writes that while the Thrales offered Johnson a home,

the only obligation they subjected him to was, that of supporting his character, and, in a family where there were many visitants, furnishing such conversation was to be expected from a man who had distinguished himself by his learning, his

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<sup>102</sup> Prendergast notes that 'Thrale's later salon, which she hosted after her second marriage', included several more women, including Elizabeth Montagu, Eva Garrick, and Hannah More, and so has a 'more feminine emphasis' compared to the 'originally predominantly masculine group', 70.

<sup>103</sup> John Wiltshire, *The Making of Dr. Johnson: Icon of Modern Culture* (Crowham Manor: Helm, 2009), 58.

<sup>104</sup> Prendergast, 69, 68. For examples of conversation and manuscript circulation see *Thraliana*, 56, 167, 328.

wit and his eloquence. This, it must be confessed was a burdensome task [...] To be continually uttering apophthegms, or speeches worthy of remembrance, was more than could have been expected of Socrates.

Wary of appearing to have been a burdensome hostess, demanding Johnson perform, Piozzi resists recording or emphasising those apothegms, instead favouring conversational openness, which captures a Johnson that is ‘off-record’.

The discursive nature of *Anecdotes* works to reflect conversational paradigms of the sociable spaces Piozzi and Johnson participated in and represents her own complex engagement with the ‘smoothness’ of polite conversation.<sup>105</sup> Jon Mee observes that polite conversation was a prominent aspect of eighteenth-century culture: ‘conversation didn’t just happen in eighteenth-century Britain. It was scrutinized, policed, promoted, written about, discussed, and practised’.<sup>106</sup> In *British Synonymy* (1794), ‘Hester Piozzi thought the word ‘polite’ implied “from its very derivation freedom from all asperity, an equable smoothness over which we roll, and are never stopped or impeded in our course”’. While conversation was regulated to achieve this smooth politeness, Mee recognises a ‘combative tradition that has always found pleasure in a more contentious idea of conversation’.<sup>107</sup> In Johnson’s Literary Club, for instance, conversation was ‘competitive’.<sup>108</sup> It apparently extended beyond those spaces; Elizabeth Montagu for one was infuriated with Johnson’s unwillingness to comply with the polite manners of her salon with his disruptive, plain speaking.<sup>109</sup> Boswell corroborates this in his *Life*,

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<sup>105</sup> Hester Lynch Piozzi, *British Synonymy; or, An Attempt at Regulating the Choice of Words in Familiar Conversation*, 2 vols (London, 1794), vol. 2, 262

<sup>106</sup> Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6. Politeness is, of course, only one aspect of a diverse eighteenth-century culture. As E. P. Thompson has noted, a historiographic preoccupation with politeness and the commercialisation of culture has resultantly neglected the relevance of this to the dispossessed rural poor. See *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1991).

<sup>107</sup> Mee, 3, 10. Mee cites Piozzi, *British Synonymy*, vol. 2, 262.

<sup>108</sup> Leslie Stephen, *Samuel Johnson* (New York: Harper, 1879), 61.

<sup>109</sup> See Mee, 93.

describing Johnson's conversational style as 'talking for victory'. Twice, Boswell includes Goldsmith's claim that there 'is no arguing with Johnson, for if his pistol misses fire, he knocks you down with the butt end of it'.<sup>110</sup>

In *Anecdotes*, Piozzi turns away from modes practiced by Johnson and Montagu, instead emulating a conversational mode closer to Leigh Hunt's idea of 'openness'. In his essay, 'Coffee-Houses and Smoking' (1826), Hunt reflects on reformulations in the regulation of conversation, and longs for a former time when, he believes, 'there was a more humane openness of intercourse'.<sup>111</sup> Richard Lovell Edgeworth expands on this notion of openness, and the importance of it, stating that the risk of being 'attacked, [and] exposed to argument and ridicule' by unregulated conversations was worth it for preserving 'the free communication of ideas'.<sup>112</sup> While Piozzi inherits a polite ideal abutting a rebarbative reality, in *Anecdotes*, she rejects this mode of social intercourse. While Hunt longs for an openness of discourse because, he believes, it is more 'humane', Piozzi's display of this conversational mode is not simply a nostalgic return to freer discourse but as conscious innovation in biographical practice through the use of anecdote. In this way, Piozzi's writing emulates Edgeworth's spirit. The anecdote form was well-suited to achieving this 'openness' since, as Monika Fludernik states, it is the 'most natural form of oral history and cannot be easily regulated'.<sup>113</sup> The form's inheritance from an organic mode of oral storytelling in print tests the regulated ideals of sociable intercourse. Specifically, freedom from restriction of regulated conversation enables Piozzi to converge voices enabled by unregulated conversation, and thus display Johnson's voice, her own, and those that represent the wider social milieu within which

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<sup>110</sup> *BLJ*, 311. Boswell makes a second reference to Goldsmith's claim on 915.

<sup>111</sup> Leigh Hunt, 'Coffee-Houses and Smoking', *New Monthly Magazine*, ed. Thomas Campbell, vol. 16 (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), 50-54, 51.

<sup>112</sup> Mee, 3. Mee cites Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth*, 2 vols (London: R. Hunter, 1821), vol. 1, 189.

<sup>113</sup> Monika Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology* (Oxford: Routledge, 1993), 67.

they are situated to create a more nuanced, and subversive, image of Johnson's character than the unified character other early biographies sought to present.

However, to return to the *Lives*, Hawkins establishes a narrative of dissatisfaction with the intellectual conviviality at Streatham, and ultimately, in this *Life*, Johnson's association with the Streatham Park circle ended as a result of 'the decease of Mr. Thrale'. After this, 'his visits to Streatham became less and less frequent, and [...] he studiously avoided the mention of the place or family'.<sup>114</sup> James Harrison is yet more explicit than Hawkins in detailing Piozzi's role in Johnson's estrangement from Streatham Park. In Harrison's account, an 'increasing pressure of melancholy and disease' in Johnson was exacerbated because Piozzi felt 'more inclination to become the wife of another man, than continue Johnson's nurse' and so 'contrived the means to free herself from so incommodious a visitant'. The 'new club' at the Essex Head, in Harrison's account, was established 'to compensate in some measure for the loss of his domestick companions'.<sup>115</sup> This is contrary to Hawkins's later account that it was Streatham Park that was burdensome to Johnson, and not the other way around. Harrison's narrative in particular, in arguing that the Club was formed due to the loss of Johnson's 'domestick companions', acknowledges that Johnson enjoyed an intellectual sociability at Streatham Park. However, this emphasis on the 'domestick' and the figuring of Piozzi as a 'nurse' figure downplays Streatham Park's literary associations and Piozzi's place as an interlocutor within it. When Piozzi came to annotate *Anecdotes* and *Letters* in 1816, she placed greater emphasis on the significance of Streatham to rival other *Lives* and sought to redress narratives of misogynous construal of Johnsonian sensibility, not only in those *Lives* published between 1785 and 1791, but also those published in the wake of Boswell's *Life*.

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<sup>114</sup> Hawkins, 456, 552-553.

<sup>115</sup> James Harrison, 'The Life of Dr. Samuel Johnson, (1786)', in *The Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson*, ed. O. M. Brack, Jr., and Robert E. Kelley (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1974), 247-290, 286, 287.

The denunciation of Streatham Park in favour of depicting Johnson's masculine, metropolitan sociability continued to be perpetuated after Piozzi's *Anecdotes*, extending into biographies published between 1791 (after Boswell's *Life*) and 1816 (when Piozzi annotated *Anecdotes* and *Letters*). Emphasis on Johnson's participation in these clubs worked tacitly to construct Streatham as an inferior intellectual space. Arthur Murphy, a playwright, also attended gatherings at Streatham Park, and was responsible for introducing the Thrales to Johnson in 1765.<sup>116</sup> Despite belonging to Henry Thrale's circle and then later attending assemblies at Streatham Park, his *Essay* only goes so far as to mention that Johnson was in 'select and polished company' there. Though in Murphy's account Johnson is described as leaving 'the place with regret' and 'casts a lingering look behind', Piozzi is simply written out. While Murphy believes Hawkins only includes a list of Ivy Lane club members in his biography to 'draw a spiteful and malevolent character of almost every one of them', Murphy's lists demonstrate the intellectual company with which Johnson associated. In his description of the interactions at the Literary Club, Murphy records excerpts from the members' conversation, and concludes that 'Johnson felt not only kindness but zeal and ardour for his friends'.<sup>117</sup> In Murphy's account, Streatham becomes overshadowed by gentlemanly club culture, and so continued to imply that it was less central to Johnson's literary sociability.

Robert Anderson's *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1815), which was one of the few 'new' biographies of Johnson that followed Boswell's, is the most generous in its

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<sup>116</sup> For an account of this introduction, see McCarthy, *Hester Thrale Piozzi*, 23.

<sup>117</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D. a new edition, in twelve volumes, with An Essay on his Life and Genius, by Arthur Murphy, Esq.*, ed. A. Chalmers (London: J. Nichols et. al, 1810), vol. 1, 101, 122, 126, 65, 98.



depiction of Streatham as a space of intellectual activity and in its treatment of Piozzi as an interlocutor within it.<sup>118</sup> Anderson writes

the vivacity, learning, and affability of Mrs Thrale, roused him to cheerfulness and attention, even when they were alone. But this was not often the case; for he found here a constant succession of what gave him the highest enjoyment. The society of the learned, the witty, and the eminent in every way, were assembled in numerous companies, called forth his wonderful powers, and gratified him with admiration, to which no man could be insensible.

This is quite different to Hawkins' account of the social pressures Johnson was allegedly subjected to at Streatham Park. However, Anderson's account of the Essex Head club continues much in the same way as Murphy's. The club consisted of a 'select number of his friends, respectable for their rank, their talents, and their literature' who 'entered very heartily into the scheme, for the pleasure of enjoying his conversation, and of contributing to his comfort'.<sup>119</sup> Though Piozzi herself is more present in this account, like in Murphy's, Streatham is overlooked in favour of depicting the gentlemanly sociability of the club, thus emphasising a masculine intellectual sociability as a cornerstone in Johnson's life.

### Reading with Johnson

When *Anecdotes* was first published, Piozzi aimed to counter a specific public image of Johnson. While that image was ossifying, in her annotations to *Anecdotes* and *Letters*, made in 1816, she sought to drill down on her version of Johnson, and emphasise the

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<sup>118</sup> As Robert Folkenflik has noted, 'to write a life of Johnson is potentially the most ambitious undertaking for a biographer, since Boswell's Johnson is by consensus the greatest of English biographies', 'Johnson's Modern Lives', in *Johnson after Two Hundred Years*, ed. Paul J. Korshin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 3-23, 21.

<sup>119</sup> Robert Anderson, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D. with Critical Observations on His Works* (Edinburgh: Doig and Sterling, et. al, 1815), 304, 422-426.

literary-intellectual dimension of her relationship to him. In 1816, Piozzi presented an annotated copy of her *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson* to her friend and literary executor, Sir James Fellowes (**Figure 1.4**).<sup>120</sup> According to McIntyre, Piozzi was ‘anxious that he should have annotated copies of her books’ because, as remarked by Heather Jackson, Fellowes was also Piozzi’s prospective biographer.<sup>121</sup> Piozzi’s annotations may, of course, have been intended only as private notes to Fellowes rather than guides to rewriting the years of her association with Johnson. William Sherman suggests that the main purpose of marginalia, even before the eighteenth century, was generally considered as a process of introspective, private reflection, which could also be used as a memory aid.<sup>122</sup> However, there is a significant development in marginal practices in the period, which Jackson articulates: ‘during the period from about 1750-1820, this kind of writing [marginalia] developed rapidly and became highly sophisticated. Good specimens were copied out and imitated, so that by 1820 they were ready to be launched as publishable’.<sup>123</sup> Aware of the permanence of her marginal annotations, it is reasonable to assume that Piozzi intended these to be circulated more widely. Indeed, they were, as they appeared in Abraham Hayward’s *Autobiography, Letters and Literary Remains of Mrs. Piozzi (Thrale)* (1861).<sup>124</sup> Hayward was enlisted to compile and condense Piozzi’s memoirs, letters, fugitive pieces of her literary compositions, and manuscript notes in her books; he notes that the late Fellowes and ‘the late Sir John Piozzi Salusbury were her [Piozzi’s] executors, and the present publication takes place in pursuance of an agreement

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<sup>120</sup> SJBM 2001.55.251.

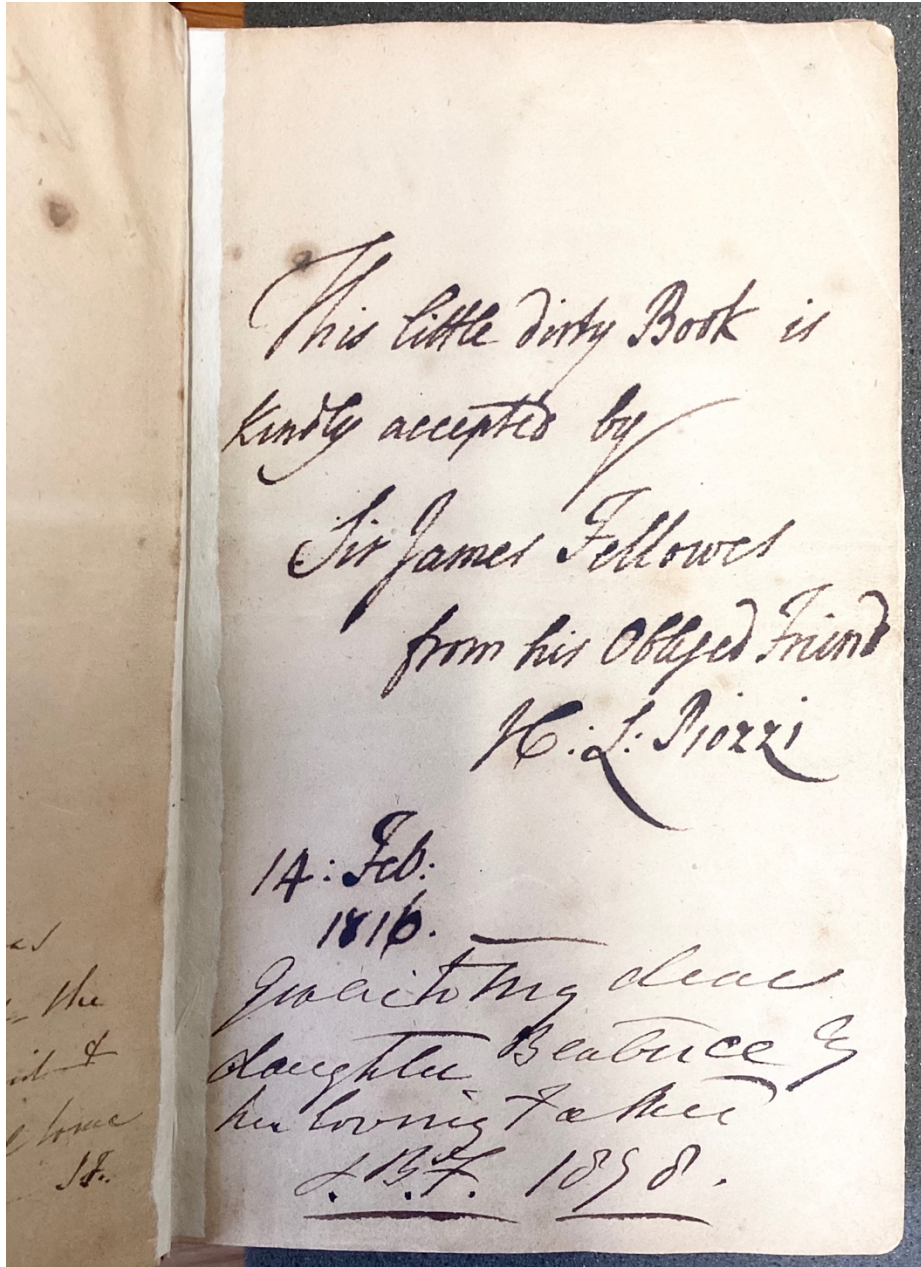
<sup>121</sup> McIntyre, 356. Heather J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 104.

<sup>122</sup> William H. Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>123</sup> Jackson, 15.

<sup>124</sup> Some annotations from Piozzi’s books are included in Percival Merritt’s *Piozzi Marginalia, compromising some extracts from manuscripts of Hester Lynch Piozzi and annotations from her books* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925).

with their personal representatives, the Rev. G. A. Salusbury [...] and Captain J. Butler Fellowes'. Hayward's treatment of the marginalia is selective and it is used 'to fill up a few puzzling blanks, besides supplying some information respecting men and books, which will be prized by all lovers of literature'.<sup>125</sup>



**Figure 1.4.** Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: T. Cadell, 1786), flyleaves, SJB/2001.55.251.

<sup>125</sup> Abraham Hayward, *Autobiography, Letters and Literary Remains of Mrs. Piozzi (Thrale)*, 2 vols (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861), vol. 1, 3, 150.

Marginalia are crucial for understanding Piozzi's self-reflection beyond a mere engagement with men and books and rather illuminate her relationship with them.<sup>126</sup> Her marginalia deserve attention not only because they 'fill up a few puzzling blanks' but as acts of life-writing in their own right. Piozzi's marginalia in *Anecdotes* and *Letters*, then, had three uses: personal reflection on her relationship with Johnson; limited circulation in Fellowes's circles; and informing a prospective publication.<sup>127</sup> The final part of this chapter explores Piozzi's Johnsonian anecdotes added to the margins of *Anecdotes*, *Letters*, and other books she owned, and argues that her intention is not to create a finalised text or edition through revision but rather is concerned with extension and addition. These marginalia extend the literary sociability she depicted in *Anecdotes* and reveal her intention to position herself as a writer within that network. Additionally, I examine how Piozzi reframes intimacy in the marginalia in *Letters*, shifting from a domestic portrayal of herself as a wife, mother, and caretaker, to a literary self-

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<sup>126</sup> Piozzi was an avid reader and annotated many of the books she owned. Melanie Bigold has recently assessed Piozzi's Welsh library at Brynbella, which contained 752 titles (141). Bigold observes that Piozzi's library 'had much more poetry than fiction (26 per cent versus 11 per cent)' but that her main focus as a collector was French *ana*: 'hybrid texts containing anecdotal snippets of all manner of information, and which inspired her own capacious journal, 'Thraliana', and her best-selling *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson*' (143, 144). See 'Women's Book Ownership in Wales, c. 1770-1830: The Ladies of Llangollen, Hester Thrale Piozzi and Elizabeth Greenly', *The Welsh History Review*, 31:1 (2022), 126-149.

Piozzi also annotated other works of biography, including James Northcote's *The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London: Henry Colburn, 1818), 2 vols, HOU/GEN/EC75.P6598.Zz818n. Piozzi's annotated copy is examined by Richard Wendorf in "'Well said Mr. Northcote": Hester Thrale Piozzi's annotated copy of James Northcote's biography of Sir Joshua Reynolds', *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 9:4 (1998), 29-40. Wendorf notes that 'Piozzi's commentary in the two volumes of Northcote's biography sheds light on a wide variety of subjects ranging from the accuracy of the text to her responses to some of Reynolds's most important paintings', 32.

<sup>127</sup> Piozzi's marginalia have received some attention in scholarship. In addition to Wendorf's study of her copy of *The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, see: Katherleen Lubey's assessment of Piozzi's annotations to *The Spectator* ('Marginalia as Feminist Use of the Book: Hester Piozzi's *Spectator* Annotations', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 41:1 (2022), 11-44); Paul Tankard's chapter similarly examines Piozzi's annotations to periodicals ('Hester Piozzi's Annotations to the *Adventurer* and Johnson's *Rambler*: Beyond the Case Study', in *Marginal Notes: Social Reading and the Literal Margins*, ed. Patrick Spedding and Paul Tankard (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 85-113); and McCarthy (*Hester Thrale Piozzi*). McCarthy quotes Piozzi's marginalia, including that to her copies of Joseph Warton's *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1756), her own *Observations and Reflections* (1789), and Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, and while there is no extended examination of a single book, it contributes to understandings of Piozzi as a reader.

There has been no scholarly attention to her copies of *Anecdotes* and *Letters* held by the Birthplace Museum. It is also worth noting that these are not the only copies of these texts that she annotated. For example, another copy of *Anecdotes* annotated by Piozzi is held by the Beinecke Library (Im J637W786d) and her annotated *Letters* are held by the Wren Library, University of Cambridge (RW.71.1-2).

representation, emphasising shared reading and her identity as a reader (both in terms of her re-reading of her *Johnsoniana* and as a student of Johnson). Through the act of re-reading and marginal inscription, I argue, Piozzi reclaims her authority as Johnson's biographer against detractors of *Anecdotes*.

In light of the criticism *Anecdotes* received upon its publication in 1786, Piozzi's marginalia thirty years later can certainly be read as a defence of her biography for posterity. This is particularly plain in her addition of Boswell's name, previously concealed in the print text, and emphasising the word 'liar' beneath.<sup>128</sup> This annotated copy of *Anecdotes* shows Piozzi utilising marginal space to secure her legacy as a literary professional and to defend her innovation in the genre of 'anecdotal biography'. Indeed, Michael Franklin notes that, after reading William Forbes's *The Life of James Beattie* (1806), Piozzi was 'quick to take the credit for her generic innovation'.<sup>129</sup> As she states in a letter to her daughter, Hester Maria Thrale in 1807, 'the present mode of publishing Biographical Anecdotes – begun by myself – is exquisitely pleasing'.<sup>130</sup> Piozzi was cognisant of her work as a departure from traditional biographical structures. By claiming credit for pioneering the 'anecdotal' form, she not only defends her approach but also asserts her place in shaping biographical discourse. Her marginalia, then, serve not only as personal reflections but deliberate assertions of her contribution, ensuring that her legacy as a literary figure 'remains intact'.

Piozzi deploys manicules to indicate her insistence on a point made previously in print. By implication, she compares *Anecdotes* to Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*. In *Journal*, Johnson is depicted as a vibrant and energetic character, constantly 'wishing to move' and seek out opportunities for 'energetick conversation', differing

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<sup>128</sup> SJB/2001.55.251, 261.

<sup>129</sup> Franklin, 160.

<sup>130</sup> *The Piozzi Letters*, vol. 4, 147.

vastly from Piozzi's more sedentary, domestic portrayal.<sup>131</sup> Though Piozzi modestly refers to the anecdotes as 'little memoirs', referring to the anecdote's status as incidental material, Piozzi eloquently transitions into a metaphor, which defends her biographical practices and emphasises her literary achievement with the *Anecdotes*. Piozzi writes:

virtues are like shrubs, which yield their sweets in different manners according to the circumstances which surround them; and while generosity of the soul scatters its fragrance like the honeysuckle, and delights the senses of many occasional passengers, who feel the pleasure, and half wonder how the breeze has blown it from so far, the more sullen but not less valuable myrtle waits like fortitude to discover its excellence, till the hand arrives that will crush it, and force out that perfume whose durability well compensates the difficulty of production.<sup>132</sup>

Piozzi's metaphor echoes one of Johnson's, found in his 'Preface' to Shakespeare's plays. Johnson claims the work of a 'correct and regular writer is a garden accurately formed and diligently planted, varied with shades and scented with flowers'. Shakespeare, by comparison, 'is a forest, in which oaks extend their branches, and pines tower in the air, interspersed sometimes with weeds and brambles, sometimes giving shelter to myrtles and roses [...] gratifying the mind with endless diversity'.<sup>133</sup> For Johnson, the myrtle represents 'natural genius' and this is something that, when Shakespeare's works are examined closely, can be seen through the 'weeds', which represent the workaday activity of literary production. Piozzi, then, uses this theory to mount a defence of her biographical practice. Though the honeysuckle might look appealing, or, while Boswell places Johnson in a 'brilliant light', embarking on a more laborious task to recover the

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<sup>131</sup> Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. Celia Barnes and Jack Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 253.

<sup>132</sup> SJB/2001.55.251, 243.

<sup>133</sup> Samuel Johnson, 'Preface to the Edition of Shakespeare's Plays (1765)' in *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. H. R. Woudhuysen (London: Penguin, 1989), 120-165, 140-141.

myrtle is more worthwhile because it leads to something more precious and authentic. Though Piozzi produces a portrait of Johnson less coherent than Boswell's more diligently formed one, she believes it is her biography that reveals the perfume or essence, which is the 'index of [Johnson's] mind'. Piozzi's placement of the manicule itself is significant. Piozzi's own hand appears in the margin, pointing directly to 'till the hand that will crush it', affirming to the reader that it is she who has achieved this biographical feat. Therefore, the manicule not only amplifies her printed defence, but quietly redirects criticism of her method back to the text itself. In doing so, Piozzi reclaims the value of her innovation in the genre.

While Piozzi asserts her distance from Boswellian biography, she uses marginalia to emphasise her identity as a writer who worked alongside Johnson. Piozzi recalls the time when she bought a print depicting people ice skating, with a short verse in French underneath. Piozzi remembers asking for 'translations from every body', and records that Johnson was 'most exceedingly enraged when he knew that in the course of the season I had asked half a dozen acquaintance to do the same thing', because he knew that Piozzi's friends, the Pepyses' 'translations were unquestionably the best'.<sup>134</sup> In *Anecdotes*, Piozzi includes translations from Johnson, Lucas Pepys, and his brother, William. When Johnson sees William's translation, which is arguably the most impressive and close to the original French, Johnson makes a second attempt, which, in comparison to his first, is more poetic and crafted. Piozzi is impressed with Johnson's second translation because it is extemporaneous. Felicity Nussbaum discusses Piozzi's appreciation of the improvisational mode, noting that Piozzi has a 'fascination' with the art of improvisation. Attributing 'to Johnson "an almost Tuscan power of improvisation"', she compares him to the Florentines who refuse to allow their verses to be transcribed because, as they express

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<sup>134</sup> SJB/2001.55.251, 243, 244, 243, 143.

it, [...] translation would forfeit “what little glory they possess”<sup>135</sup>. In the margin at the bottom of the page, Piozzi adds her own translation:

Thus o'er the dangerous Gulph below  
Is Pleasure's slippery surface spread:  
On tender steps with Caution go,  
They soonest sink who boldest tread. H:L:P. **(Figure 1.5)**<sup>136</sup>

Though it is impossible to ascertain exactly how long Piozzi took to write her verse, it is clear that she values the improvisatory mode. Furthermore, Wendorf notes that as an annotator on the Reynolds biography, Piozzi is ‘spontaneous, unmediated’, and the annotations are often ‘expressed in the form of a running dialogue’.<sup>137</sup> Nevertheless, Piozzi’s addition is impressive. Not only does the quatrain seem loaded with meaning, conveyed through a darker, minatory, almost prophetic tone, but the verse is structured neatly and succinctly. One way of reading Piozzi’s marginal verse here would be to say that, similarly to the use of the manicule, she seeks to display her own literary talent. As such, Piozzi presents herself as not only well-placed but as artistically qualified to be Johnson’s biographer by matching the improvisatory talents of her mentor, thus writing back to detractors of *Anecdotes* and those who regarded Streatham as an unliterary site. Indeed, James L. Clifford argues that Piozzi’s marginalia collectively work to ‘provide the most unquestionable proof not only of the variety of her reading but her knowledge as well. They are the answer to those who have followed Boswell in sneering at both her intellect and her character’.<sup>138</sup> In addition, Piozzi implicitly suggests through this verse

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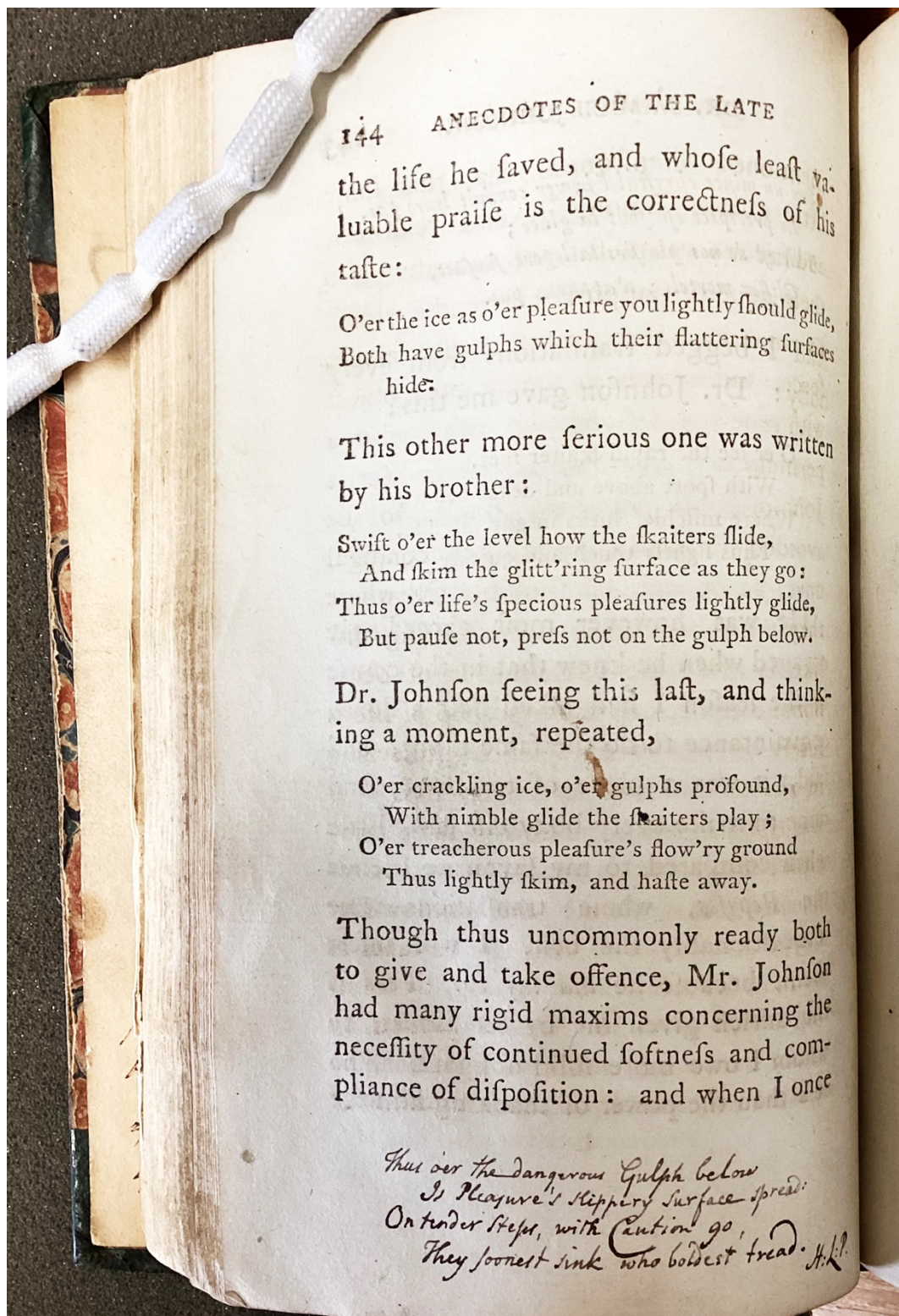
<sup>135</sup> Nussbaum, 61.

<sup>136</sup> SJB/2001.55.251, 144.

<sup>137</sup> Wendorf, “‘Well said Mr. Northcote’: Hester Thrale Piozzi’s annotated copy of James Northcote’s biography of Sir Joshua Reynolds”, *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 9 (1998), 29–40, 30.

<sup>138</sup> James L. Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs. Thrale)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 449.





the life he saved, and whose least valuable praise is the correctness of his taste:

O'er the ice as o'er pleasure you lightly should glide,  
Both have gulphs which their flattering surfaces  
hide:

This other more ferious one was written  
by his brother :

Swift o'er the level how the skaiters slide,  
And skim the glitt'ring surface as they go:  
Thus o'er life's specious pleasures lightly glide,  
But pause not, pres not on the gulph below.

Dr. Johnson seeing this last, and thinking  
a moment, repeated,

O'er crackling ice, o'er gulphs profound,  
With nimble glide the skaiters play ;  
O'er treacherous pleasure's flow'ry ground  
Thus lightly skim, and haste away.

Though thus uncommonly ready both  
to give and take offence, Mr. Johnson  
had many rigid maxims concerning the  
necessity of continued softness and com-  
pliance of disposition : and when I once

*Thus o'er the dangerous Gulph below  
In Pleasure's slippery surface spread:  
On tender steps, with Caution go,  
They soonest sink who boldest tread. H.L.P.*

Figure 1.5. Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: T. Cadell, 1786), 144, SJBM/2001.55.251. Annotations in Piozzi's hand.

that the improvisatory quality of the *Anecdotes* itself is skilful, and therefore her anecdotal selections are not mere celebrity gossip but a serious literary work. However, the presence of the verse itself is significant, suggesting that Piozzi too has something to contribute to this larger, collaborative translation process. The addition of the verse can also be read as an intellectual, yet affectionate, response to Johnson and the Pepyses, as they have inspired her to write her own verse translation. As such, in the margin, Piozzi moves from spectator to participant, establishing her writerly place in this creative network.

Piozzi's collaborative participation in the marginal space is most distinctly revealed by her addition of new anecdotes in the margins of *Anecdotes*. Prior to annotating *Anecdotes* and *Letters* in 1816, Piozzi had already begun adding Johnsonian anecdotes to her copy of Boswell's *Life*. Piozzi annotated the *Life* in 1808, and the four volumes are heavily marked with her commentary. Many of these marginalia either supply a new anecdote in response to the printed text or directly contest Boswell's account. Piozzi defends *Anecdotes* against the note in *Life* that claims 'Mrs. Piozzi has given a strange fantastical account of the original of Dr. Johnson's belief in our most holy religion'. Boswell continues, arguing that her account of Johnson's resolution to be a Christian is 'one of the numerous misrepresentations of this lively lady' and is 'childish, irrational, and ridiculous'. In short, the problem Boswell found with Piozzi's account of Johnson's early religious experiences was that they lack the rationality and maturity that might be expected in the development of such convictions. However, in the margin, Piozzi asserts that Johnson 'told me this himself; I did not dream it, & could not have invented it, or heard it from others. I will swear he told me as I told the Public, & swear it

(if they will) when in my last Moments' (**Figure 1.6**).<sup>139</sup> Piozzi corrects Boswell again, crossing out the printed text and amending it, noting that this 'was the way Johnson repeated it to me' (**Figure 1.7**). Taken together, in these annotations, Piozzi not only reasserts her relationship with Johnson but also highlights the anecdote's capacity as a fluid and subjective form of biography. Emphasising her interactions with Johnson, Piozzi positions her own version of events as the more authentic and personal record, reinforcing the anecdote's value as a form that captures the elusive nature of writing a life.

Elsewhere, Boswell's *Life* prompts her to recall new anecdotes. Boswell's mention of Hogarth, for instance, elicits Piozzi's memory of hearing 'Hogarth speak of Johnson when I was a Child, & I recollect his saying: That Man not only believes in the Bible but I think he believes nothing that is not in the Bible. I told Doctor Johnson that he said so, and Johnson laugh'd' (**Figure 1.8**). When Boswell recounts a conversation he had with Johnson in which he told him that Johnson's and Addison's styles of depicting character in biography could not 'differ more from each other', Piozzi recounts another conversation: 'I remember Dr. Johnson telling Doctor Burney that he made him his model of Style in the Journey to the Hebrides; but we only laughed, Thinking no Styles could resemble each other less than Johnson's and Burney's' (**Figure 1.9**). These marginalia underscore the convivial nature of their conversation and highlight Piozzi's intention to extend the biographical record. They also show Piozzi evaluating style, reminding the reader that such critical understanding is not beyond her learning. Piozzi's annotations to Boswell's *Life* signal the beginning of a broader project to document Johnsonian anecdotes across her books, and this endeavour is characterised by her presentation of her alternative perspective, rather than an intention to provide an authoritative version.

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<sup>139</sup> James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 4 vols (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1807), HOU/2003J-TP61, vol. 1, 45, 225, 123, 203.

I became capable of rational enquiry."<sup>2</sup> From this time forward religion was the predominant object of his thoughts; though, with the just sentiments of a conscientious christian, he lamented that his practice of its duties fell far short of what it ought to be.

This instance of a mind such as that of Johnson

<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Piozzi has given a strange fantastical account of the original of Dr. Johnson's belief in our most holy religion. "At the age of ten years his mind was disturbed by scruples of infidelity, which preyed upon his spirits, and made him very uneasy, the more so, as he revealed his uneasiness to none, being naturally (as he said) of a sullen temper, and reserved disposition. He searched, however, diligently, but fruitlessly, for evidences of the truth of revelation; and, at length, recollecting a book he had once seen [I suppose at five years old] in his father's shop, intitled *De veritate Religionis*, &c. he began to think himself highly culpable for neglecting such a means of information, and took himself severely to task for this sin, adding many acts of voluntary, and, to others, unknown penance. The first opportunity which offered, of course, he seized the book with avidity; but, on examination, not finding himself scholar enough to peruse its contents, set his heart at rest; and not thinking to enquire whether there were any English books written on the subject, followed his usual amusements and considered his conscience as lightened of a crime. He redoubled his diligence to learn the language that contained the information he most wished for; but from the pain which guilt [namely having omitted to read what he did not understand] had given him, he now began to deduce the soul's immortality, [a sensation of pain in this world being an unquestionable proof of existence in another] which was the point that belief first stopped at; and from that moment resolving to be a Christian, became one of the most zealous and pious ones our nation ever produced." Anecdotes, p. 17.

This is one of the numerous misrepresentations of this lively lady, which it is worth while to correct; for if credit should be given to such a childish, irrational, and ridiculous statement of the foundation of Dr. Johnson's faith in Christianity, how little credit would be due to it. Mrs. Piozzi seems to wish, that the world should think Dr. Johnson also under the influence of that easy logick, *Stet præ ratione voluntas*.

M<sup>rs</sup> Piozzi thought & knew that she was telling Truth

he told me this himself; I did not dream it, & could not have invented it, or heard it from others. I will swear he told me as I told the Public, & swear it (if they will) when in my last Moments, in 1808 they cannot be fraudulent.

Figure 1.6. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 4 vols (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1807), vol. 1, 45, HOU/2003J-TP61. Annotations in Piozzi's hand.

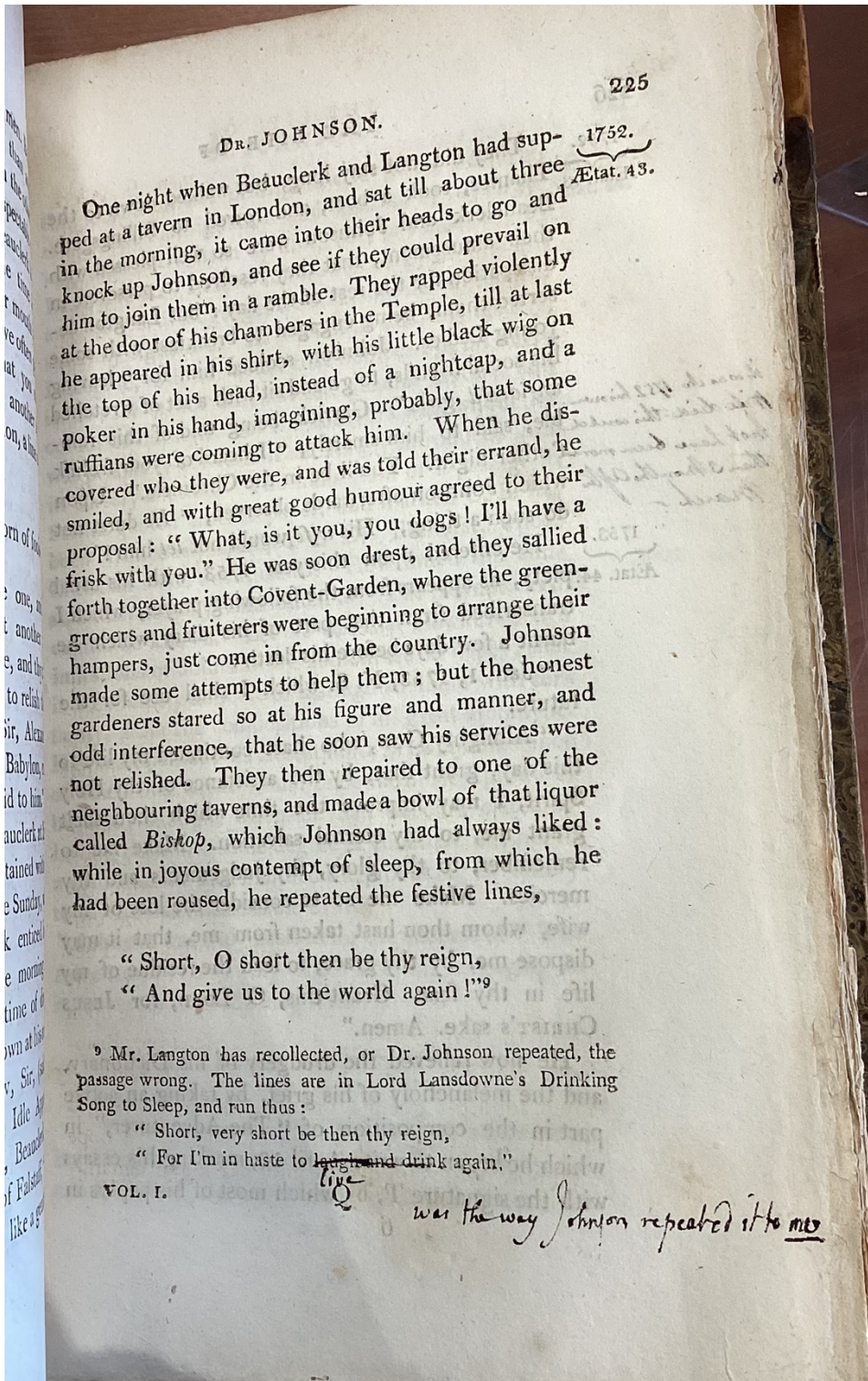


Figure 1.7. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 4 vols (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1807), vol. 1, 225, HOU/2003J-TP61. Annotation in Piozzi's hand.

to me by the same friend, from the relation of Mr. Hogarth. <sup>1739.</sup>  
Ætat. 30.

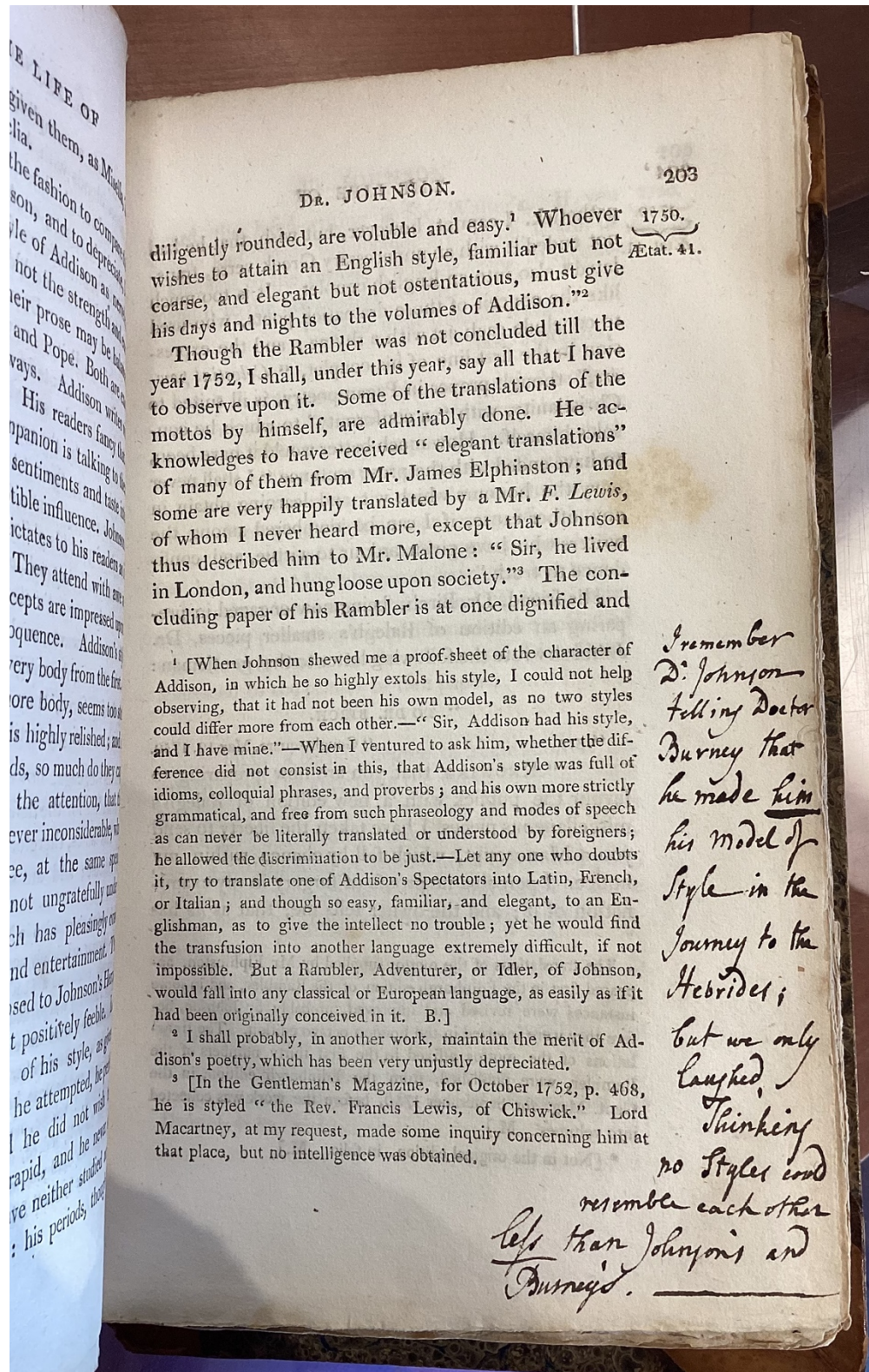
Johnson used to be a pretty frequent visitor at the house of Mr. Richardson, authour of Clarissa, and other novels of extensive reputation. Mr. Hogarth came one day to see Richardson, soon after the execution of Dr. Cameron, for having taken arms for the house of Stuart in 1745-6; and being a warm partisan of George the Second, he observed to Richardson, that certainly there must have been some very unfavourable circumstances lately discovered in this particular case, which had induced the King to approve of an execution for rebellion so long after the time when it was committed, as this had the appearance of putting a man to death in cold blood, and was very unlike his Majesty's usual clemency. While he was talking, he perceived a person standing at a window in the room, shaking his head, and rolling himself about in a strange ridiculous manner. He concluded that he was an idiot, whom his relations had put under the care of Mr. Richardson, as

<sup>7</sup> Impartial posterity may, perhaps, be as little inclined as Dr. Johnson was, to justify the uncommon rigour exercised in the case of Dr. Archibald Cameron. He was an amiable and truly honest man; and his offence was owing to a generous, though mistaken principle of duty. Being obliged, after 1746, to give up his profession as a physician, and to go into foreign parts, he was honoured with the rank of Colonel, both in the French and Spanish service. He was a son of the ancient and respectable family of Cameron, of Lochiel; and his brother, who was the Chief of that brave clan, distinguished himself by moderation and humanity, while the Highland army marched victorious through Scotland. It is remarkable of this Chief, that though he had earnestly remonstrated against the attempt as hopeless, he was of too heroick a spirit not to venture his life and fortune in the cause, when personally asked by him whom he thought his Prince.

*I have heard  
Hogarth speak  
of Johnson when  
I was a Child,  
& I recollect  
his saying: That  
Man not only  
believes in the  
Bible but I  
think he believ  
nothing that is  
not in the Bible.*

*I told Doctor  
Johnson that he  
said so, and  
Johnson laugh'd*

Figure 1.8. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 4 vols (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1807), vol. 1, 123, HOU/2003J-TP61. Annotation in Piozzi's hand.



diligently rounded, are voluble and easy.<sup>1</sup> Whoever wishes to attain an English style, familiar but not coarse, and elegant but not ostentatious, must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison.<sup>2</sup>

Though the Rambler was not concluded till the year 1752, I shall, under this year, say all that I have to observe upon it. Some of the translations of the mottoes by himself, are admirably done. He acknowledges to have received "elegant translations" of many of them from Mr. James Elphinston; and some are very happily translated by a Mr. F. Lewis, of whom I never heard more, except that Johnson thus described him to Mr. Malone: "Sir, he lived in London, and hung loose upon society."<sup>3</sup> The concluding paper of his Rambler is at once dignified and

<sup>1</sup> [When Johnson shewed me a proof-sheet of the character of Addison, in which he so highly extols his style, I could not help observing, that it had not been his own model, as no two styles could differ more from each other.—"Sir, Addison had his style, and I have mine."—When I ventured to ask him, whether the difference did not consist in this, that Addison's style was full of idioms, colloquial phrases, and proverbs; and his own more strictly grammatical, and free from such phraseology and modes of speech as can never be literally translated or understood by foreigners; he allowed the discrimination to be just.—Let any one who doubts it, try to translate one of Addison's Spectators into Latin, French, or Italian; and though so easy, familiar, and elegant, to an Englishman, as to give the intellect no trouble; yet he would find the transfusion into another language extremely difficult, if not impossible. But a Rambler, Adventurer, or Idler, of Johnson, would fall into any classical or European language, as easily as if it had been originally conceived in it. B.]

<sup>2</sup> I shall probably, in another work, maintain the merit of Addison's poetry, which has been very unjustly depreciated.

<sup>3</sup> [In the Gentleman's Magazine, for October 1752, p. 468, he is styled "the Rev. Francis Lewis, of Chiswick." Lord Macartney, at my request, made some inquiry concerning him at that place, but no intelligence was obtained.

1750.  
Ætat. 41.

Remember  
D. Johnson  
telling Doctor  
Burney that  
he made him  
his model of  
Style in the  
Journey to the  
Hebrides;  
but we only  
laughed,  
Thinking  
no Styles could  
resemble each other  
less than Johnson's and  
Burney's.

Figure 1.9. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 4 vols (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1807), vol. 1, 203, HOU/2003J-TP61. Annotation in Piozzi's hand.

The nature of anecdotes – as fluid, episodic, and subject to continual re-evaluation – accords with Piozzi’s approach of ongoing revision and addition. Her project continued beyond the annotation of *Anecdotes* and *Letters*; Piozzi also added additional anecdotes when she re-read Johnson’s *Rasselas* (1759) in 1818. Some of Piozzi’s annotations draw connections between Johnson and his protagonist, Imlac; one instance occurs whereby Piozzi notes that Johnson ‘meant Imlac as his own Representative to his own Feelings’. Many of the annotations are Johnsonian anecdotes and one even directs the reader back to her own *Anecdotes*: ‘& Johnson delighted in such Speculative Calculations . . . . see H. L: Piozzi’s Anecdotes —’.<sup>140</sup> This demonstrates Piozzi’s commitment to capturing Johnson’s talk through an evolving project of life-writing, reflecting the ephemeral nature of conversation, the marginalia continuing the premises of the published *Anecdotes*.

Piozzi’s presence as an interlocutor in *Anecdotes* is emphasised in the marginalia to her copy of that work. One such example is delivered when, in the print original, Piozzi comments on the conversational quality of Johnson’s writing and aligns his conversation with the substance of his literary output. In a rare critical perspective on Johnson’s literary output, Piozzi argues that *The Rambler* ‘breathes the genuine emanations of its great author’s mind’. Piozzi claims that the genius the reader witnesses in Johnson’s periodical reflects Johnson’s actual, corporeal genius. In the margin, Piozzi notes her first-hand witnessing of this, recalling how ‘we used to say to one another familiarly at Streatham Park, Come; let’s go into the Library, & make Johnson speak Ramblers’. This can be seen as a revision to the print text, as Piozzi inserts herself into the passage through the reference to Streatham Park, reinforcing her claim to the authenticity of *Anecdotes*. By inserting herself into the text through this anecdote, Piozzi not only underscores her

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<sup>140</sup> Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia: A Tale* (London: John Sharpe, 1818), HOU/GEN/EC75.P6598.Zz818j, 49, 55. For a more extensive discussion of Piozzi’s annotations in her copy of *Rasselas*, see Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books*, 102-112.



intimate perspective of Johnson's 'genius' but strengthens her authority as a witness to it. The annotation also works as an invitation to the reader to listen back to Johnson and witness the wider group, and the relationships they forged through talk, which is reminiscent of Piozzi's invitation to the reader in the preface to wait in the portico before being 'admitted to the family within'.

Similar to the annotations in to Boswell's *Life*, the marginal space in *Anecdotes* is a platform on which Piozzi reinforces a conversational mode characterised by convivial openness, contrasting with the competitive 'talking for victory' witnessed in the clubbable sociability depicted in other *Lives*. This approach invites other voices to participate and enrich the narrative. The marginalia itself are an extension of this conversation. In his study of Piozzi's marginalia, Percival Merritt reflected that 'it would seem as if she must have written exactly as she talked', because her manuscript notes 'give the reader the sensation of visualising her habits of speech and thought'.<sup>141</sup> In the margin, conversational exchange goes beyond that of Streatham Park, as the margins are opened up to a wider sociable network. Piozzi recalls Johnson's praise of the poet Isaac Hawkins Browne's conversational qualities. In the margin, however, Piozzi adds her own thoughts on Browne: Hawkins Browne 'who wrote the Imitation of all the Poets – in his own ludicrous Verses praising a pipe of Tobacco'. In addition to her own aside, Piozzi recalls an anecdote from Mrs Choldmondeley:

of Hawkins Browne the pretty Mrs. Choldmondeley said she was soon tir'd because the first Hour he was so dull there was no bearing him, The second he was so witty there was no bearing him; And the third he was so drunk there was no bearing him (**Figure 1.10**).<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Merritt, *Piozzi Marginalia*, 49-50.

<sup>142</sup> SJB/2001.55.251, 304, 304, v, 173, 173. Mary Choldmondeley was a London socialite who regularly convened with Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, Charles Burney, and Johnson.

was however no enemy to that sort of talk from the famous Mr. Foote, " whose happiness of manner in relating was such (he said) as subdued arrogance and roused stupidity: His stories were truly like those of Biron in Love's Labour Lost, so very attractive

That aged ears play'd truant with his tales,  
And younger hearings were quite ravish'd,  
So sweet and voluble was his discourse.

Of all conversers however (added he), the late Hawkins Browne was the most delightful with whom I ever was in company: his talk was at once so elegant, so apparently artless, so pure, and so pleasing, it seem'd a perpetual stream of sentiment, enlivened by gaiety, and sparkling with images." When I asked Dr. Johnson, who was the *best* man he had ever known? " Pfalmanazar," was the unexpected reply: he said, likewise, " that though a native of France, as his friend imagined, he possessed more of the English language, than any one of

*Who wrote the imitation of all the best English Verse praising the style of Voltaire? in his own.*  
*Of Hawkins Browne the brother Mr. Cadmonley said because the first hour he was so dull that was no hearing him, the second he was so witty that was no hearing him, and the 3<sup>d</sup> he was so drunk that was no hearing him.*

Figure 1.10. Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: T. Cadell, 1786), 173, SJB/M/2001.55.251. Annotations in Piozzi's hand.

While the anecdote is ostensibly insignificant because it does not disclose any information strictly about Johnson, it serves to emulate the voices and conversation surrounding that life. Crucially, adding scribal anecdotes to *Anecdotes* disrupts any notion of the printed text as a final, authoritative version. Joel Fineman's observation is particularly astute here considering Piozzi's aim to present a nuanced *Life*: 'anecdote [is a] genre that works to both break apart and to build up grand narratives of history in a potentially endless cycle'.<sup>143</sup> The inclusion of voices and invitations to participate in the marginal anecdotes encourages an ongoing process of sharing and re-writing through which to remember Johnson. In summary, it appears there is a dual purpose at play in Piozzi's annotations of her *Anecdotes*. On one hand, Piozzi is safeguarding and defending her reputation to posterity. On the other, Piozzi brings forth the collaborative network of writerly relations of which she was an active part. These two purposes are, however, interconnected, as Piozzi attempts, in the margin, to consolidate her legacy as an innovative writer working within, and influenced by, a collaborative space.

However, in Piozzi's marginalia to *Letters*, that network gives way to a foregrounding of Piozzi's and Johnson's literary mentorship, which is emphasised most prominently in anecdotal evidence of their shared reading. Piozzi brings her reader back to a more intimate relationship, focussing on her literary identity as a reader rather than her role as Johnson's caretaker, as presented in the 1786 *Anecdotes*. Piozzi gains power through the act of re-reading *Anecdotes* itself. Manicules are one marginal feature of her re-reading that Piozzi deploys throughout the edition to defend, and lay claim to, her biographical method and authorial status. By 1816, manicules were a well-established method of annotation. Sherman suggests that though the practice becomes less common

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<sup>143</sup> Joel Fineman, 'The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction', 61, cited in Wood, *Anecdotes of Enlightenment*, 18.

in the eighteenth century, they are still a powerful symbol because ‘they have an uncanny power to conjure up the bodies of dead writers and readers’.<sup>144</sup> Manicules are a gesticulative symbol, thus giving an impression of the reader’s somatic presence and in this way, adding one is a deeply personal action. This is certainly true of Piozzi, as she takes care to detail the cuff of her sleeve. Though there are only six instances in this copy, their rarity amplifies their significance; they work not only to give the reader, Fellowes in the first instance, an impression of the annotator but also to emphasise Piozzi’s own presence within the text, reinforcing her dual identity as both narrator and participant. One manicule, for example, sees Piozzi pointing to ‘the writing of these anecdotes’, while in another she points to a reference to Hogarth’s ‘The Lady’s last Stake’, implicitly claiming herself to be the woman the painting was rumoured to be modelled on (**Figure 1.11**).<sup>145</sup> While the manicules ‘conjure up’ Piozzi to the present-day reader of the marginalia, they were perhaps even more powerful at the time of Piozzi’s re-reading and re-writing. In her discussion of Laurence Sterne’s use of the printed manicule in *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), Helen Williams suggests that Sterne ‘uses the image of the hand during episodes addressing issues of literary property, where it expresses his fear of an unknowable and therefore uncontrollable response to his own work’. Similarly, Piozzi’s use of manicules reflects her concerns about her posterity based on the detractors of *Anecdotes*, as she attempts to control the critical response through a biography of her own life. For Piozzi, as for Sterne, ‘reading, like writing, functions as a haptic and therefore empowering experience, and annotation is a profoundly subversive act’, since she becomes reader of the *Anecdotes*, who, by ‘handling the printed text’, ‘gains control over the author’s work’ as they ‘may read particular sections out of context or place emphasis

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<sup>144</sup> Sherman, 29.

<sup>145</sup> SJB/2001.55.251, 162, 137.

interesting now only because they were his. As he made all his talents, however, subservient to the great purposes of morality, and the earnest desire he had to mend mankind, his discourse commonly ended in an ethical dissertation, and a serious charge to me, never to forget his picture of the *Lady's last Stake*.

Of Dr. Johnson, when my father and he were talking together about him one day: That man (says Hogarth) is not contented with believing the Bible, but he fairly resolves, I think, to believe nothing *but* the Bible. Johnson (added he), though so wise a fellow, is more like king David than king Solomon; for he says in his haste that all men are liars. This charge, as I afterwards came to know, was but too well founded: Mr. Johnson's incredulity amounted almost to disease, and I have seen it mortify his companions exceedingly. But the truth is, Mr. Thrale had a very powerful influence over the



Figure 1.11. Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: T. Cadell, 1786), 137, SJB/2001.55.251. Annotation in Piozzi's hand.

on passages of their own choosing'.<sup>146</sup> By adding the marginalia, Piozzi not only attempts to 'gain control' but also reassert her presence in the narrative and biographical authority. Through these gestures, Piozzi highlights her identity as a reader to gain this authority, much like Seward did in her biography of Erasmus Darwin to gain credibility, as we will see in Chapter Two.

Piozzi anchors her extended anecdotes to a literary mentorship with Johnson, which acknowledges his influence in order to arrogate literary authority to herself. The marginalia in *Letters* not only differs from that in sentiment, but it also details a record of Piozzi's shared reading with Johnson, which exposes a more intimate sociability between the writers. In *Anecdotes*, Piozzi recalls that Johnson

had sometimes fits of reading very violent; and when he was in earnest about getting through some particular pages, for I have heard him say he never read but one book, which he did not consider as obligatory, through in his whole life (and Lady Mary Wortley's Letters was the book); he would be quite lost to company, and withdraw all his attention to what he was reading, without the smallest knowledge or care about the noise made round him.<sup>147</sup>

The act of reading, for Johnson, is often an aggressively anti-social one. As Abigail Williams notes, 'Johnson took reading matter with him to dinner, sitting at the table with his book wrapped up in the tablecloth or in his lap, where [...] it formed a bulwark against talking and engaging with others' (**Figure 1.12**).<sup>148</sup> All acts of reading recorded in *Anecdotes* show Johnson reading alone, and they are never depicted as acts of serious study, often instead taking a comic turn. As a child reading *Hamlet* 'quietly in his father's kitchen', Johnson 'kept on steadily enough, till coming to the Ghost scene, he suddenly

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<sup>146</sup> Helen Williams, *Laurence Sterne and the Eighteenth-Century Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 24.

<sup>147</sup> *Anecdotes*, 259.

<sup>148</sup> Abigail Williams, *The Social Life of Books* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 83.

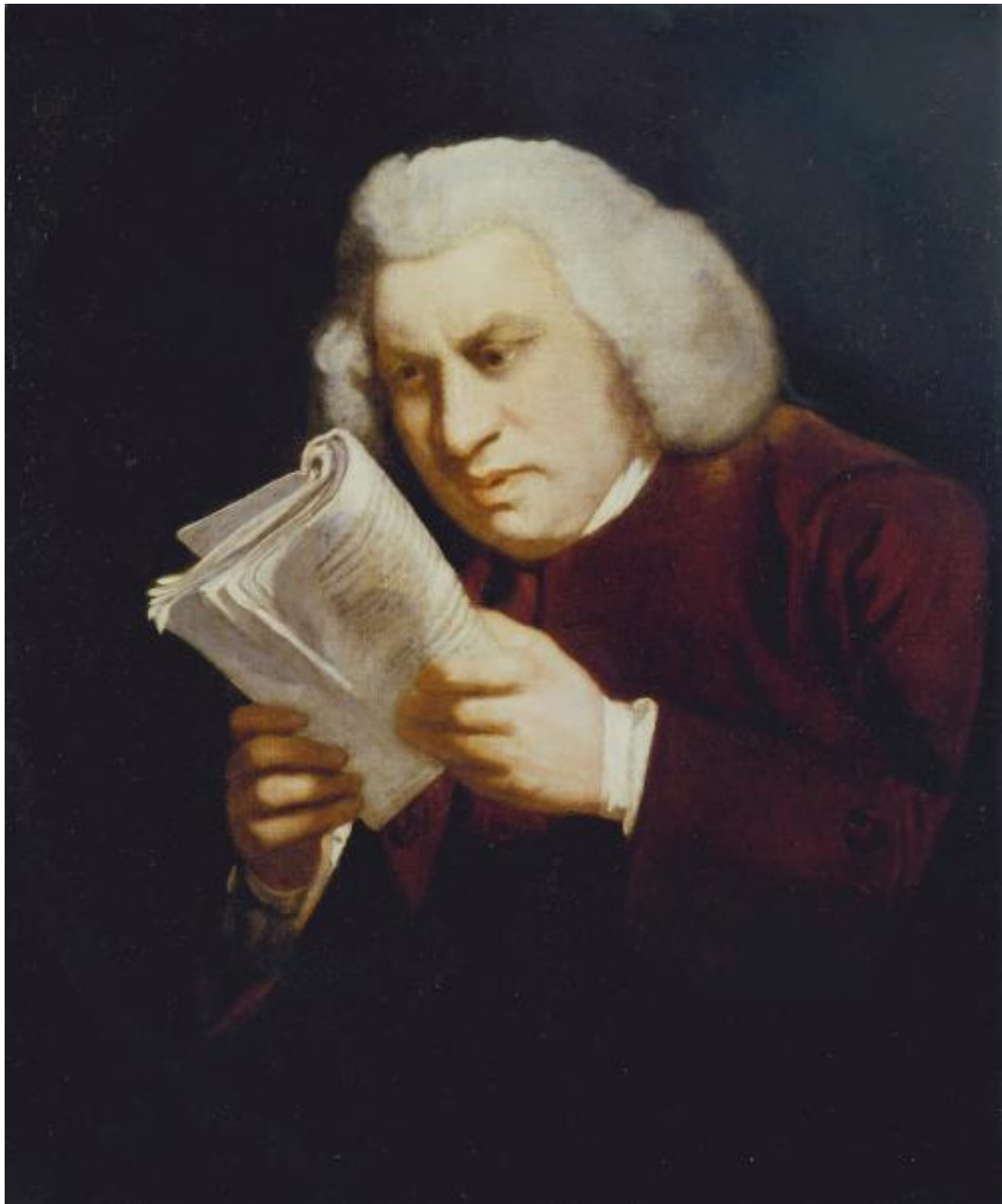
hurried up stairs to the street door that he might see people about him'. At Streatham, Johnson's 'constant custom' was 'reading a-bed'.<sup>149</sup>

However, Piozzi's *Letters* supply evidence for alternative acts of shared reading and literary discourse. Piozzi's marginalia in the volumes work to emphasise these instances of social reading. The second volume covers correspondence written between 1777 and 1783, and largely recounts domestic and mundane activity. Yet, they are also a literary correspondence, documenting literary sociability through a shared reading demonstrated by Johnson's record of his reading, literary criticism, book recommendations, and evidence of sharing books. Piozzi's marginalia also highlight a more subtle engagement with literature in the letters. Johnson often expresses sentiment through citation of verse. For instance, in 1780, Johnson writes to Piozzi stating, 'I am sorry you have seen Mrs. W-'. In her copy, Piozzi writes that this is Mrs 'Walmesley' **(Figure 1.13)**. Magdalen Aston Walmsley married Gilbert Walmsley in 1736. Johnson goes on to explain that 'she and her husband exhibited two very different appearances of human nature. But busy, busy, still art thou. He prevailed on himself to treat her with great tenderness; and to show how little sense will serve for common life, she has passed through the world with less imprudence than any of her family'.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> *Anecdotes*, 20, 237.

<sup>150</sup> SJB/2001.55.111.2, 105.



**Figure 1.12.** Joshua Reynolds, 'Portrait of Samuel Johnson ("Blinking Sam")' (1775), HUN/2006.22.



DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON. 105

Pray, of what wonders do you tell me? You make verses, and they are read in publick, and I know nothing about them. This very crime, I think, broke the link of amity between Richardson and Miss M<sup>also</sup>, after a tenderness and confidence of many years. However, you must do a great deal more before I leave you for Lucan or Montague, or any other charmer; if any other charmer would have me.

I am sorry that you have seen Mrs. W<sup>almerley</sup>, She and her husband exhibited two very different appearances of human nature. But *Aluding to Thomson's Verses.* busy, busy, still art thou! He prevailed on himself to treat her with great tenderness; and to show how little sense will serve for common life; she has passed through the world with less imprudence than any of her family.

Sir Philip's bill has been rejected by the Lords. There was, I think, nothing to be objected to it, but the time at which it was proposed, and the intention with which it was

*against the Contractors.*

*For being busy with art thou  
to win the prize, which you;  
The heart from pleasure to relate  
And join the gentle to the rude.*

Figure 1.13. Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Letters to and from the late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, 2 vols (London: T. Cadell, 1788), vol. 2, 105, SJBM/2001.55.111.2. Annotations in Piozzi's hand.

Magdalen's family had a reputation for such behaviour, and Anna Seward's account of Elizabeth Aston shows her to be more imprudent than her sister. Writing to Boswell in 1785, Seward recounts a conversation between herself and Johnson 'on the subject of Mrs Elizabeth Aston of Stowe Hill'. Though 'in her youth, a very beautiful woman', Elizabeth had 'all the censoriousness and spiteful spleen of a very bad temper'. According to Seward, it was 'well known, that Mr. Walmsley was considerably governed by this lady'. Johnson conceded that 'Aston obtained absolute dominion over his will [...] Walmsley was a man; and there is no man who can resist the repeated attacks of a furious woman. Walmsley had no alternative but to submit, or turn her out of doors'.<sup>151</sup> In the letter, Johnson's citation 'busy, busy, still art thou', is confirmed by Piozzi in the left-hand margin as 'alluding to Thomson's Verses'. Next to the paragraph, in the right-hand margin, Piozzi provides the rest of stanza:

For busy busy Still art thou  
 To join the joyless, luckless Vow;  
 The Heart from Pleasure to delude  
 And join the Gentle to the Rude.<sup>152</sup>

In Thomson's 'Song', addressed to Fortune, the speaker laments that Fortune is 'an unrelenting foe to love' and, praying to Fortune, vows to resign 'all other blessings' to 'make but the dear *Amanda* mine'.<sup>153</sup> Johnson takes up the speaker's complaint to Fortune to indicate to Piozzi that Walmsley and Magdalen are one such example of 'the Gentle' being joined 'to the Rude'. Johnson's reference to Thomson assumes Piozzi's knowledge,

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<sup>151</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, 40-42.

<sup>152</sup> SJB/2001.55.111.2, 105, 105. In Millar's edition of Thomson's *Works*, the stanza reads:

But busy busy still art thou,  
 To bind the loveless joyless vow,  
 The heart from pleasure to delude,  
 To join the gentle to the rude.

See *The Works of James Thomson*, 4 vols (London: A. Millar, 1765[?]), vol. 2, 229.

<sup>153</sup> *The Works of James Thomson*, 229.

which she confirms in her marginalia. This literary knowledge exchanged via personal correspondence is decoded in the margins of *Letters* to highlight the intellectual nature of their communication. This marginalia demonstrates Piozzi's role as a significant interlocutor in literary conversation surrounding Johnson, reinforcing her authority and intimate understanding of his life and works through her annotations.

Johnson and Piozzi's literary sociability is also shared more literally in the documented exchange of books. *Letters*, and the marginalia Piozzi added to it, trace the physical exchange of books (primarily) between Johnson and Piozzi and includes Johnson's correspondence with Hill Boothby from 1755, which Piozzi obtained from Seward.<sup>154</sup> Writing to Boothby in December 1755, Johnson writes, 'I beg you to return the book when you have looked into it. I should not have written what is in the margin, had I not had it from you, or had I not intended to shew it you'.<sup>155</sup> The purpose of Johnson's copious reading was, Lynda Mugglestone shows, to gather words for his *Dictionary*, and 'the books Johnson read for the *Dictionary* were [...] irrevocably changed by the experience'.<sup>156</sup> Indeed, Hawkins also notes that, for his *Dictionary* reading, Johnson used books from 'his own collection', as well as 'all such as he could borrow; which latter, if ever they came back to those that lent them, were so defaced as to be scarce worth owning'.<sup>157</sup> Piozzi claims the book in question in the letter to Boothby 'was Law's Serious Call'. It is probable that Piozzi assumes it is William Law's *A Serious Call to the Devout and Holy Life* (1729) because it was widely considered to be an influential work for Johnson. Boswell's *Life* features an anecdote concerning the book: at Oxford, Johnson

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<sup>154</sup> See Teresa Barnard, *Anna Seward: A Constructed Life: A Critical Biography* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 140.

<sup>155</sup> SJB/2001.55.111.2, 396.

<sup>156</sup> Lynda Mugglestone, *Samuel Johnson & the Journey into Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 62.

<sup>157</sup> Hawkins, *Life*, 175.

took up Law's *Serious Call to a Holy Life*, expecting to find it a dull book, (as such books generally are), and perhaps to laugh at it. But I found Law quite an overmatch for me; and this was the first occasion of my thinking in earnest of religion, after I became capable of rational inquiry.<sup>158</sup>

Balderston admits 'Mrs. Thrale was the only person I know of in his [Johnson's] own day who suspected a real debt to Law in his writings'.<sup>159</sup> In an entry in *Thraliana* in 1780, Piozzi had written that *Serious Call* is 'a fine Book', and that Johnson 'has however studied it hard I am sure, & many Ramblers apparently took their Rise from that little Volume, as the Nile flows majestically from a Source difficult to be discovered or even discerned'.<sup>160</sup> Here, Piozzi recalls the preface to *Anecdotes*, in which she lauds Johnson's erudition, claiming that his genius was not acquired 'by long or profound study: nor can I think those characters the greatest which have most learning driven into their heads, any more than I can persuade myself to consider the River Jenisca as superior to the Nile'. Piozzi elaborates on her analogy: the Jenisca, 'receives near seventy tributary streams in the course of its unmarked progress to the sea, while the great parent of African plenty, flowing from an almost invisible source, and unenriched by any extraneous waters, except eleven nameless rivers, pours his majestic torrent into the ocean by seven celebrated mouths'.<sup>161</sup> In the margin, Piozzi reiterates her profession to know Johnson intimately enough that she understands the source of his literary genius.

However, what is most significant, is the contrast in the way that Johnson shares books with Boothby in comparison to Piozzi. The letters between Johnson and Boothby

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<sup>158</sup> *BLJ*, 43.

<sup>159</sup> Katharine C. Balderston, 'Doctor Johnson and William Law', *PMLA*, 75 (1960), 382-394, 382.

<sup>160</sup> *Thraliana*, vol. 1, 421. Allen Reddick discusses Johnson's use of William Law's works in *The Making of Johnson's Dictionary, 1746-1773* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). For Law's influence on Johnson, see Robert DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 129-137.

<sup>161</sup> *Anecdotes*, vii.

present evidence of shared reading, which is extended in their reciprocal discussions and debates concerning literature via correspondence. Johnson and Piozzi's correspondence, however, shows Johnson adopting a paternalism in his directing of Piozzi's reading. This paternalistic mentorship is particularly evident in Johnson's criticism of travel writing. McCarthy states that travel writing in the period 'was so intensely cultivated, criticism of it [...] had grown demanding and fastidious'. Johnson was, McCarthy continues, 'one of the most severe critics' of the genre.<sup>162</sup> Indeed, in a letter to Piozzi written in 1773, Johnson writes,

you have often heard me complain of finding myself disappointed by books of travels; I am afraid travel itself will end likewise in disappointment. One town, one country, is very like another: civilized nations have the same customs, and barbarous nations have the same nature: there are indeed minute discriminations both of places and of manners, which perhaps are not wanting of curiosity, but which a traveller seldom stays long enough to investigate and compare. The dull utterly neglect them, the acute see a little, and supply the rest with fancy and conjecture.<sup>163</sup>

In 1775, Johnson directs Piozzi to, 'not buy /Chandlers\ travels, they are duller than /Twiss\'s. /Watkins\ is too fond of words, but you may read him. I shall take care that Adair's account of America may be sent to you, for I shall have it of my own' (**Figure 1.14**).<sup>164</sup> While Piozzi simply appears to be filling in the titles of books in her interlinear annotations on this page, this act in itself identifies her as a beneficiary of Johnson's refined taste in travel writing. Her supplying of this information amplifies her presence as a recipient of not only of those letters, but of Johnson's recommended reading.

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<sup>162</sup> McCarthy, 149, 149.

<sup>163</sup> *LSJ*, vol. 1, 107.

<sup>164</sup> SJBM/2001.55.111.1, 221.

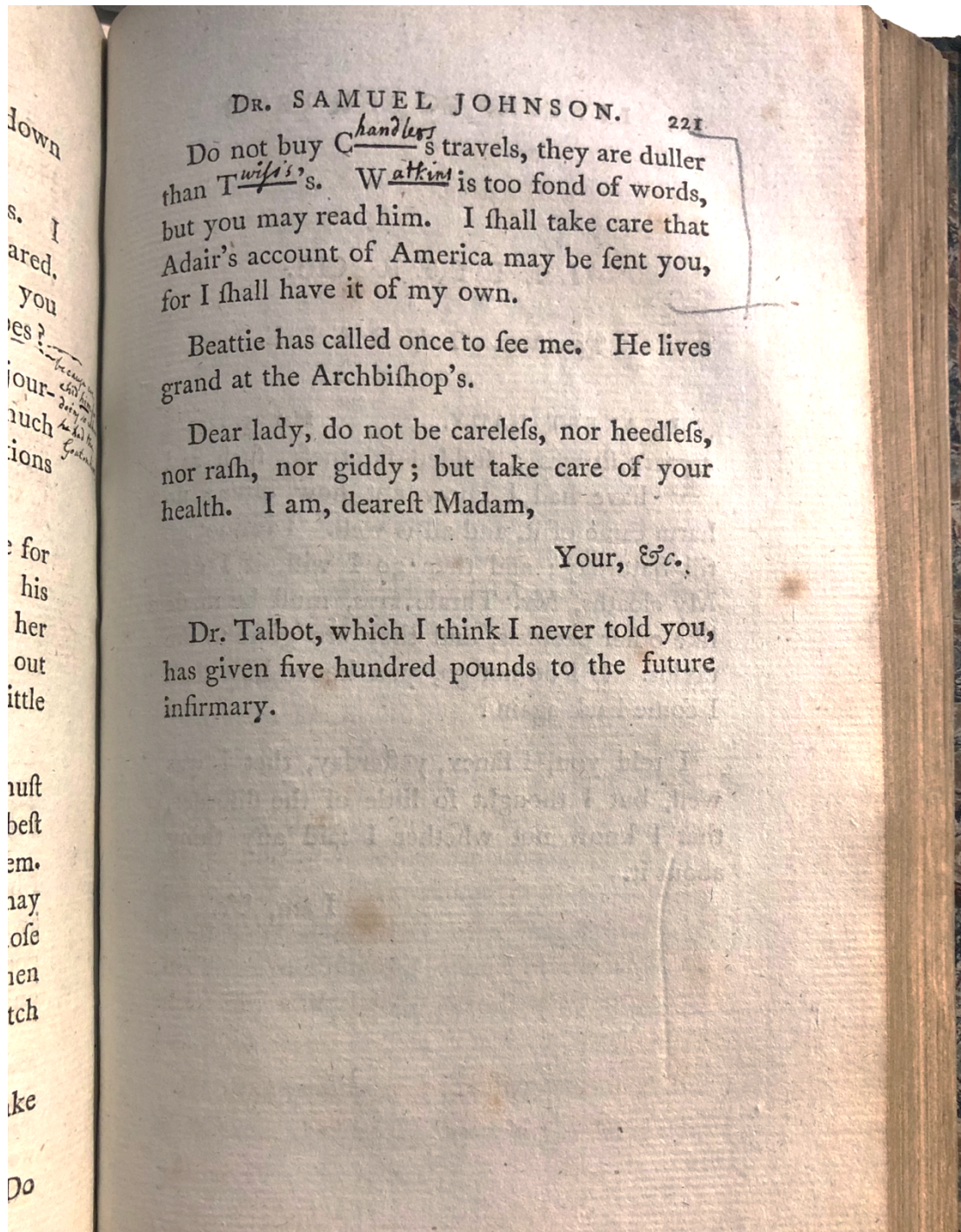


Figure 1.14. Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Letters to and from the late Samuel Johnson, LL. D.*, 2 vols (London: T. Cadell, 1788), vol. 1, 221, SJBM/2001.55.111.1. Annotations in Piozzi's hand.

Piozzi's welcoming of a paternalistic view of Johnson's mentorship of her in the margins becomes a way to reclaim authority: it delineates their relationship as a literary one, overlooked by those early biographies.

This chapter has demonstrated that Piozzi's focus on intimate, domestic, and personal details provided a nuanced and humanising portrayal of Johnson, which contrasted with early *Lives* that adopted a more formal approach to public biography. In emphasising her domestic perspective and privileged access to Johnsonian anecdotes, Piozzi feminised the role of the biographer. This approach aligned with broader cultural trends that valued private, emotional, and moral insight over public accomplishments. Her portrayal also highlights the significance of domestic spaces in fostering intellectual exchange. This chapter has also challenged the dominant focus on not only canonical biographies (such as Boswell's *Life*) but print texts by assessing Piozzi's marginalia in her annotated copies of *Anecdotes* and *Letters*. These marginalia not only serve to defend her biographical method and assert her literary authority but function as acts of life-writing themselves: they extend the biographical record beyond the print text and emphasise her own identity as a writer and intellectual. The annotations reveal both her ongoing engagement with recording Johnson's life and her efforts to secure her own legacy as a literary figure. By highlighting her literary mentorship by Johnson in annotations that record their shared reading and intellectual exchange, Piozzi underscores her authority as Johnson's biographer and her place within his literary network, which risked being overlooked.

Through her presentation of a more intimate, intellectual conversation in *Anecdotes* and the marginalia, Piozzi establishes her place in literary culture, challenging traditional, patriarchal modes of biographical narration. By drawing on gendered modes of storytelling that emphasise personal insight, she diverges from more

removed, public accounts that lack the depth of an intimate relationship between biographer and subject. What matters, then, is not necessarily *who* wrote these accounts, but *how* they wrote them. Piozzi's narrative style, shaped by her close relationship with Johnson, lends an authoritative voice to her portrayal of him, suggesting that it is the method of narration, rather than the biographer's identity, that grants a more nuanced and legitimate understanding of her subject. In this way, she redefines the boundaries of literary biography, demonstrating that authority can emerge from intimate, gendered modes of narrating a life. The following chapter turns to Anna Seward, who navigates a more fraught relationship with gender and authority in her biography of Erasmus Darwin.



## Chapter 2

### Marginalia to *Memoir*: Anna Seward's Critical Biography

'His wit is brilliant, his genius considerable, but he is the most decisive, and the oftenest mistaken critic I know, his fine abilities considered', complained Anna Seward in a 1787 letter to Helen Maria Williams.<sup>1</sup> Seward was discussing the writer and politician George Hardinge's literary criticism.<sup>2</sup> A letter written earlier, in 1786, to Hardinge himself reveals Seward's complaint is a longstanding one, as she accuses him of not studying 'poetic composition scientifically'.<sup>3</sup> The first volume of Archibald Constable's *Letters of Anna Seward* (1811) portrays the recently deceased Seward, who was already an established poet with a national reputation, as an authority on poetic composition and an emerging literary critic at the time the letters were composed. Throughout *Letters*, which she selected for posthumous publication, Seward presents her critical practice in opposition to that of Hardinge. Assuring both the original recipient and the later reader of her literary critical abilities, Seward provides attentive close readings of texts, and her critical commentary is founded on providing the 'scientific' analyses that apparently elude Hardinge. Furthermore, Seward's situating her detailed literary criticism in relation to her reading aims to convince the reader of her extensive literary knowledge. As Claudia Thomas Kairoff notes, 'Seward regarded herself as an experienced practicing poet, an identity frequently on display in her correspondence'.<sup>4</sup> Teresa Barnard goes on to state that Seward 'emphasised her considerable knowledge of the English poets in order to stand level with her male contemporaries'.<sup>5</sup> Rather than focusing on Seward's identity as

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<sup>1</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, 397.

<sup>2</sup> Constable includes their correspondence between 1786-1796 in *Letters*. The content of their correspondence has been characterised by Claudia Thomas Kairoff as literary, and she notes that Seward often used this connection to promote poetry by her 'various protégés'. See Kairoff, *Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 60.

<sup>3</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, 211.

<sup>4</sup> Kairoff, 60.

<sup>5</sup> Teresa Barnard, *Anna Seward: A Constructed Life* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 21.

a poet, here, I consider Seward primarily as a reader, and through an analysis of her marginalia and literary correspondence, this chapter shows that her practice as a consumer and critic of literature informed her authoritative treatment of Darwin when she came to write *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin* (1804).<sup>6</sup>

The first two parts of this chapter explore Seward's reading practices and identify the tenets of her literary criticism. The chapter shows that Seward's methodology for analysing poetry is grounded in her own identity as an intellectual reader; through a study of her marginalia in books, some of which were annotated around fifty years before the publication of *Memoirs*, and her literary correspondence, I show that Seward's detailed critiques of literature explicate her shift from being a reader to becoming a writer. Continuing with this study of Seward's literary criticism, the chapter proceeds to demonstrate that Seward eschews a Johnsonian mode of criticism that is fixed and reflexive in favour of critical positions that are more provisional, negotiated, and considered. Her critical position, sitting between Augustan and Romantic outlooks, amounts to a disavowal of a Johnsonian mode of criticism. I contend that Seward's literary criticism, which is marked by an assertive independence of critical judgement, indicates a more conscious and even rebarbative self-styling. This literary persona, one that arrogates to itself originality by rejecting influence, develops from her marginalia, through letters, and to the published biography. The final part of Chapter Two produces a reading of *Memoirs*, which shows that Seward sought to develop the role of the literary biographer as an arbiter of literary taste and judgement. Like Piozzi, Seward exploits her personal relationship to Darwin to provide original insights about his life. However, while Piozzi revised *Anecdotes* and *Letters* to supply evidence of her own literary knowledge

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<sup>6</sup> Seward, *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin* (London: J. Johnson, 1804). All further references are made to the modern critical edition: Philip K. Wilson, Elizabeth A. Dolan, and Malcolm Dick (eds.), *Anna Seward's Life of Erasmus Darwin* (Studley: Brewin Books, 2010).

and sociability with Johnson and thereby secure authority, in *Memoirs*, Seward does this from the outset, leveraging her reputation as a professional author to assess Darwin's literary output and use that assessment to generate insight into his character.

### Reading and Epistolary Sociability

Seward read extensively across literary genres and periods. In this sense, her programme of reading exemplifies the reading Johnson endorses (that which includes 'modern books' and 'the best works of antiquity').<sup>7</sup> Seward selected contemporary literature based upon favourable reviews. She tells William Hayley, for instance, that she purchased William Cowper's *The Task* (1785) because of the recent attention it had attracted.<sup>8</sup> A letter written in February 1792 records that Seward read Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which had only been published the previous month.<sup>9</sup> Though Seward receives new literature somewhat quickly for a woman living in a provincial town, in a letter to Piozzi she complains that, though she has ordered Della Crusca's (Robert Merry) new poem, *Diversity* (1788), upon Piozzi's recommendation, her bookseller 'is often a tedious while before he procures my commission'.<sup>10</sup> She was also familiar with the works of ancient and early modern poets, including 'Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, and Virgil'.<sup>11</sup> Seward's reading, which includes poetry, drama, novels, essays, and biography, is in evidence throughout the six volumes of her *Letters* and in the margins of the books she owned, in which she draws intertextual connections and makes references to her wider reading. However, after her death, Seward's books, among her other household effects, were sold at 'public auction to discharge any small remaining debts and for funeral

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<sup>7</sup> *BLJ*, 703.

<sup>8</sup> Seward to William Hayley, 27 December 1785, HOU/MS Eng 1255.

<sup>9</sup> *LAS*, vol. 3, 117.

<sup>10</sup> Seward to Piozzi, 15 February 1789, JRL/GB133/Eng MS 565/7.

<sup>11</sup> *LAS*, vol. 3, 373.

expenses'.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, beyond her correspondence and the few books that it can be ascertained she owned from her marginalia, reconstructing Seward's reading involves reasonable inference.<sup>13</sup> Although no formal records exist to confirm the following transactions, Seward had various opportunities to access books via several means open to a woman of her economic status, even while living in a provincial town.<sup>14</sup> Subscription and circulating libraries were one means, and William St. Clair observes that women's membership of such libraries 'was itself an innovation' in the period.<sup>15</sup> Seward is critical of such establishments, however, bemoaning the 'endurance of the trash, daily pouring out from the circulating libraries'.<sup>16</sup>

Another means of access to books was cathedral libraries, and Seward was in an advantageous position, since her father, Thomas Seward, was Prebendary at Lichfield Cathedral. Paul Kaufman's study of readers in Lichfield, which examines the cathedral borrowing records between 1764 and 1800, reveals Lichfield's to be anomalous among comparable borrowing records. In Lichfield, 'non-clerical residents of the area were given the privilege of borrowing books', and a significant proportion of borrowers were

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<sup>12</sup> Barnard, 175.

<sup>13</sup> Amy Solomons proposes that fragmented evidence should be embraced to reconstruct women's reading experiences in the period. Solomons argues that 'just as a mark of ownership does not equate to readership, lack of signature does not mean a reader did not read a text'. Solomons advocates that historians of reading adopt a more expansive view, which acknowledges 'that readers accessed far more than the few books they marked'. Though the Seward's' library no longer physically exists, and is not, in this sense, comparable to Nostell Priory (the library examined in Solomons's article), it is a useful methodology for approaching Seward's reading because of its inclusivity through inference made by fragmentary evidence of that reading. See 'Fragments and traces: uncovering Sabine Winn's reading experiences, 1734-1798', *Women's History Review* (2024), 1-17, 3, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Paula Backscheider comments on Seward's 'privilege' and Barnard states that Seward's 'frugality belied her vast fortune'. John Brewer confirms that after the death of her father in 1790, Seward was able to live 'in splendid isolation with an inheritance of £400 a year'. For more on Seward's economic status, see: Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 286; Barnard, 166; and Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 575.

<sup>15</sup> William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 243.

<sup>16</sup> Anna Seward, 'On the *Clarissa* of Richardson and Fielding's *Tom Jones*', in *Variety: A Collection of Essays. Written in the year 1787*, ed. Humphrey Repton (London: T. Cadell, 1788), 231.

women.<sup>17</sup> Contrary to Jan Fergus's observation that cathedral libraries predominantly held works of an ecclesiastical variety, Kaufman notes that 'the residents went to the Cathedral collection not for religious works, since only one of the twenty most borrowed books, Newton's *On the Prophecies* (1733), was of this nature'.<sup>18</sup> Though there is no evidence to suggest Seward herself borrowed directly from the Cathedral library, the *Letters* do indicate that she had access to a range of genres comparable to that offered by the Cathedral, including plays, histories, essays, and periodicals. Furthermore, her father, was one of Lichfield Cathedral's most prolific users, borrowing at least, Kaufman notes, twenty-nine titles.<sup>19</sup> It is also possible that as a clergyman, and author and editor himself, Thomas participated in the kind of book clubs Ina Ferris describes. The club books 'were taken home for a set period where, especially in isolated areas, they were shared among family members who thus constituted an informal club periphery'.<sup>20</sup> It is possible that Seward acquired books via her father's access.

Walter Scott's statement in his 'Biographical Preface' to *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward* (1810) appears to suggest otherwise. He writes that Seward's parents stopped fostering her literary interests for fear that 'encouragement might produce [...] that dreaded phenomenon, a learned lady'.<sup>21</sup> As such, 'poetry was prohibited' at Bishop's Palace'.<sup>22</sup> However, the fact that a set of the 1754 edition of Alexander Pope's *Works* are inscribed as belonging to Anna and Sarah Seward suggests these were owned, and likely

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Kaufman, 'Readers and Their Reading in Eighteenth-Century Lichfield', *Library*, 28 (1973), 108-115, 110. Kaufman notes that 'there were at least 158 borrowers, 40 of whom were women', 110.

<sup>18</sup> Kaufman, 115. See Jan Fergus, *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14.

<sup>19</sup> Kaufman, 113.

<sup>20</sup> Ina Ferris, *Book-Men, Book Clubs, and the Romantic Literary Sphere* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 11, 3, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Anna Seward, *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward*, ed. Walter Scott, 3 vols (Edinburgh: John Ballantyne and Co., 1810), vol. 1, vii.

<sup>22</sup> *PWS*, vii. Jacqueline Pearson demonstrates that anxieties about women's reading extended beyond the novel to other genres and forms, including poetry. See *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 57-64. Bishop's Palace, Lichfield, where Seward lived 'from the age of thirteen until her death' in 1809. See *MED*, 10.

read, before Seward was twenty-one, since Sarah died aged nineteen in 1764.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, their father had earlier advocated female education.<sup>24</sup> Thomas Seward's poem *The Female Right to Literature* (1748) questions why 'does Custom bind / In chains of Ignorance the female mind?' and urges women to 'let thy growing mind / Take ev'ry knowledge in of ev'ry kind'.<sup>25</sup> Though he argues that female intellect should not compromise 'soft innocence and virgin modesty', Thomas opposes male anxiety concerning women's access to literature; he accuses men of chauvinism, as they implore, 'shield me, propitious powers, nor clog my life / With that supreme of plagues *a learned wife*'.<sup>26</sup> Scott apparently overstates the prohibition on women's learning, since, as Norma Clarke notes, at Bishop's Palace there was a 'substantial library of English poetry and drama, history, essays and sermons, as well as fiction and miscellanea which young Nancy had permission to range at will', which allowed her to 'become a notably well-read woman'.<sup>27</sup> The evidence of Seward's being a well-read woman is to be found in her writing. As Mark Towsey shows us, 'the act of reading, and especially the tendency to read collectively, sociably, and in mutually supportive reading circles, encouraged women to become writers'.<sup>28</sup> Seward's literary criticism, and by extension her identity as a literary critic, in the margins of her books, as well as in her literary letters and in *Memoirs*, is informed by the breadth of her reading, and her sociable reading practices.

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<sup>23</sup> SJB/2001.1526.1-5. The title pages to volumes II, III, V, VI, and X of *The Works of Alexander Pope, Esq.* (London: H. Lintot, R. Tonson, and S. Draper, 1754), held by the Samuel Johnson Birthplace Museum, are inscribed 'Anna & Sarah Seward'. There is a minor variation in volume X, which reads 'Ann & Sarah Seward'.

<sup>24</sup> For an account of Seward's education conducted by her father, see Barnard, 32-38, and Norma Clarke, *The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Letters* (London: Pimlico, 2004), 24-28.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Seward, 'The Female Right to Literature, in a Letter to a young Lady from Florence', in *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes. By Several Hands*, ed. Robert Dodsley (London, 1763), vol. 2, 298, 299.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Seward, 298, 299.

<sup>27</sup> Clarke, 26. 'Nancy', Seward's hypocorism among family.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Towsey, 'Women as Readers and Writers', in *The Cambridge Companion to Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789*, ed. Catherine Ingrassia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 21-36, 22.

As an adult, Seward's participation in more formal literary circles, such as Lady Anna Miller's assemblies at Batheaston, which she attended between 1775 and 1781, proved essential to accessing reading material.<sup>29</sup> Abigail Williams points out that sharing books was a form of literary sociability, since 'exchanging reading material had the same function as reading aloud: the forging of closeness through enjoyment of the same literary works'.<sup>30</sup> Exchanging reading material was necessary for Seward to obtain literature, and subsequently comment on it: if, as an author residing in a provincial town, Seward was to become a literary critic, she needed to rely on sharing books and manuscripts. In her study of the eighteenth-century literary salon in Britain, Amy Prendergast 'investigates the presence of salons outside of urban areas, arguing for the importance of the provincial salon in the dissemination of literary material outside the capital'.<sup>31</sup> Prendergast argues that provincial salons 'were successful in promoting the sharing and dissemination of various forms of literature' and 'saw a different form of collaboration than their metropolitan counterparts', because the circulation of material in rural areas relied 'on friends for the acquisition of new titles'.<sup>32</sup> The literary exchanges beyond documented membership suggest a more diverse sociable reading culture than commentators on provincial women have allowed, the recognition of which is crucial for the inclusion of women readers and which implies a potentially 'creative' means of obtaining the latest reading material for women like Seward.

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<sup>29</sup> Miller encouraged Seward 'to share her verse and the social gatherings' and 'published Seward's first poems in her annual volume of poetry'. See *MED*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Abigail Williams, *The Social Life of Books* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 123. Eve Tavor Bannet has explored how printers and booksellers contributed to the mode of reading aloud and to foster polite literary conversation by producing 'conversation pieces', which were 'stylized printed models of conversations [...] that centred on reading aloud', *Eighteenth-Century Manners of Reading: Print Culture and Popular Instruction in the Anglophone Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 94, 109.

<sup>31</sup> Amy Prendergast, *Literary Salons Across Britain and Ireland in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 12-13.

<sup>32</sup> Prendergast, 152.

Seward's reading facilitated and extended her sociability. In 'Letter to Anna Seward', later reproduced in *Poetical Works*, John André invokes Seward's social circle, which he describes 'enlivening your dressing-room [...] with the same sensible conversation' and 'tasteful criticism, [...] dreading the iron-tongue of the nine o'clock bell'.<sup>33</sup> Another letter, this one written by Seward in 1795 and not included in Constable's edition, offers a similar, although more intimate, sociable scene in which 'Sir Brooke Boothby was reading to me 20 beautiful Sonnets, painting with truth, & nature, & original grace, the various miseries of parental deprivation. He means to publish them'.<sup>34</sup> Terry Castle points out that 'many of the most interesting critical contributions by women during the [eighteenth] century were made [...] in rather more spontaneous and informal contexts' than published criticism. Castle reminds us that 'some of the most important female criticism in the period was never written down at all'. The critical conversation hosted in literary salons and clubs – spaces in which women were free to talk about literature 'when they did not always feel free to write about it' – was, Castle notes, 'often instrumental in shaping contemporary literary taste'.<sup>35</sup> It is important to recognise, then, that Seward's criticism also developed in non-scribal ways and these letters indicate that more work is going on, of an improvisatory and occasional nature, than is recorded in surviving texts.

Markman Ellis uses the correspondence of Elizabeth Montagu's literary circle to elucidate the sociable reading practices of her group via correspondence. Ellis suggests

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<sup>33</sup> John André, 'Letter to Anna Seward', in *PWS*, vol. 2, 89-104, 102. André (1751-1780) was a major in the British Army and 'close friend' of Seward. See Barnard, 21.

<sup>34</sup> Anna Seward to Anne Parry Price, March 2, 1795, BL/Add MS 46400/291-292, 291. It is likely the sonnets Seward mentions here are Boothby's manuscript drafts which would come to be published anonymously in *Sorrows. Sacred to the Memory of Penelope* in 1796. Penelope, Boothby's only daughter, died in 1791 age five. See *Sorrows. Sacred to the Memory of Penelope* (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1796), 7-30.

<sup>35</sup> Terry Castle, 'Women and literary criticism', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 4 The Eighteenth Century*, ed. H. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 434-455, 443, 444.



that letter-writing was a mode through which Montagu and other intellectual women could write about reading and informally develop their critical practice. Though ‘the familiar letter has often been understood as a private form of communication, addressed to a named individual [...] in this period letters aspired to readers beyond their addressee, circulating within domestic and friendship circles of the recipient’, and this is quite apart from authors’ plans to publish selected letters.<sup>36</sup> It is first worth noting that sharing letters was commonplace. In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), for instance, the reader of a letter is not always the addressee. Mrs Dashwood shows Sir John Middleton’s letters ‘to her daughters, that she might be secure of their approbation’; Marianne puts Willoughby’s ‘letters into Elinor’s hands’ who read them ‘eagerly’; and Edward Ferrars also put Lucy Steele’s letter, releasing him from the engagement, ‘into Elinor’s hands’.<sup>37</sup> While the letters written by Middleton, Willoughby, and Steele were not intended for readers other than the addressee, letter-writers anticipated that circulation was a possibility. When Messenger Monsey shared Montagu’s letters with his wider network, he sought to limit who read them. Sharing Montagu’s letters with Sarah Price, he attached a note requesting that she ‘let no body see them’. Monsey’s injunction was in vain; Price wrote to Monsey apologising that she did not see his request, admitting that ‘I have not only read M<sup>rs</sup>. Montagu’s letters, but I have read them loud, read them to the Bishop of Bangor[,] Lady Sophia, M<sup>r</sup>. Price, & my youngest Brother’.<sup>38</sup> Monsey need not have worried. Others also circulated Montagu’s letters and they were well-received. Elizabeth Pococke praised

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<sup>36</sup> Markman Ellis, ‘Reading Practices in Elizabeth Montagu’s epistolary network of the 1750s’, in *Bluestockings Displayed: Portraiture, Performance and Patronage, 1730-1830*, ed. Elizabeth Eger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 213. The publication of authorial letters, including by Pope (who famously set the precedent in the genre) and Seward, is the subject of the next chapter of this dissertation.

<sup>37</sup> Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. Ros Ballaster (London: Penguin, 2012), 24, 177, 358.

<sup>38</sup> Sarah Price to Messenger Monsey, 21 August 1757, BL/Add MS 79498/118-120.

Montagu's letters, which were being passed around a wider circle of acquaintances, specifically for their reporting of 'new books worth notice & your opinion of them'.

Ellis concludes that, through her correspondence, Montagu refined her critical commentary, which allowed her to 'cross the boundary from private scribal correspondence into the world of print publication' in her 1769 *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear*.<sup>39</sup> In a similar way, exchanges of manuscript poems and critical conversation not only gave Seward access to literature but the opportunity to develop her literary analyses. Seward's *Letters* index a circulation of manuscript material, and a further sharing of her critical responses, with the six volumes representing a sort of epistolary literary clinic. Letters to several correspondents, including Hardinge and Sophia Weston, indicate that, by the 1780s, Seward was considered an authority on poetry by her contemporaries.<sup>40</sup> Seward's letters often respond to requests to provide commentary on other established poets' works or the original compositions and translations of her correspondents. For instance, obliging the Reverend Bagshaw Stevens's request for feedback on his translation of Horace's 'Ode to Delius', Seward comments that while the 'first, second, third, and fifth stanzas' are 'thoughtfully rendered', the fourth is 'less beautifully rendered than the others', and adds that 'the last line of the concluding verse does not quite satisfy me'. Seward finds in Stevens's verse 'a want of accuracy', and she challenges Stevens's final line – 'And the sad prize of mortals is to die' – asking 'is not a prize rather something that we obtain than that we do?'. Seward even draws Stevens's attention to her own translation of the ode, although she admits her translation is less poetic and more 'paraphrastic'. Stevens has, however, achieved relative success: according to Seward, since Horace 'leaves too much to the

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<sup>39</sup> Ellis, 226, 228.

<sup>40</sup> On Seward and Weston's acquaintance, see Margaret Ashmun, *The Singing Swan* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 149, 247.

imagination’, it ‘should be the business of his translator, paraphraser, and imitator, to draw the dark hint into poetic daylight’.<sup>41</sup> Seward’s assessments of her network’s manuscript drafts, here and elsewhere, emphasise the requirement for suitably crafted figurative language and aversion to cryptic expression, which become a hallmark of her literary criticism. Seward’s letters formalise this sociable reading across genres into literary criticism and demonstrate her endeavour to combine a rational, ethical, emotional, and aesthetic judgement.

*Letters* also show Seward practising an authoritative critical voice. An epistolary exchange with the author Henry Francis Cary in 1789 is one such example. In his letter of 24 May, Cary tells Seward, ‘I have been experiencing y<sup>e</sup> delightful magic of that necromancer Rousseau, who has y<sup>e</sup> key to every avenue of my heart’ and declares that ‘Rousseau should ever be my guide & conductor!’.<sup>42</sup> Seward first discussed Rousseau in her juvenile letters, which were presented in *Poetical Works* in 1810. Writing in 1762, Seward tells her fictional correspondent, ‘Emma’: ‘you talked of reading the New Eloisa; throw it aside, I beseech you’, and she proceeds in her next letter to set out her criticism of that work.<sup>43</sup> In her response to Cary, Seward warns against his ‘admiration of Rousseau’. She writes that she is ‘sorry to see you so dazzled by the splendours of his eloquence, as not to perceive that little sound morality is to be found amidst his glittering maze of paradoxes’, and she reminds him of ‘the distrust, misanthropy, and wretchedness into which his subtle refinements betrayed his own spirit’, urging Cary to ‘beware of adopting them with too implicit veneration!’<sup>44</sup> Seward here is less impassioned and defensive of her critical judgement than in her letter to ‘Emma’, instead adopting an authoritative critical voice, indicating that sound reading is guarded; it is not unthinking

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<sup>41</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, 279-280, 160.

<sup>42</sup> Henry Francis Cary to Anna Seward, 24 May 1789, HOU/MS Eng 1313/6.

<sup>43</sup> *PWS*, vol. 1, xlvii.

<sup>44</sup> *LAS*, vol. 2, 282.

immersion but a rational assessment of morality and artistry together. The response to Cary demonstrates a refinement of criticism that shifts from explanatory commentary in the juvenile letter to terse judgement. This is partly reinforced by Seward's maturity and the literary status she had since achieved. It is also informed by the transition of the letter from 'private' to 'public'. Seward's development toward becoming a critical reader, and an increasingly conscious self-styling as an arbiter of literary taste is evident in the evolution of her critical voice between these forms. This critical acuity was first developed in the margins of Seward's books, where she began refining her criticism before presenting them to her public. While it is too simplistic to state in general that private writing is a rehearsal for public writing in the eighteenth century, there is a clear through-line from Seward's marginalia in her books to printed statements.

### Marginalia in Books

While there are only a handful of extant books annotated by Seward, her marginalia are an important, though neglected, source for exploring the tenets of her literary criticism. Since the marginalia preceded the editing and publication of *Letters*, they provide evidence for the development of her critical identity and rhetoric, and her epistemological principle that literature promotes truth through its sentiment and expression of feeling. William H. Sherman observes that prior to the eighteenth century, readers were taught to write 'notes in and on their books', and so marginalia were 'first and foremost an aid to the memory'.<sup>45</sup> Though markings and annotations denote formal study, and indicate introspective, private reflection, annotating books increasingly became a social reading practice. As demonstrated in Chapter One, Johnson's and Piozzi's marginalia in books testify to reading as an extension of sociability, since they intended for their annotations

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<sup>45</sup> William H. Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 3, 4.

to be read and responded to (and in Piozzi's case, even published) by the person to whom they would present the book. Marginalia in books also represents an imagined sociability when annotators dramatise the book and author. H. J. Jackson uses Samuel Taylor Coleridge's copy of Robert Southey's *Life of Wesley* (1820) to illustrate this point. In 1825, Coleridge exclaimed in the margins,

how many and many an hour of Self-oblivion do I owe to this Life of Wesley –  
how often have I argued with it, questioned, remonstrated, been peevish and asked  
pardon & then again listened & cried Right! Excellent! - & in yet heavier hours  
intreated it, as it were, to continue talking to me.<sup>46</sup>

Jackson explains that 'the record of readers' notes in the period suggests that he [Coleridge] was not alone' in his 'dramatized description of his engagement' with the book, since evidence shows that 'in unguarded moments, or under the strong impression that the book was talking to them, readers talked back to their books'.<sup>47</sup>

There is no evidence to suggest that Seward circulated her marginalia within her literary circles. However, her annotations adopt a public, rather than intimate, rhetoric, indicating that she used the margins of her books to draft and refine responses for criticism she intended subsequently to be published. For instance, her annotations to James Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson* (1785) are almost verbatim to an essay she wrote on that book, published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1786. Many of the verse annotations she wrote in her copy of *The Task* are notes that would later form a longer, critical poem, withheld from publication, entitled 'Remonstrance, Addressed to William Cowper, Esq. in 1788, On the Sarcasms Levelled at National Gratitude in The Task'. An annotation in her copy of Piozzi's *Letters of Johnson*,

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<sup>46</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley and H. J. Jackson, 6 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980-2001), vol. 5, 120-121, cited in H. J. Jackson, *Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 123.

<sup>47</sup> *Romantic Readers*, 124.

examined later in this chapter, was copied into a personal letter to Piozzi in which she expressed her opinions on the book. Jackson states that

critical marginalia, especially, typically arise over points of difference, oblige the reader to find words to articulate the difference, and thereby foster independence. But self-awareness is the key thing: conscious agreement and dissent alike contribute to the construction of identity. [...] A marked or annotated book traces the development of the reader's self-definition in and by relation to the text.<sup>48</sup>

Seward's marginalia mark her transition from reader to writer, and the developments in her marginalia, from her markings in her volumes of Pope's *Works*, to her political and poetic responses to *The Task*, to her lengthy paratextual essay in Boswell's *Journal* (all of which are examined in this chapter), articulate the critical persona that is seen later in her published criticism, including that which would buttress her depiction of Darwin's literary life in *Memoirs*.

The public rhetoric of Seward's marginalia is distinctive in comparison to its precedents as she creates space for herself in critical discourses. Seward demonstrates a critical independence that is not only intended to be timeless but resists a gendered rhetoric, signalling her determination in her 'right to public notice'.<sup>49</sup> Women writers, as Castle observes in her survey, tended to operate 'on the ephemeral branches of criticism'. Isolated critical essays written by women, such as Montagu's 1769 *Essay* were relatively rare, while short book reviews and prefaces were considered 'typically feminine' critical genres throughout the century.<sup>50</sup> Women's participation in public cultural discourse was

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<sup>48</sup> H. J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 87.

<sup>49</sup> *PWS*, vol. 1, xiii.

<sup>50</sup> Montagu reflected on how the anonymous *Essay* was assumed to have been written by a man: 'the monthly Review & y<sup>c</sup> Magazines have not yet taken the Essay into consideration. My great pleasure is no one finds me out, & whenever they mention the Author they talk of him & he, so that they make me stroke my chin to find whether I have a great beard'. See Montagu to Benjamin Stillingfleet, 2 June 1769, HUN/MO5129.

limited, since ‘throughout the eighteenth century it was commonly held that literary judgement was – or should be – a privilege reserved for men’.<sup>51</sup> As such, the exclusion of women from critical discourse was partly a reaction to their potential as a ‘destabilizing force in the [...] literary marketplace’.<sup>52</sup> While, in reality, women were limited by education in comparison to men, assumptions about feminine nature as unsuited to mental exertion were prevalent. In *Strictures on the Modern System of Education* (1799), for instance, Hannah More contends that women’s critical thought is obscured by a ‘natural’ tendency to be ‘more affectionate than fastidious’, observing that women ‘read [...] with less critical spirit than men’ and so ‘they will not be on the watch to detect errors, so much as to gather improvement; they have seldom that hardness which is acquired by dealing deeply in the books of controversy’.<sup>53</sup> Such anxieties and beliefs meant that when women writers did enter the public realm of critical literary discourse, they did so often with an affected critical rhetoric, which, during the period 1720-1780 at least (this is the period Castle focuses on), was decidedly self-conscious and reserved.<sup>54</sup>

Seward’s criticism countervails Castle’s generalisation about ‘feminine’ rhetoric and defies More’s statement that critical rigour and feminine propriety are inimical. Seward’s rhetoric is direct and demonstrates not only a willingness to insert her often controversial opinions into literary and political debates but is also supported by the

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Montagu’s book was published anonymously to curb personal criticism. Markman Ellis observes that Montagu ‘proposes that anonymity would protect her reputation from the stigma of public recognition and critical judgement’ (423). To ‘own a publication was both to assert that one was the author of that text, and transitively, that the writer was an author’ and, for Montagu, to own authorship ‘was incompatible with her status as a woman in the upper echelons of London society’ (437). See “‘An Author in Form’: Women Writers, Print Publication, and Elizabeth Montagu’s Dialogues of the Dead’, *ELH*, 79:2 (2012), 417-445. I briefly noted women writers’ concerns about publication and anonymity in the Introduction; see n. 48.

<sup>51</sup> In a letter to Matthew Robinson, Montagu explains her decision to publish anonymously: ‘there is in general a prejudice against female Authors especially if they invade those regions of literature [*sic*] which the Men are desirous to reserve to themselves’, 10 September 1769, HUN/MO 4767.

<sup>52</sup> Castle, 440, 434, 436.

<sup>53</sup> Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, 2 vols, (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1799), vol. 2, 35.

<sup>54</sup> Many did so anonymously (and before Clara Reeve’s *Progress of Romance* (1785)), including Isabella Griffiths and Anna Letitia Barbauld. See Mary A. Waters, *British Women Writers and the Profession of Literary Criticism, 1789-1832* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

attention to detail More believes women readers lacked. Seward's close reading practice, exhibited clearly in her marginalia to editions of poetry, makes her a shrewd critic, assured in her literary taste and judgement. The remainder of this discussion of Seward's marginalia will first establish the tenets of her literary criticism, which are founded on attentive close readings, and identify her critical ideology as one that imbibes the spirit of both Augustan evaluation and Romantic appreciation. Second, it will respond to the scholarly treatment of Seward's criticism and argue that Seward purposefully assimilates Augustan and Romantic tendencies to distinguish herself from a dominant, patriarchal mode of literary criticism, which she blamed Johnson for popularising.

'Tasteful criticism' as Seward practises it combines rational, ethical, emotional, and aesthetic judgement. Propriety of diction, that is to say, style, language, and expression, is one of Seward's most consistent principles in her rigorous close readings, which serve to enhance her literary authority, even within the private margins of her books. Seward's diction in her own poetry is conventional, drawing on poetic vocabulary that spans from Shakespeare to the late eighteenth century, including personified abstractions, archaisms, and compound adjectives.<sup>55</sup> In her feminist approach, Clarke shows that Seward's 'real achievement was in reading and evaluation'. It is her precise close readings, Clarke argues, through which Seward 'dramatised herself as a sedulous and discriminating reader of English literature'.<sup>56</sup> In her copy of the fourth volume of Pope's *Works*, for example, Seward provides a recommendation to his imitation of Horace. On the line 'and now, on rolling waters snatch'd away' from the ode 'To Venus', Seward underlines 'snatch'd'. Noting Pope's use of the verb in the margin, Seward avers that this is 'not a good word on the occasion, borne away on waters had been better. AS'

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<sup>55</sup> See Charlotte Brewer, 'Seward's Poetry' in *Examining the OED* <<https://archive.examinetheoed.com/oed.hertford.ox.ac.uk/main/content/view/398/446/index.html>> [accessed September 2024].

<sup>56</sup> Clarke, 18.



(Figure 2.1).<sup>57</sup> Of course, Pope's poetry was unmatched, and therefore Seward's correction is audacious, but it attests to her formulating an authoritative critical persona.

Seward's annotations to Cowper's *The Task*, made later between 1785 and 1788, demonstrate her continued attentive close reading and her particular concern with diction.<sup>58</sup> Seward's letter to William Hayley confirms that she read *The Task* for the first time on or around 27 December 1785. Since Seward read the poem on 'the road', it is likely that the marginalia were written on a subsequent reading of the book, but before 1788 (when she rendered her judgements in verse, in 'Remonstrance'). Seward's initial reading of the poem in the letter to Hayley differs vastly from the censure of it found in the margins of the book. As such, this letter reminds us that the writing of criticism could be affected by the mode in which, and to whom, it was being articulated. The letter captures Seward's response to *The Task* as she reads it. Allowing herself to read 'just one morsel, the opening line', Seward regards Cowper 'a spirited Bard' for his tracing 'the invention of chairs, from the first rude essay, a 3 legg'd stool, that sustain'd the royal bum of the immortal Alfred, to the luxurious Sofa of the present Day'. On 29 December, Seward makes an addendum, in which she reports that she has finished reading *The Task*. She has much praise for Cowper, who she argues has

great poetic fire — that his Landscapes have the precision tho /not quite the\ high coloring of Thompson's [*sic*]. Their style is very original. His numbers are less polish'd & mellifluent. His satire is merciless, & has a great deal of the pious furor[e] of Young, & more austerity.<sup>59</sup>

The critical reflections in the letter are summative – even breezy – and written to entertain rather than to convince Hayley.

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<sup>57</sup> SJB/2001.1526.4, 167; Seward's underlining.

<sup>58</sup> Later in this chapter, I show that some of the marginalia Seward made in her copy of *The Task* was made at a later date; she refers to the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act in England, which took place in 1794.

<sup>59</sup> HOU/MS Eng 1255.

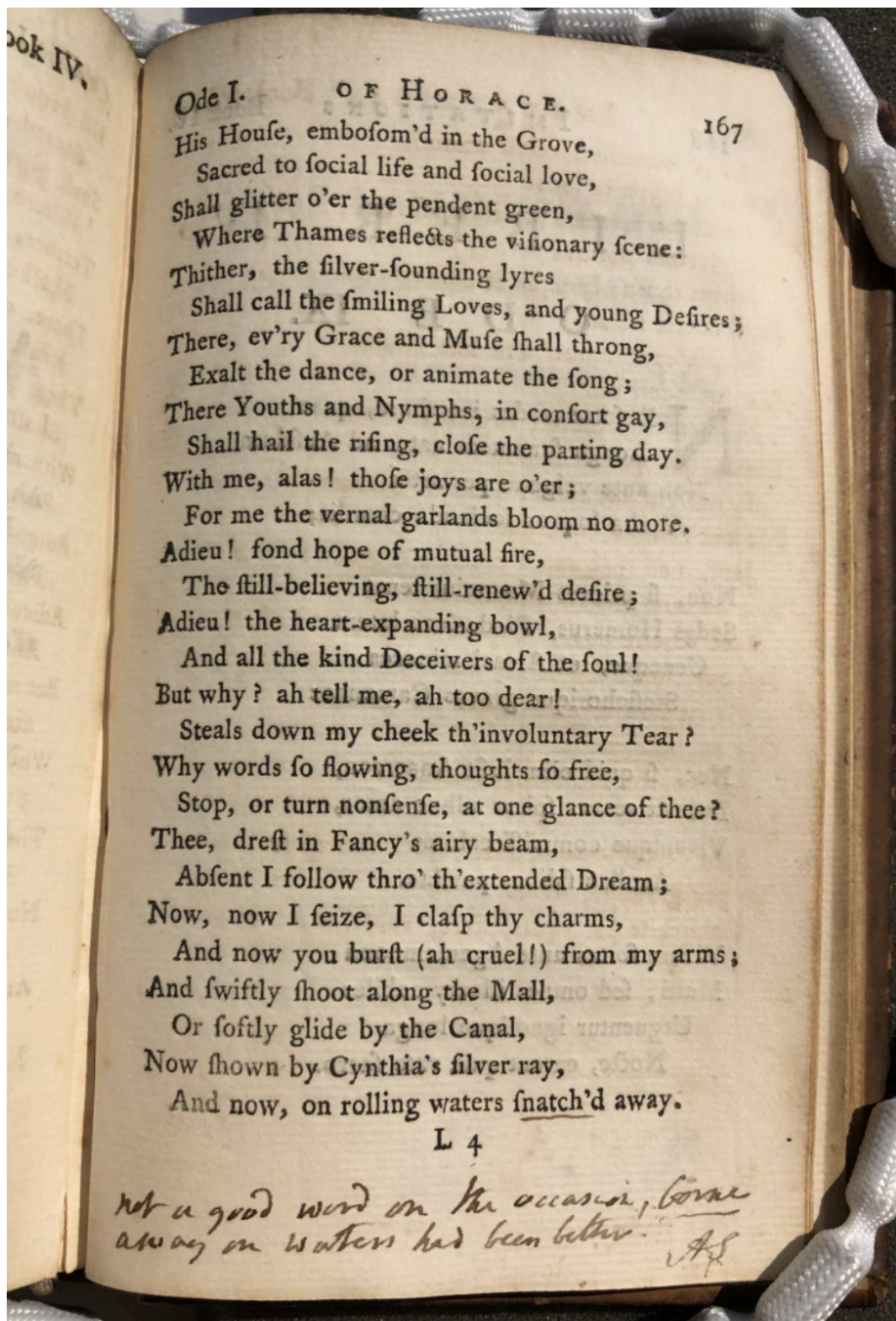


Figure 2.1. Alexander Pope, *The Works of Alexander Pope, Esq.*, (London: H. Lintot, R. Tonson, and S. Draper, 1754), vol. 6, 167, SJBM/2001.1526.4. Annotation in Seward's hand.

Before a calm, that rocks itself to rest,  
 For he whose car the winds are, and the clouds - a very  
 The dust that waits upon his fultry march *inharmonious*  
 When sin hath moved him, and his wrath is hot, *line.*  
 Shall visit earth in mercy; shall descend  
 Propitious, in his chariot paved with love, | a strange idea  
 And what his storms have blasted and defaced *a paved chariot*  
 For man's revolt, shall with a smile repair. *of the pavement*  
*(love!)*

Sweet is the harp of prophecy. Too sweet  
 Not to be wrong'd by a mere mortal touch;  
 Nor can the wonders it records, be sung  
 To meaner music, and not suffer loss.  
 But when a poet, or when one like me,  
 Happy to rove among poetic flow'rs  
 Though poor in skill to rear them, lights at last  
 On some fair theme, some theme divinely fair,  
 Such is the impulse and the spur he feels  
 To give it praise proportioned to its worth,

That

Figure 2.2. William Cowper, *The Task*, a poem, in six books (London: J. Johnson, 1785), 269, BL/6.71.c.22. Annotation in Seward's hand.

Seward's criticism is more exacting in the margins of the book. Similarly to her criticism of Pope's word choice, there are several instances in *The Task* in which Seward reprimands Cowper's diction. In a note on the line, 'propitious, in his chariot paved with love', Seward remarks that it is 'a strange idea' (**Figure 2.2**).<sup>60</sup> However, unlike her comment on the ode 'To Venus', Seward does not offer an alternative construction of the image. Rather than demonstrating a lack of engagement with Cowper's poems, Seward's not offering a replacement phrase, as she does with Pope, perhaps indicates an increased assurance in her critical writing, much like the development seen in her criticism of Rousseau. Evidently, when she comes to annotate *The Task*, Seward no longer feels the need to provide an alternative word to validate her opinion that there is a fault in the original. Though Seward remains attentive to the propriety of diction, she does not feel obliged to justify the remark; the word of a national poet is authority enough. As such, Seward increasingly rejects the 'exaggerated self-consciousness' and 'stylized display of authorial timidity or self-effacement' that Castle observes 'frequently mars eighteenth-century feminine critical rhetoric'.<sup>61</sup>

Seward's close readings and preference for correctness show her to be appropriating an Augustan neoclassical standard of literary criticism in the marginalia. Prevalent in the first half of the century, Augustan standards of criticism are characterised by a preference for classical ideals shaped by a distinct emphasis on elegance, refinement, wit, and correctness. Mary Waters observes that in the second half of the century, 'women critics continue to rely on standards of value derived from Augustan literary criticism, labeling the works they regard as good with "elegant," "refined," "witty," or "correct"'.<sup>62</sup> James Engell notes that 'eighteenth-century critics tend to view evaluation and judgement

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<sup>60</sup> William Cowper, *The Task, a poem, in six books* (London: J. Johnson, 1785), BL/6.71.c.22, 269.

<sup>61</sup> Castle, 437.

<sup>62</sup> Waters, *British Women Writers and the Profession of Literary Criticism*, 17.

as paramount. In doing so they subsume generic, structural, and linguistic criteria'. Johnson, whose motive in criticism was to articulate 'strong judgement', Engell observes, is one such arbiter of this standard of Augustan critical writing.<sup>63</sup> Seward's literary criticism is similarly founded on an evaluative processing of 'structural, and linguistic criteria' to figure any given works' position in her perception of a canon of English literature. In her copy of *The Task*, Seward draws attention to specific examples in her annotations, initiating a comparison that demonstrates the strength of Cowper's image over another popular example of blank verse: James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726-30).<sup>64</sup> In 'The Winter Evening' from *The Task*, Seward underlines 'and sigh, but never tremble at the sound'. Copying extracts from Thomson's 'Autumn' into the margin, on the line 'that restless men involve, hears, and but hears', Seward underlines the word 'but'. Though Thomson's line consists of ten syllables, the stressed and unstressed syllables of the penultimate foot are inverted: 'hears, and but hears'. While the unrest of Thomson's line fits with the image of the 'restless men', Cowper's line, by comparison, fits the iambic pentameter neatly, resulting in a smoother line; like the speaker, the line 'never tremble[s]' (**Figure 2.3**).<sup>65</sup> For Seward, Cowper has improved Thomson's image because it better attains the poetic ideals of precision and correctness she appreciates. Though in *Memoirs*, Seward casts Cowper as a less accomplished poet in comparison to Pope and even Darwin, in her close readings in the margins of *The Task* Seward's acknowledgement of that poem's merit at various points show her treating him with a critical impartiality, attained through intertextual evaluation.

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<sup>63</sup> James Engell, *Forming the Critical Mind: Dryden to Coleridge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 7, 175.

<sup>64</sup> David Womersley states that the Augustan is 'the Tory interpretation of literary history', 'founded on a distinctive view' whereby 'the quality of English literature' was seen 'as rising out of its relation to the classical literatures, rather than separately from them', 'Introduction', *Augustan Critical Writing* (London: Penguin, 1997), xi-xliv, xvi.

<sup>65</sup> BL/6.71.c.22, 142.

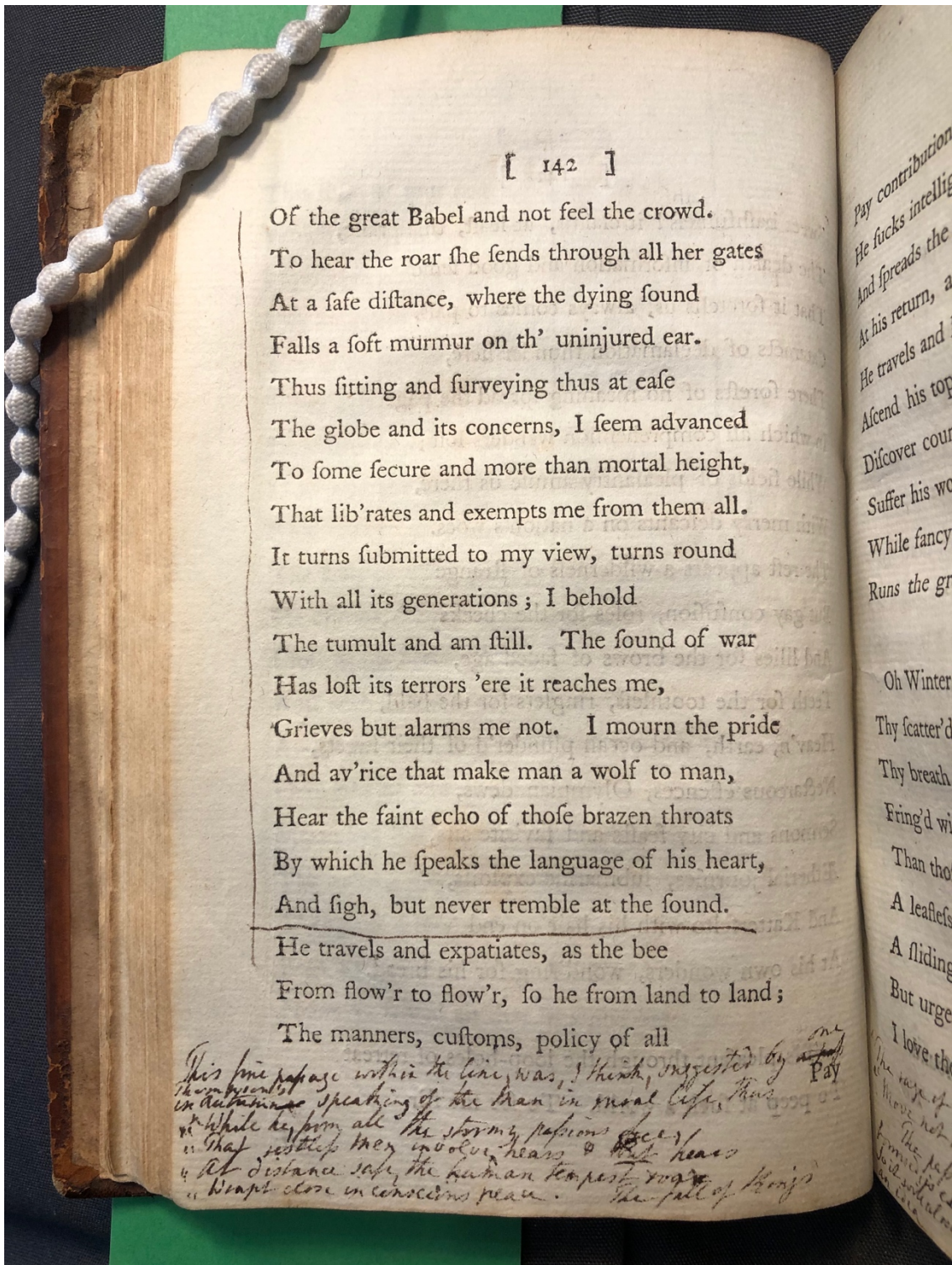


Figure 2.3. William Cowper, *The Task*, a poem, in six books (London: J. Johnson, 1785), 142, BL/6.71.c.22. Annotations in Seward's hand.

Here, Seward positions her criticism within prevailing norms of taste and judgement, aligning her writing with a respected tradition of criticism. In doing so, she integrates her writing into a continuum of established critical standards to gain acceptance in a genre dominated by men.

However, Seward's literary criticism is overall more accurately described as sitting at an intersection between Augustan and Romantic preferences for critical writing. While Seward's criticism adheres to an established eighteenth-century objectivity in reading that indicates sound judgement, it is being pulled toward a proto-Romantic critical judgement that prioritises feeling and sentiment. Seward does not use these criteria simply to delineate an objective judgement on the merits of any given work but rather uses close, attentive textual readings to demonstrate how a work operates to convey its sentiment. In her summary of *The Botanic Garden* (1791), Seward writes that Darwin's verse is 'corrected, polished, and modulated with the most sedulous attention'. While this 'delights the imagination', Darwin 'leaves the nerves at rest' because 'he seldom mixes with the picturesque the (as it is termed in criticism) *moral epithet*, meaning that the quality of the thing being mentioned, which pertains more to the mind, or heart, than to the eye, and which, instead of picture, excites sensation'. Seward illustrates this through an intertextual comparison between Darwin's and Shakespeare's respective depictions of a glow-worm. Darwin's glow-worm is pictured thus:

Warm, on her mossy couch, the radiant worm,  
Guard from cold dews her love-illum'd form,  
From leaf to leaf conduct the virgin light,  
Star of the earth, and diamond of the night!

In comparison, Shakespeare wrote: 'the glow-worm shows the morning to be near, / And 'gins to pale his ineffectual fire'. Seward explains that Shakespeare's line 'does better

than paint its object' because 'it excites a sort of tender pity for the little insect, shining without either warmth or useful light, in the dark and lonely hours'.<sup>66</sup> As such, she applies a standard of judgement based on the verse's evocation of refined feeling.

Since Seward sits at this intersection, I recognise that equating the rational rectitude with Augustan criticism and affective aestheticism with Romanticism risks a simplistic polarity that can tend towards teleology.<sup>67</sup> Within Georgian critical discourse, however, rationalism was in tension with emotionalism, and Seward's marginalia show considerable concern with feeling but primarily propound Augustan concerns for correctness. Yet, by the time she comes to write *Memoirs*, Seward's dominant concern is feeling; her understanding that literature promotes truth through its sentiment evolves in the marginalia but is fully realised, and therefore best exemplified, in *Memoirs*. Invoking the famous model of aesthetic change introduced by M. H. Abrams, Anne K. Mellor proposes that 'in place of the mirror and the lamp, we might think of Romantic-era women literary critics as sustaining the earlier Enlightenment image of literature popularized by Addison and Cowper, the trope of literature as a balance or scale that weighs equally the demands of the head and the heart, of reason and emotion'.<sup>68</sup> Though they 'fully acknowledged the role played by the feelings as well as by reason in human experience', literary criticism by women in this period also 'consistently argued that sensibility must be joined with correct perception' to reveal 'empirical truth'. Though

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<sup>66</sup> *MED*, 131-133. See William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 190, l. 89-90.

<sup>67</sup> Lorna Clymer, citing David Fairer's important contributions, states that 'the transition from Augustan to Romantic was less comprehensive, abrupt, revolutionary, or triumphant than a narrative of starkly delineated literary periods suggested'. See 'The Poet as Teacher', in *The Oxford Handbook of English Poetry, 1660-1800*, ed. Jack Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 183.

<sup>68</sup> Anne K. Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780-1830* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 86. Mellor refers to M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), a study which argues that the mimetic preoccupation of neoclassical literature is a 'mirror', held to reflect reality, whereas Romantic literature displaces the mirror with a 'lamp', which illuminates an individualised, emotive, experience of that reality.



Seward seems to be caught in the middle between established but dated Augustan principles and newer ones that in time would come to be labelled 'Romantic', her critical identity sits firmly within this period, among a number of women critics establishing authority in comparable ways, including Joanna Baillie, Anna Barbauld, Elizabeth Inchbald, Clara Reeve, and Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>69</sup>

Though Seward is among the number of women identified by Mellor as taking up this kind of critical position in the period, Seward's reconciliation of Augustan and Romantic approaches has rendered her published criticism, and the degree to which it can be considered professional writing, problematic. In the preface to Seward's collected *Letters*, Archibald Constable summarises the components of her criticism that appear at odds. He gently states that,

in her Critical remarks, Miss SEWARD will always be found ingenious and instructive; and, if she sometimes errs in praising her favourite authors with too little discrimination, the error is of that generous kind which marks the warmth of her character, and could proceed only from an enthusiastic admiration of every thing which seemed to her to bear the stamp of genius.<sup>70</sup>

Since this assessment, the small number of studies on Seward's literary criticism have proved contentious. Less forgiving than Constable, Samuel H. Monk writes that 'Miss Seward almost abandoned thought and objectivity for feeling'. For Monk, Seward's criticism is too simplistic to be considered a professional endeavour because 'there is never a hint in her writing that she valued a poem for anything beyond its meretricious ornaments or its sentiments', and therefore 'it is inevitable that her view of poetry should

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<sup>69</sup> Mellor, 93, 94, 85.

<sup>70</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, viii.

have led her to admire Darwin's verses, for they, as well as her own, were the embodiment of her taste'.<sup>71</sup>

More recently, Adam Rounce has provided a more measured study of Seward's literary criticism but ultimately draws the same conclusions as Monk regarding Seward's legacy as a critic. Rounce observes that 'Seward's criticism oscillates between examination of minutiae and expression of the most unsupportable generalities; the strength of her delight in poetry means that close reading is always tempered (and often replaced) by feeling'. The basis of Seward's criticism as an expression of feeling is problematic, in these accounts, because of its reactivity, 'responding to an adverse judgement, often with great indignation, which prevents her from making a considered reply'. As such, Rounce not only contends that Seward's 'partial critical nature' is 'disabling to her criticism', but that this has detrimental implications for her legacy: her unprofessional approach to literary criticism, motivated by feeling, contributes to a larger failing of her legacy.<sup>72</sup>

There is certainly evidence of reactionary judgements in Seward's marginalia, as well as in the published critical work that Rounce discusses. In her copy of *The Dunciad* (1728), Seward underlines the following passage as indicated:

Now flam'd the Dog-star's unpropitious ray,  
Smote ev'ry Brain, and wither'd ev'ry Bay;  
Sick was the Sun, the Owl forsook his bow'r,  
The moon-struck Prophet felt the madding hour:<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Samuel H. Monk, 'Anna Seward and the Romantic Poets: A Study in Taste' in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Studies in Honour of George McLean Harper*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 118-134, 123, 124.

<sup>72</sup> Adam Rounce, *Fame and Failure 1720-1800: The Unfulfilled Literary Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 152, 115, 153, 152.

<sup>73</sup> SJBM/2001.1526.4, 6.

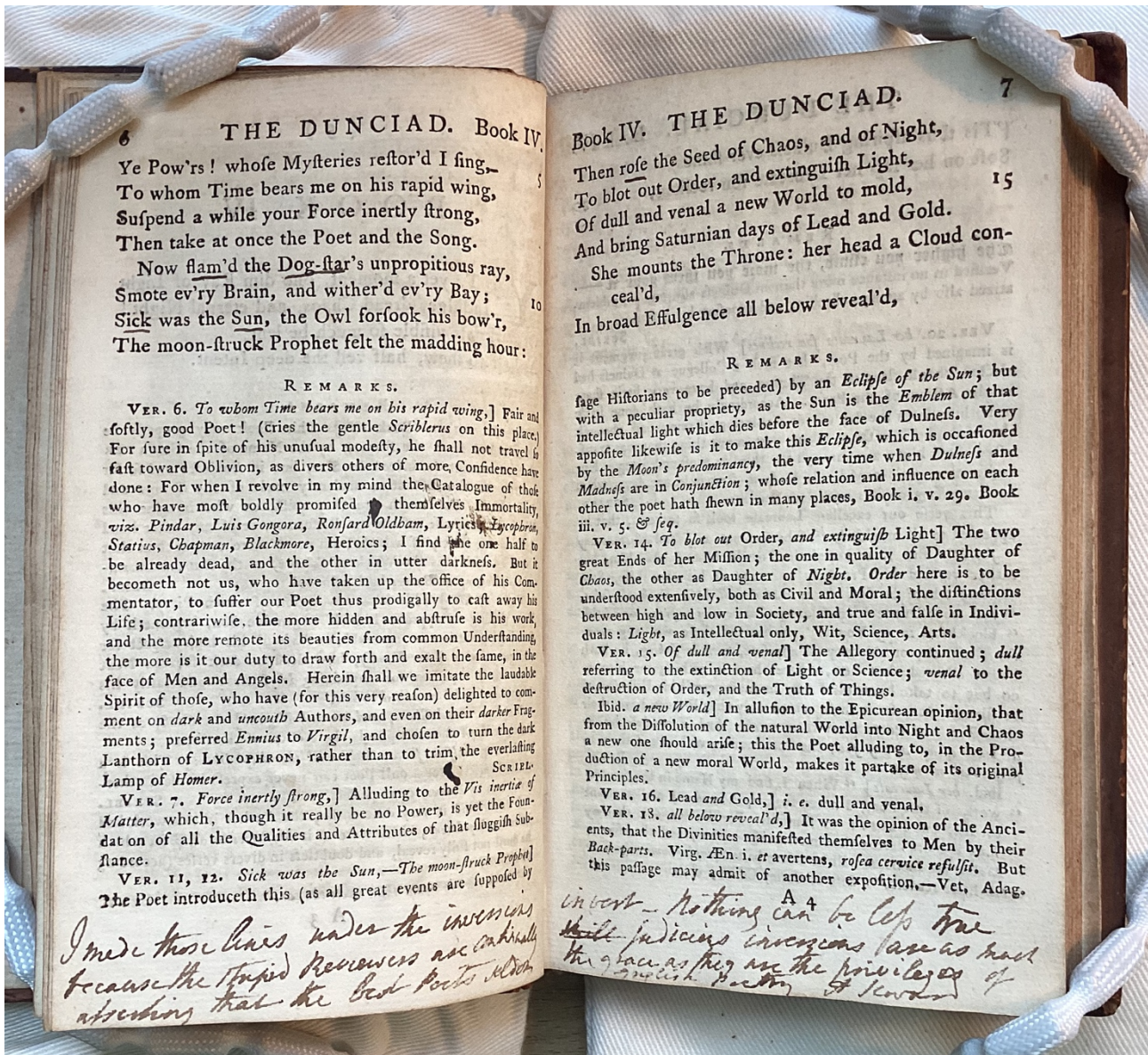


Figure 2.4. Alexander Pope, *The Works of Alexander Pope, Esq.*, (London: H. Lintot, R. Tonson, and S. Draper, 1754), vol. 6, 6-7, SJBM/2001.1526.4. Annotations in Seward's hand.

In the margin, Seward explains her reasons for those markings, stating 'I made those lines under the inversions because the stupid Reviewers are continually asserting that the best Poets seldom invert – Nothing can be less true s[+]h[+]h[+]h[+] judicious inversions are as much the grace as they are the privileges of English poetry' (Figure 2.4).<sup>74</sup> The intense focus on the minutiae of Pope's structure of those lines, followed by the complaint in which Seward

<sup>74</sup> SJBM/2001.1526.4, 6-7.

appears so personally affronted, exemplifies the defects of Seward's criticism articulated by Constable, Monk, and Rounce. That is to say, Seward's impassioned response threatens to undercut a more measured, judicious, technical reading. However, Seward's responses are guided by a combination of affect and formal understanding. It is important to remember that while Seward appropriates an Augustan critical standard, she is also writing at a time in which, as John Mullan states, sensibility increasingly became 'a governing principle of critical judgement' and so 'feelings could be treated as a qualification of the discriminating reader'.<sup>75</sup>

This is not to say that Seward was not aware that a critical response founded on feeling could be problematic, especially for women readers. This understanding is evident in her appreciation of Isabelle de Montolieu's 1786 novel, *Caroline de Lichtfield*. In a 1787 letter to the poet William Newton, Seward writes that she appreciates this novel's capacity to make 'my imagination, and my heart its instant captives', which she claims is due to the 'simplicity, wit, and pathos, and the most exalted generosity' in the 'characters, plan, conduct, and sentiments'. In the same letter, however, Seward is wary of appearing to be a 'novel reader' and begs Newton to 'not suppose I make a practice of reading novels. I open none that have not been highly recommended to me by those whom I believe judges of great writing'. Though she responds enthusiastically to *Caroline de Lichtfield*, admitting that it was 'the only new publication in which I felt interested', Seward is aware of the common perception of novels' capacity for sensation as inimical to a deeper, more intellectual, engagement.<sup>76</sup> This was coded as feminine and absorptive, and Seward is guarding her reputation by resisting the association even as she wishes to valorise immediate emotion as a legitimate response to literature.

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<sup>75</sup> John Mullan, 'Sensibility and Literary Criticism', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 4 The Eighteenth Century*, 417-433, 426; 423. See also, Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 8-9.

<sup>76</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, 293.

Nevertheless, Seward championed a notion that criticism which expressed feeling or emotion in response to a poetic work was the most authentic way to signal appreciation of it.<sup>77</sup> As Deidre Lynch shows, for Seward, ‘the qualifications for criticism include not only powers of judgement but also capacities for gratitude and enthusiasm’. Seward’s literary criticism, written in this ‘new age of sensibility’, works against an earlier Johnsonian model, which was characterised by Seward as being intent on displaying the prejudiced ‘authorism’ of a ‘professional London author’.<sup>78</sup> This ‘authorism’, Lynch explains, ‘went hand in hand with a ‘jealousy’ that could impair ‘candour’’.<sup>79</sup> While Seward ensured that her published *Letters* expounded what she saw as the limitations of Johnson’s criticism at length (this will be examined in Chapter Three), her quarrel is epitomised in her sonnet, ‘On Doctor Johnson’s Unjust Criticisms’. Seward defends Johnson against critics’ claims that he was insensitive to poetic beauty, most famously illustrated in James Gillray’s 1783 caricature ‘Apollo and the Muses, Inflicting Penance on Dr. Pomposo, round Parnassus’, by arguing that Johnson’s own ‘prose, or rhyme, confutes that plea’ (**Figure 2.5**).<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> While literary critics in this period were seen as arbiters of taste, avoidance of pedantry and malice in criticism was also desirable in Augustan criticism. See Pat Rogers, *The Augustan Vision* (London: Methuen & Co, 1974), 200.

<sup>78</sup> Deidre Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 55, 24, 55. Jack Orchard also points toward this ‘London authorism’ in his study of Jemima Grey’s reading of *The Rambler*, which she criticised Johnson for his ‘pomposity, lack of originality and exclusiveness inherent in the authorial voice’. See ‘Dr Johnson on Trial: Catherine Talbot and Jemima Grey Responding to Samuel Johnson’s *The Rambler*’, *Women’s Writing*, 23:2 (2016), 193-210, 193.

<sup>79</sup> Lynch, 55. Lynch explains here that Seward’s use of the word ‘candour’ is used ‘in that special late eighteenth-century sense of responsiveness that involves kindness and a favourable disposition’, 55.

<sup>80</sup> Anna Seward, ‘On Doctor Johnson’s Unjust Criticisms In His Lives of the Poets’, in *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects; and Odes Paraphrased from Horace* (London: G. Sael, 1799), 69. The placard Johnson carries describes his guilt as an unjust critic, and his hat lists the names of the poets he criticised, including Milton, Otway, Waller, Gray, Shenstone, and Lyttelton.



**Figure 2.5.** James Gillray, ‘Apollo and the Muses inflicting penance on Dr. Pomposo round Parnassus’ (1783), Lewis Walpole Library/783.07.29.01.

Indeed, Seward states in her poem’s explanatory footnote that Johnson’s ‘prose abounds with poetic efflorescence, metaphoric conception, and harmonious cadence, which in the highest degree adorn it, without diminishing its strength’. Rather, she argues that ‘the source of his injustice’ is found ‘in the envy of his temper’. For Seward, Johnson’s criticism is impeded by its display of envy, and in being unable to bear another’s ‘renown’, he, ‘lift[s] the *mean* and lay[s] the *MIGHTY* low’.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>81</sup> *Original Sonnets*, 70, 69. Like Seward, Elizabeth Montagu disliked Johnson’s approach to criticism and biography, as is evident in her letter to Elizabeth Carter: ‘have you read M<sup>r</sup> Potters admirable enquiry into some passages in [?] D<sup>r</sup> Johnsons Lives of y<sup>e</sup> Poets? His reprehensions of y<sup>e</sup> malignant Biographer, & wretched critick, are decent tho severe’, 18 June 1786, HUN/MO 3546.

It is important to note that Seward's criticism of Johnson's 'envy' is generalised and does not wholly reflect the nuances which have been brought to light in contemporary scholarly debates. John Wain contends that Johnson was a benevolent literary critic: 'his nature is generous and affirmative, more given to sharing a love than imparting a hate'.<sup>82</sup> Jack Lynch even suggests that Johnson 'may be the most diffident of all the great critics', evident especially in his 'offering conjectural emendations'.<sup>83</sup> By contrast, Thomas Leonard-Roy argues that 'hatred is fundamental for understanding Johnson's thoughts on conversation and criticism', and he shows that, for Johnson, 'good hating was a [...] critical ideal' intended to refine public literary taste. This is as opposed to 'bad hating – hatred motivated by malice and malignity – which threatened civil discourse'.<sup>84</sup> Seward, was one certainly convinced Johnson was 'motivated by malice'. Occupying the middle-ground, Deidre Lynch argues that Johnson 'is ready to make loveability one criterion of evaluation', but this is undercut by his recording of 'the fallibilities and peccadilloes of the poets'. In *Lives of the Poets*, 'the genius who soars also comes down to earth and partakes equally with the meanest specimens of humanity'.<sup>85</sup> For example, Johnson describes Pope as a poet with 'a mind active, ambitious, and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring; in its widest searches still longing to go forward, in its highest flights still wishing to be higher; always imagining something greater than it knows, always endeavouring more than it can do'.<sup>86</sup> Johnson recognises Pope's genius but subtly grounds him by acknowledging the inherent limitations of being human. Seward notes that in *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, 'Mr. Boswell writes, "I mentioned

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<sup>82</sup> John Wain, *Johnson as Critic* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 55.

<sup>83</sup> Jack Lynch, 'Criticism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Jack Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 191-208, 207.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Leonard-Roy, 'Samuel Johnson and Good Hating', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 44:1 (2021), 41-57, 42.

<sup>85</sup> Deidre Lynch, 45, 46.

<sup>86</sup> *LEP*, vol. 4, 62.

Shenstone's having said, that Pope possessed the art of condensing sense more than any body." Dr. Johnson replied, "It is not true; there is more sense in a line of Cowley's than in a page, or a sentence, or ten lines, I am not certain of the phrase, of Pope's." Seward responds by reasoning that 'sound criticism will hardly vouch for the verity of *that* assertion; but the praise of another was ever a caustic on the mind of Dr. Johnson'.<sup>87</sup>

Seward saw this as plain envy, which she believed was inimical to tasteful criticism. Seward's marginalia in her copy of Boswell's *Journal*, illustrates this further. The book was gifted to her by the author, and the marginalia precede the publication of her letter to the editor of *The Gentleman's Magazine* in January 1786, published anonymously under the pseudonym 'Benvolio'. Though the published letter is occasionally more refined, overall, it is identical to the marginalia, indicating that this volume is where Seward drafted sections of the forthcoming publication that concerned Boswell's recording of Johnson's treatment of David Garrick. The only annotation omitted in the *Gentleman's Magazine* was a particularly scathing comment, in which Seward asserts that 'with all Doc<sup>t</sup>. Johnson's ostentatious conscientiousness, if stung by envy, he had no scruple in asserting what he knew to be untrue' (**Figure 2.6**).<sup>88</sup> In the published letter, Seward needed not to trouble herself to suffer the repercussions of calling Johnson an envious liar, since she shows this much is evident in Boswell's own account.

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<sup>87</sup> Anna Seward [Benvolio], Letter to Sylvanus Urban, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, ed. John Nichols [Sylvanus Urban] (London: John Nichols, 1786), vol. 59, 125-126, 125.

<sup>88</sup> James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: Charles Dilly, 1785), SJB/2001.1138, endpapers.



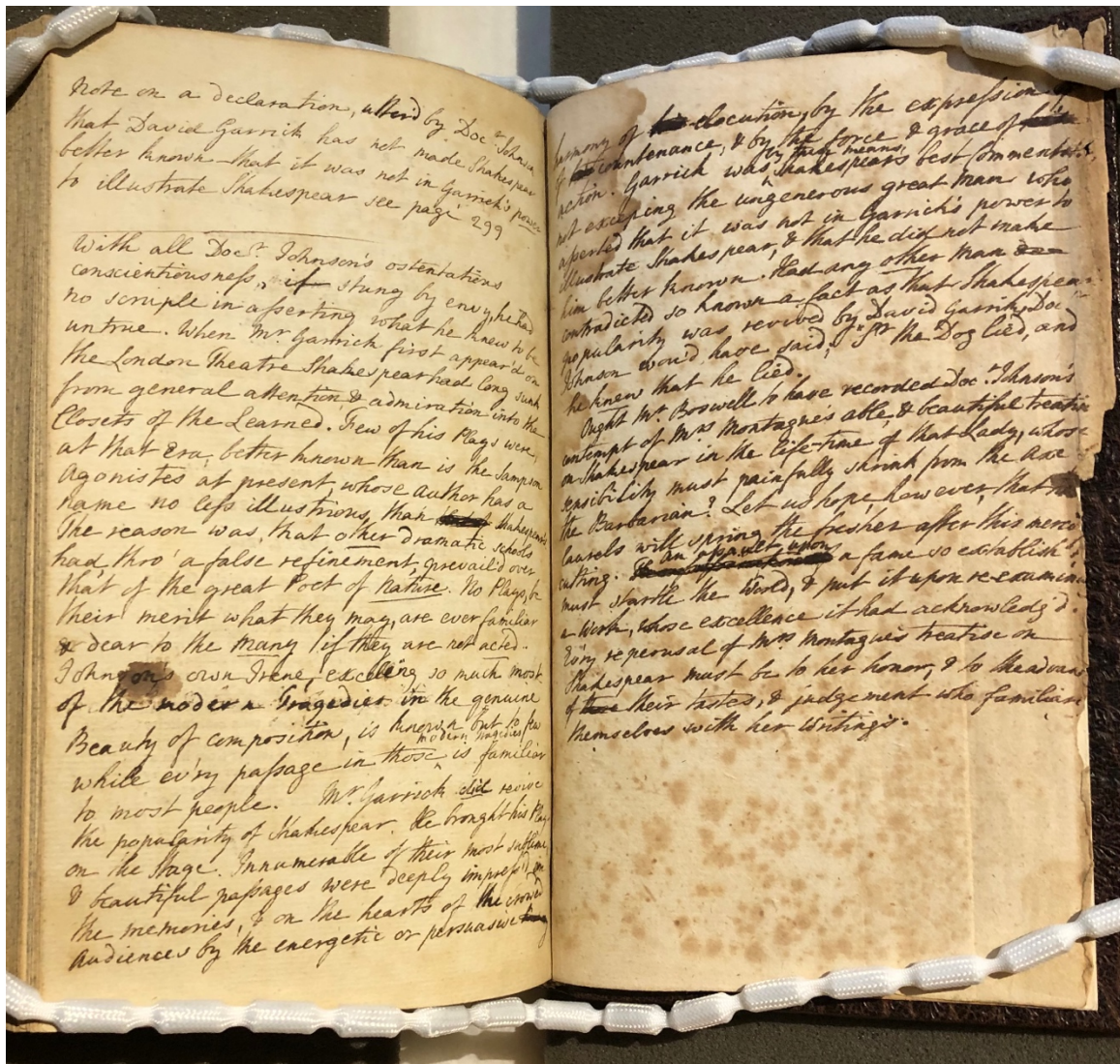


Figure 2.6. James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: Charles Dilly, 1785), endpapers, SJB/2001.1138. Annotation in Seward's hand.

Seward's response, however, is less concerned with criticising Johnson's envy of those canonical major figures featured in his *Lives of the Poets* than with his, and Boswell's, treatment of a contemporary literary network writing on and producing Shakespeare's plays. In *Journal*, Boswell comments that

Dr. Johnson is often too hard on our friend Mr. Garrick. When I asked him, why he did not mention him in the Preface to his *Shakspeare*, he said, "Garrick has been liberally paid for any thing he has done for Shakspeare. If I should praise

him, I should much more praise the nation who paid him. He has not made Shakspeare better known; he cannot illustrate Shakspeare: So I have reasons enough against mentioning him, were reasons necessary. There should be reasons *for it*".<sup>89</sup>

Seward, however, believes that Garrick's contribution to the revival of Shakespeare should have been recognised by Johnson in his 1765 'Preface' to his edition of Shakespeare's Plays. In the endpapers to her copy of *Journal*, Seward challenges Johnson's omission, arguing that 'when Mr. Garrick first appear'd on the London Theatre Shakespear had long sunk from general attention, & admiration into the Closets of the Learned'.<sup>90</sup> Seward goes on to demonstrate the significance of Garrick's revival by comparing it to the legacy of Johnson's own play, *Irene* (1749). Pointing out that 'no plays, be their merit ever so great, are familiar and dear to the many if they are not represented', Seward contends that 'Johnson's own IRENE, so much excelling most of the modern popular tragedies in the genuine beauty of composition, is known but to the few; while almost every passage' of Shakespeare's plays are now, due to Garrick's revival, 'present to the minds of the multitude'.<sup>91</sup> The success of Garrick's revival of 'the popularity of Shakespear' is because, she argues, his 'sublime, & beautiful passages were deeply impress'd on the memories, & on the hearts of the crouded Audiences by the energetic or persuasive harmony of elocution by the expression of countenance, & by the force & grace of action'. It is worth noting that Seward's response is one that focuses on affect, which is more apparent in performance, which is downplayed by Johnson, who is arguably more interested in Shakespeare as literature than entertainment. Envy impedes literary criticism not only because it jeopardises tasteful judgement and rejects ideals of

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<sup>89</sup> James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. Celia Barnes and Jack Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 303.

<sup>90</sup> SJB/2001.1138, endpapers.

<sup>91</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine*, 126.

appreciation, but also because it threatens writers' legacy and, perpetuates anxieties about misrepresentation in biography. Johnson's honesty here, for Seward, is misplaced. It is not the reputation of Garrick's work itself that is at stake but the legacy of his reputation and achievement.

In the margin, Seward notes another passage from Boswell's *Journal*: 'I spoke of Mrs Montague's very high praises for Garrick – Johnson. "Sir, it is fit she should say so much, and I should say nothing. Reynolds is fond of her book, and I wonder at it; for neither I, nor Beauclerk, nor Mrs Thrale, could get through it".<sup>92</sup> Seward was ready to defend Montagu, one of the only women writers to have written a substantial work of published literary criticism. For Seward, Montagu represented the kind of tasteful criticism that she herself aspired to practise and uphold. Montagu's letter to Elizabeth Carter demonstrates that she actively sought to work against an establish patriarchal model of literary criticism in her *Essay on Shakespeare*. Proposing her project, she writes that she aspires to proceed in a 'quite different track' to the precedents set by Pope and Johnson, in her display of appreciation of the beauties of Shakespeare's writing. Though Montagu concedes that 'both M<sup>r</sup> Pope & Johnson have written the prettiest [?] imaginable on Shakespear', she argues that 'they have done very little in shewing his excellencies in particular circumstances, & either general encomium or invective, is to me not properly criticism, both these writers aim to please rather than teach'.<sup>93</sup>

Seward's response not only seeks to expose Johnson's unjust criticism, but takes issue with the propriety of Boswell's inclusion of it. Seward asks,

ought Mr Boswell to have recorded Doc<sup>t</sup>. Johnson's contempt of M<sup>rs</sup>. Montague's able & beautiful treatise on Shakespear in the life-time of that Lady, whose

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<sup>92</sup> SJB/2001.1138, endpapers, 298-299. Montagu was publicly known to be the author of *The Writings and Genius of Shakespear* by the time this conversation took place.

<sup>93</sup> Montagu to Elizabeth Carter, 17 October 1765, HUN/MO 3157.

sensibility must painfully shrink from the Axe of the Barbarian? Let us hope, however, that he[r] laurels will spring the fresher after this merci[less] cutting. /An assault upon\ a fame so establish'd, must startle the world, & put it upon re-examining a work, whose excellence it had acknowledg'd. Evr'y reperusal of M<sup>rs</sup>. Montague's treatise on Shakespear must be to her honor, & to the advan[tage] of ~~those~~ their tastes, & judgement who familiari[se] themselves with her writings.<sup>94</sup>

Seward creates a divide between those with refined critical taste and judgement (herself, Montagu, and Garrick) and the 'barbarian', Johnson, which implicitly extends to Beauclerk, Thrale, and Boswell. For Seward, Shakespeare is the touchstone of literary quality, and she implies that Montagu's and Garrick's ability to appreciate Shakespeare demonstrate a refined sensibility of feeling. Johnson and Boswell, however, not only assault Montagu's reputation with their axes, but Seward implies that they fail to recognise the refined tastes of Montagu and Garrick. This partitioning of critical responses mirrors the canonical hierarchies Seward establishes through her intertextual evaluations in the margins of *The Task*. By contrasting Montagu's classical civility and taste – epitomised in her claim that Montagu's 'laurels will spring fresher' after Johnson's attack – with Johnson's barbarism, Seward aligns 'correct' critical judgement with cultured feeling and sentiment, which is rooted in a collective evaluation, countering Johnson's tendency to take pleasure in overturning common judgement. Arguing against such notions of singularity, Seward appeals to a collective standard, which emphasises sociability and shared values, thus advocating for the amelioration of singular judgements in favour of a more collective intellectual discourse.

Seward's marginalia reflect her position at the intersection between Augustan and proto-Romantic critical rhetoric and ideals. It is in this space between that she asserts

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<sup>94</sup> SJB/2001.1138, endpapers.

herself as an arbiter of correct taste and judgement. Seward leveraged this identity to enhance her authority and influence in literary culture in her most ambitious piece of literary criticism, *Memoirs of Dr. Darwin*. In the final part of this section, I turn to an extended example of Seward's critical marginalia in her annotations to Cowper's *The Task*. This analysis bridges her role as a critical reader with her developing conception of biography, in which she links the poet's work to his character. In these critiques, Seward evaluates Cowper's poetry to form judgements about his personality, illustrating a belief that art reflects the moral sensibilities of its creator.

Across the marginalia in *The Task*, Cowper himself becomes a figure of interest to Seward because she reads the poem as displaying his contrasting patriotic, political, and religious views. Her marginalia respond at moments of contrast between the poem and Cowper. Seward is marking out the boundaries for biographical writing, and her annotations show her working through an organisation of complexity of character and how to reconcile that in biography. While Seward is largely performing 'scientific' analyses, founded on the mechanics at work in Cowper's poetry, her marginalia in *The Task* demonstrates that she develops an interest in the personal affect beyond the self. That is to say, while Seward remains concerned with how a poem operates to convey sentiment, she becomes increasingly interested in the life of the poet, and so her literary criticism becomes a place in which poetry and biography become entwined. To begin with, Seward engages with Cowper's ideological stances to reflect on his political and moral convictions. The marginalia show, for instance, Seward's interest in Cowper's political position on the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, which sought to protect individuals from arbitrary detention. In *The Task*, Cowper criticised the suspension of the Act. Cowper objects to the oppressive Bastille, lamenting:

Ye horrid tow'rs, th' abode of broken hearts,

Ye dungeons and ye cages of despair,  
and expresses hope for its fall:

There's not an English heart that would not leap  
To hear that ye were fall'n at last, to know  
That ev'n our enemies, so oft employed  
In forging chains for us, themselves were free.

Cowper denounces the oppressive institution of the Bastille as a symbol of tyranny, arguing that even those who have tried to oppress the English should be liberated. Though Seward observes that 'Cowper did not then foresee / that England \ w<sup>d</sup> adopt, & by [?] her own laws sanction Bastiles', she agrees with him, lamenting the subsequent suspension of the Act in 1794, which allowed the government to detain individuals without trial, and Seward complains that 'miserable men have languished in our Bastile since that guilty hour — & the just picture the poet here draws is the lot of Englishmen to whom freedom was a birth right privilege O worse than murderers are they who have destroyed it'.<sup>95</sup> Seward's agreement with Cowper, and her extension of that critique, demonstrates a shared ideological commitment, and the marginalia underscore the role of literature in reflecting and shaping moral and political convictions. Her engagement with Cowper here demonstrates how Seward's criticism begins to merge literary analysis with broader socio-political and ethical concerns.

However, this was one of few issues that Seward agreed with Cowper on. Seward's subsequent poem, 'Remonstrance', borne out of her marginalia on *The Task*, demonstrate her developing understanding of Cowper's character through her critical reading, and subsequent condemnation of his religious sensibilities. In a footnote to 'Remonstrance', Seward explains that

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<sup>95</sup> BL/6.71.c.22, 201, 203-204.

when this Remonstrance to Cowper was written, its author only knew him in his publications. Mr Hayley's Biography of that unfortunate man softens, by excited pity, the indignation which had arisen from the ungenerous passages reprobated here; – but the delineation of Cowper's character, and the records of his life, compared with the illiberal censures which disgrace the interesting and beautiful pages of the TASK, teach us, more than ever, to deplore the dire Calvinistic principles, which ruined his peace, and which could so freeze and narrow a heart, which Nature had made warm and expansive.<sup>96</sup>

Here, Seward explains that her early judgements were informed by Cowper's writing alone and that while William Hayley's biography, *The Life and Posthumous Writings of William Cowper* (1803-1804), has softened her perception of Cowper, she felt it did not effectively address the issues concerning his moral principles that she finds in the poetry. Seward reprimands Hayley for excusing Cowper's faults, and argues that his Calvinism, which she believes contributed to his moral shortcomings, are more evident in his poetry than in the biography. For Seward, Cowper's moral and ideological contradictions, especially those shaped by his religious convictions, offer profound insight into his character.

Seward finds poetry to be a more useful means for understanding character than biographical documentation. Seward's perception of Cowper as the 'Bard morose' with a 'marble breast' is substantiated by her reading of *The Task*; she argues that it is Cowper's poetry, rather than Hayley's biography, that provides a more accurate description of his true character.<sup>97</sup> Seward is especially critical of a passage in *The Task* where Cowper reflects on the human capacity for sensitivity toward nature. Cowper writes:

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<sup>96</sup> Seward, 'Remonstrance Addressed to William Cowper, Esq. in 1788, On the Sarcasms Levelled at National Gratitude in The Task', in *PWS*, vol. 3, 5-14, 14.

<sup>97</sup> *PWS*, vol. 3, 11, 12.

I would not enter on my list of friends,  
(Tho' grac'd with polish'd manners'  
with fine sense  
Yet wanting sensibility) the man  
Who needlessly sets foot upon a worm.  
An inadvertent step may crush the snail  
That Crawls at evening in the public path,  
But he that has humanity, forewarned,  
Will tread aside, and let the reptile live.<sup>98</sup>

Cowper here distinguishes between awareness of and compassionate regard for the snail, suggesting that true humanity is demonstrated by sparing harm where it can be avoided. Seward's poem, 'Remonstrance', critiques the Calvinist attitudes she finds hypocritical in *The Task*. Seward writes:

'tho endow'd  
With talents destin'd to immortal fame,  
But wanting generosity, the man  
Who darts the blighting of satiric wit,  
Lanc'd from a spleenful heart, or sullen weaves  
The dark anathemas of Calvin's school  
Against a nation's praise.<sup>99</sup>

Here, Seward condemns Cowper for using his poetic genius to invoke religious condemnations from the Calvinist tradition. While Cowper advocates sensitivity toward animals, Seward reinterprets this to focus on human relationships, arguing that true moral

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<sup>98</sup> BL/6.71.c.22, 259-260.

<sup>99</sup> *PWS*, vol. 3, 5.



sensibility should extend to kindness in human interactions. To her mind, Cowper's advocacy for compassion to the snail is undermined by the harshness of his Calvinist beliefs, which she sees as incompatible with his poetic ideals of sensitivity. Aligning herself with Cowper's moral stance in some of her marginalia but also critiquing his religious hypocrisy, Seward demonstrates how poetry reveals underlying tensions between a poet's values, ideals, and character. For Seward, poetry is not simply a form of artistic expression but a means for investigating and revealing the complexities of the poet themselves.

The marginalia shows that Seward had originally composed some of those lines in response to Cowper's criticism of George Frederic Handel's commemoration in 1784, an event which celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the composer's death. Handel's Commemoration was a popular series of concerts – King George III and Queen Charlotte were among the hundreds of attendees – which set a precedent for such events. Mary Hamilton, who attended the concert with the musicologist Charles Burney on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1784, wrote in her diary, 'I thought myself in y<sup>e</sup>. heavenly regions — 513 Performers — the harmony so unbroken that it was like y<sup>e</sup>. fall of Waters from one source — imperceptibly blended — The Spectacle too was sublime'.<sup>100</sup> Ridiculing those such as Hamilton's appreciation for the performance, in *The Task*, Cowper depicts a scene at Westminster Abbey where

ten thousand sit

    Patiently present at a sacred song,

    Commemoration-mad'.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> 'Diary of Mary Hamilton (23 April 1784 – 20 June 1784)', JRL/HAM/2/10, 121.

<sup>101</sup> BL/6.71.c.22, 263.

Gillan D’Arcy Wood clarifies that Cowper was against the ‘emerging cult of Handel’ but ‘protested not against the music itself but the use of Westminster Abbey for a mass tribute to a mere mortal’.<sup>102</sup> In the margin, Seward responds:

High-minded Bard; I mourn to see thee weave  
The dark anathemas of Calvin’s school  
Against a nation’s praise.<sup>103</sup>

Poets, Kairoff observes, ‘maintained a central role by guiding public taste toward appreciation of their cultural heritage’ and, by this time, ‘Handel has become a national figure in Britain’s pantheon, not unlike Shakespeare and Milton, and his oratorios, in particular, were acclaimed by national consensus as part of the fabric of British culture’. Therefore, Seward’s response in ‘Remonstrance’ was, Kairoff notes, ‘brutal’ because ‘she would have certainly found Cowper’s remarks critically heretical and even unpatriotic’.<sup>104</sup> Seward’s critique of Cowper’s dismissal of the commemoration reinforces her argument that Calvinist beliefs, in Cowper’s case, ‘freeze and narrow a heart’.<sup>105</sup> Here, her response to Cowper’s position is emblematic of a larger issue: the way his religious convictions, in her view, inhibit his ability to engage with national pride. By addressing his moral and political stances in his poetry, Seward demonstrates her belief that poetry provides a more authentic reflection of a poet’s character than biography alone. This chapter has so far examined Seward’s developing critical identity in her marginalia, which she articulates as an arbiter of taste distinct from a Johnsonian mode of criticism. While Seward’s critique of Cowper demonstrates her ability to evaluate character through a close reading of poetry, this is refined in her *Memoirs* of Darwin. Although Seward knew Darwin

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<sup>102</sup> Gillen D’Arcy Wood, ‘The Female Pensive: Anna Seward, Sociable Poetry, and the Handelian Consensus’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 67 (2006), 451-477, 454.

<sup>103</sup> BL/6.71.c.22, 263.

<sup>104</sup> Kairoff, 161.

<sup>105</sup> *PWS*, vol. 3, 14.

personally, her authority as biographer stems less from their relationship and more from her capacity to analyse his literary work, especially in her reading of *The Botanic Garden* as a reflection of his character. In the final part of this chapter, I explore how Seward leverages her authority to shape her biographical assessment of Darwin, using poetry as a means through which to proffer insight into the ‘Bard of Fancy’.

### Seward’s ‘little Darwiniana’<sup>106</sup>

On 16 March 1772, Seward wrote to Darwin to set the record straight about a rumoured affair with her music tutor, John Saville. Though Seward and Saville did form an attachment, there is no evidence to suggest it was improper. Barnard insists that Seward was discreet about the nature of her relationship with Saville, that the liaison was chaste. Unmarried, Seward ‘had to endure the implication of being considered an immoral, ‘fallen’ woman’.<sup>107</sup> Therefore, she would have been cautious of being accused of sexual impropriety for fear it would undermine her status as a national poet. However, Saville was married, and Darwin reported his disreputable character to Seward’s parents, apparently suggesting to them that Saville ‘dersev’d to be horse-whipt’ for he was a married man and should not have indulged any feelings for another woman. Darwin’s betrayal caused friction at the Bishop’s Palace; Seward writes in her letter that ‘the domestic peace of our family [is] destroy’d’ and relays her hope that her parents have ‘enough confidence’ in her at her ‘time of Life’ than to resume ‘the restraints of childhood’.<sup>108</sup> To Darwin, Seward declared that, ‘I am a free Agent, & will be so, of an age to think & act for my self, nor conscious of any defect in my understanding, or my resolution that shou’d impede the power of judging, or the freedom of acting’.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> *LAS*, vol. 6, 55.

<sup>107</sup> Barnard, 93.

<sup>108</sup> Seward was 29.

<sup>109</sup> Seward to Erasmus Darwin, 16 March 1772, CUL/GBR/0012/MS DAR 227.3/21-24.

As this episode encapsulates, Seward and Darwin had a tumultuous relationship and scholars have been somewhat uncertain about how to characterise the nature of it. Seward was fourteen when Darwin arrived in Lichfield in 1756. Darwin's not-always-impartial biographer Desmond King-Hele states that 'Anna had a special relationship with Darwin: she was his only pupil, and a very successful one. He continually encouraged her talent for verse'.<sup>110</sup> Kairoff has more recently affirmed that Darwin was Seward's 'early Lichfield mentor' and describes her as 'Darwin's protégée'.<sup>111</sup> However, their literary relationship has also been interpreted as including a sexual dimension. In addition to the suggestive description of their 'special relationship', King-Hele describes their collaborative literary activities as 'incestuous'.<sup>112</sup> While James Venable Logan claims that Seward loved Darwin because *Memoirs* is 'pronouncedly friendly', King-Hele suggests that her 'waspish' treatment of Darwin in the biography is because she anticipated she would become 'the second Mrs Darwin' but was passed over in favour of Mary Parker.<sup>113</sup> King-Hele suspects that Seward 'was not physical enough for him'.<sup>114</sup> Such speculative and sexualised claims about both the personal and literary aspects of their acquaintance are problematic because they addle understandings of the true nature of that relationship. The lack of surviving letters – manuscript and print – between the pair perpetuates this ambivalence, and their absence encourages speculation. While this chapter later considers Seward's dismissal of their correspondence in *Memoirs* more fully, it endorses and elaborates upon Kairoff's understanding of their relationship as, foremost, a literary mentorship. However, unlike Johnson's literary mentorship of Piozzi, which

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<sup>110</sup> Desmond King-Hele, *Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 152.

<sup>111</sup> Kairoff, 232, 235.

<sup>112</sup> King-Hele, 154.

<sup>113</sup> James Venable Logan, *The Poetry and Aesthetics of Erasmus Darwin* (New York: Octagon, 1972), 6. King-Hele, 152. King-Hele, *Erasmus Darwin: A Life of Unequalled Achievement* (London: Giles de la Mare, 1999), 107. Mary Parker was Darwin's employee and bore him two illegitimate daughters between 1772-1774. For an account of their relationship, see King-Hele, *Unequalled Achievement*, 106-108.

<sup>114</sup> King-Hele, *Unequalled Achievement*, 107.

perhaps ultimately hindered Piozzi's pursuit of literary endeavours because he relied on her for emotional support, the Darwin-Seward mentorship presents a more balanced dynamic of authority and influence, evident in their collaborative social authorship.

Kairoff suggests that 'Darwin evidently instilled in Seward her early admiration of Pope and urged her study of his style'. According to Kairoff, Darwin's veneration of Pope is evident in *The Botanic Garden*, which might be described as 'Popeian' in its use of the 'couplet form'.<sup>115</sup> Seward herself acknowledged Darwin's influence on her, admitting in a letter in 1789 that he was 'a sort of poetic preceptor to me'. However, in the same letter, Seward also claims that her poetry inspired Darwin's:

when I shewed him the poetic sketch I had made of his valley, in the year 1779, he was pleased with it, and said it should stand as the exordium of a poem, which he, that instant, conceived might be written to advantage upon the Linnean system [...]. From that instant he began the brilliant work you mention [*The Botanic Garden*], which has been the amusement of his leisure hours through all the intervening years.<sup>116</sup>

According to Seward, when he read her verses on his real botanic garden just outside of Lichfield, Darwin claimed that 'the Linnaean System is unexplored poetic ground, and a happy subject for the muse', and he directs that 'you should make flowers, plants, and trees into men and woman. I', continued he, "will write the notes, which must be scientific; and you shall write the verse". Seward declined to write the verse, arguing that 'the plan was not strictly proper for a female pen'.<sup>117</sup> Sam George has shown that, though the study of botany became popular in the later eighteenth century, moralists maintained

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<sup>115</sup> Kairoff, 235, 236.

<sup>116</sup> *LAS*, vol. 2, 312.

<sup>117</sup> *MED*, 111.

that ‘the sexual system of classification was not conducive to female delicacy’.<sup>118</sup> Such indelicacy is, for instance, explained in Richard Polwhele’s poem, *The Unsex’d Females* (1798), in which he argues that women are too keen to study plants and ‘dissect its organ of unhallow’d lust, / And fondly gaze the titillating dust’. Polwhele notes that ‘Botany has lately become a fashionable amusement with the ladies. But how the study of the sexual system of plants can accord with female modesty, I am not able to comprehend’.<sup>119</sup> However, Seward was aggrieved when Darwin published the original verse she wrote in 1779, altered and interwoven with his own in *The Botanic Garden*, without acknowledging her. In a letter, she comments on the ‘disingenuousness of making no mention that the scenic description, with which he opens his poem, was the work of another’.<sup>120</sup>

It is important to note here that Darwin’s use of Seward’s verse is not necessarily a straightforward act of plagiarism but resonates with a trend in the Romantic era whereby the recognition of a literary work as a collaborative, joint enterprise, was increasingly obscured in favour of individual authorship. This shift, Michelle Levy argues, is due to ‘a vanishing manuscript culture and the dominance of print’ and reflects, ‘a struggle in Romantic self-identity between communities of feeling and individual genius’.<sup>121</sup> The

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<sup>118</sup> Sam George, ‘Not Strictly Proper For A Female Pen’: Eighteenth-Century Poetry and the Sexuality of Botany’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 2:2 (2005), 191-210, 199.

<sup>119</sup> Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex’d Females: A Poem, Addressed to the Author of the Pursuits of Literature* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1798), 8.

<sup>120</sup> *LAS*, vol. 3, 155. Donna Coffey has examined another instance of disagreement between Seward and Darwin: their different views, which they respectively expressed in verse, on Coalbrookdale. Coffey demonstrates that Seward’s poems ‘Coalbrooke Dale’ and ‘To Coalbrooke Dale’ ‘focus upon the ways in which the natural beauty of Coalbrookdale has been spoiled by industrial processes’, while Darwin’s note in Canto II of ‘The Economy of Vegetation’ celebrates ‘the potential of science and technology to capitalize on the natural resources found in the dale’. See Coffey, ‘Protecting the Botanic Garden: Seward, Darwin, and Coalbrookdale’, *Women’s Studies*, 31 (2002), 141-164, 142.

<sup>121</sup> Michelle Levy, *Family Authorship and Romantic Print Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2. George Justice observes a more subtle shift than Levy describes, proposing that instead of a “triumph” of print’ that signals ‘the demise of manuscripts’, the overlap between various literary cultures of print and manuscript suggests that a “growth into” model more accurately describes the relationship between technologies in periods of change’, ‘Introduction’, George L. Justice and Nathan Tinker (eds.), *Women’s Writing and the Circulation of Ideas: Manuscript Publication in England, 1550-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1-16, 9.

most famous example is perhaps *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Levy notes that the ‘repeated references to the “author” (singular) in the 1798 “Advertisement,”’ are ‘by which the most famous collaborative volume in English literary history sought to pass as a work of single authorship’.<sup>122</sup> In light of this context, Stuart Harris proposes *The Botanic Garden* should be read as an act of literary collaboration, whereby Seward’s reward for providing Darwin with ‘a real female voice analogous to the female voice of the Goddess of Botany who later takes charge of the discourse throughout the poem’ was publication.<sup>123</sup> This highlights the reciprocal nature of the Seward-Darwin mentorship, and is just one instance of their collaborative writing. Barnard has, for example, presented evidence which suggests they worked together on ‘Elegy on Captain Cook’ (accredited to Seward) and together, with Francis Mundy, formed a manuscript circle to work on *Needwood Forest* (1776) (accredited to Mundy).<sup>124</sup> Seward points out her contributions to *Needwood Forest* in a letter to her friend Mary Powys, claiming that the fairies ‘are mine & Doctor Darwin’s manufacture — I dress’d the Fairies and he gave them their Music. The description of the witches, all but the last couplet, and that of Murder, are mine’.<sup>125</sup> Rather than focussing on their personal relationship, *Memoirs* accounts for a broader portrayal of intellectual sociability, highlighting a recognition – rather than denial – of the community’s influence on literary production.

Why then, despite their increasingly fractious relationship, did Seward choose to author a biography of Darwin? What were her aims in doing so? What does *Memoirs* reveal about her approach to life-writing and to literary criticism? In part, Seward’s

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<sup>122</sup> Levy, 62.

<sup>123</sup> Stuart Harris, *Erasmus Darwin’s Enlightenment Epic* (Sheffield: Stuart Harris, 2002), 13-14, cited in *MED*, 30.

<sup>124</sup> Barnard, 110, 118. Barnard explores Seward’s involvement in the writings of Darwin, Mundy, Walter Scott, and her father more extensively in ‘Anna Seward’s Hidden Words: Female Interventions into Male Writing’, *Women’s Writing*, 19:4 (2012), 417-433. Barnard notes that Seward intended her contributions, which ‘proved her equal worth with her male peers to be revealed posthumously in her letters to Walter Scott and other literary colleagues on the publication of her collected letter books’, 430.

<sup>125</sup> Seward to Mary Powys, 27 February 1777, *SJBM*/2001.76.6.

writing *Memoirs* provided an opportunity to publicly address her contribution to *The Botanic Garden*. This has been likewise noted in scholarship. Donna Coffey asserts that ‘one source of bitterness that Seward clearly articulates in the Darwin *Memoirs* as that she was the true author of the first passage of Darwin’s *Botanic Garden*’.<sup>126</sup> Kairoff argues that Seward ‘turned the tables on her first poetic mentor’, by claiming ‘her poetic superiority [...] to the man who encouraged her verse writing at thirteen but later claimed her lines for his own’.<sup>127</sup> However, there were other motivations for the publication. Piozzi published her *Anecdotes* of Johnson in spite of their sometimes, and eventually entirely, contentious relationship because she felt she could offer unique insight into Johnson’s domestic life and thus write a biography that might enable her to gain cultural capital in the world of eighteenth-century letters. Though Darwin’s fame was by no means comparable to Johnson’s, Seward believed she too could offer a comparative perspective on Darwin by using personal anecdotes from his residence in Lichfield. However, *Memoirs* is a more ambitious biography than Seward lets on when she disarmingly refers to it as her ‘little Darwiniana’.<sup>128</sup> Moving from domestic recollections to critical analyses of Darwin’s poetry, Seward aimed to consecrate her status as a public literary critic. Like Piozzi, Seward trades on a number of ‘exchangeable tokens of modern authorship’ to gain cultural capital with *Memoirs*.<sup>129</sup> While Seward does exploit her personal connection to Darwin to provide original insights and emphasises her femininity as she draws on a unique domestic perspective, she also utilises her reputation as a poet and not only supplies evidence of her extensive literary knowledge to substantiate her

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<sup>126</sup> Coffey, 143.

<sup>127</sup> Kairoff, 235.

<sup>128</sup> *LAS*, vol. 6, 55.

<sup>129</sup> Gallagher, *Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), xiii.



status as literary biographer but defined the biographer as an arbiter of literary-biographical knowledge and poetic taste.

The remainder of this chapter explores how *Memoirs* both departs from and is influenced by the precedents set by Piozzi and Boswell in their treatment of the biographical subject as a literary figure. While Seward draws from *Anecdotes* in her portrayal of intimate, provincial literary sociability to memorialise Lichfield as a site of poetic culture, she also develops her own distinct approach. Despite distancing herself from his approach in her marginalia, I then show how Seward's *Memoirs* is influenced to a greater degree by Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* in her uniting of literary criticism and literary biography as she annexes a critical appraisal of *The Botanic Garden* to the *Memoirs*. Seward works within a framework of critical biography established by Johnson, which she utilises not only to establish and justify Darwin's place within a history of English poetry but to secure her own position as an arbiter of taste and disseminator of literary knowledge. As such, this chapter's final section explores how *Memoirs* reflects Seward's negotiation of these 'exchangeable tokens', examining ideals of intellectual sociability that underpin the biography and her treatment of the relationship between Darwin's life and his works, making biographical and critical authority a continuation, in the form of a prose biography, of an approach to poetic criticism developed in her annotating practices on authors such as Pope and Cowper who provide comparisons to Darwin in the *Memoirs*.

In the preface to *Memoirs*, Seward promises that the biography 'consists of the following particulars: the person, the mind, the temper of Dr. Darwin; his powers as a Physician, Philosopher, and Poet; the peculiar traits of his manners; his excellencies and faults'.<sup>130</sup> Like Piozzi's *Anecdotes*, Seward's *Memoirs* commits to a focus on the

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<sup>130</sup> *MED*, 52.

‘particulars’ of Darwin’s character. The candid portraits of Johnson presented by Piozzi and Boswell were admired by Seward; she praised Boswell’s *Journal*, arguing that, despite its ‘slipshod style’ and ‘egotism’ on Boswell’s part, it is rich with ‘the palpable fidelity of the interesting anecdotes’.<sup>131</sup> Expanding upon her praise in *Memoirs*, Seward affirms that ‘it is the fidelity of representation which makes Mrs Piozzi’s *Memoirs of Dr Johnson*, and Mr Boswell’s *Tour*, and his *Life* of that wonderful being, so valuable to those who wish not for an idol to worship, instead of a great man to contemplate’.<sup>132</sup> However, Seward is more expansive than Piozzi and Boswell, not only because she includes ‘an investigation of the constituent excellencies and defects of his excellent poem, *The Botanic Garden*’, but because the memoir will also remark upon ‘the characters and talents of those who formed the circle of his friends while he resided in Lichfield’.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, Seward is more avowedly a literary critic than either Piozzi or Boswell; she professes to evaluate Darwin’s poetry in terms of excellencies and faults; and she will set his achievement in the wider intellectual milieu of the Midlands Enlightenment. In this respect, although it is a precedent she commends, *Memoirs* departs in practice from Piozzi’s *Anecdotes*, and has a closer affinity to Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets*.

While *Memoirs* is an intimate account, Seward opts not to rely on personal papers and biographical artefacts. Though Seward begins with the modest claim that she is ‘qualified to present no more than a merely general view’, the rest of the preface belies that claim. This is particularly apparent in the conclusion to the preface, in which she claims that her memoir, alongside accounts by Robert Waring Darwin and Dewhurst

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<sup>131</sup> *LAS*, vol. 2, 80.

<sup>132</sup> *MED*, 53.

<sup>133</sup> *MED*, 52. Kairoff considers the extent to which *Memoirs* can be seen as a generic response to Boswell’s *Life*, claiming that Seward ‘attempted to surpass Boswell in his own biographical medium’ by ‘crafting a biography more honest and fair, if obviously less complete’, 238.

Bilsborrow, is the authoritative source of what can ‘be known that can now with accuracy be traced of Dr Darwin’.<sup>134</sup> Although Seward is professedly more ambitious than Piozzi in the scope of the content she will address in the *Memoirs*, she also sets parameters on the degree of intimacy she aims to attain in comparison to Piozzi’s invitation into Streatham Park. For one thing, Seward states that ‘Dr Darwin’s Letters make no part of these *Memoirs*’. This is because, she believes, ‘there would be no kindness to his memory in obtruding them upon the public; none to the public in swelling out books with materials of no intrinsic value’. Seward departs from Boswell’s precedent in particular here because, as Kairoff notes, she ‘seems to imply that her own, much briefer study is in fact superior because she eschews recourse to letters and conversations’.<sup>135</sup> The effect is a general impression, rather than a series of particular utterances or actions. According to Seward, Darwin ‘often said that he had not the talent of letter-writing’.<sup>136</sup> Seward makes the same observation about Johnson’s letters to Piozzi; she remarks that ‘letter-writing however appears to me not to have been his talent’, dismissing epistolary Johnson as ‘an unwieldy Trifler’.<sup>137</sup> Seward’s biographical approach balances authoritative content with selectivity, carefully controlling her portrayal of Darwin in contrast to accounts that relied on more personal biographical artefacts. Seemingly, Seward’s ‘kindness’ to Darwin indicates a concern with the ethics of biography and the negotiation of which private materials should be publicised or relied upon to discern character. Furthermore, Seward’s comment that there is no value in ‘swelling out books with materials’ also implies that her concern is not simply one of propriety but of protecting the quality of her own

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<sup>134</sup> *MED*, 54. Robert Waring Darwin later told Seward that he ‘never intended to write a life’ of his father. See Robert Waring Darwin to Seward, 5 March 1804, CUL/GBR/0012/MS DAR 227.4/16-17. This is a copy, made in 1868 by George Howard Darwin, of the original letter.

<sup>135</sup> Kairoff, 238.

<sup>136</sup> *MED*, 52.

<sup>137</sup> Seward to Piozzi, 14 March 1788, JRL/GB133/Eng MS 565/5. Seward’s letters to Piozzi relate her reading the edition of Johnson’s *Letters*. Seward’s annotated copies, now held by the Birthplace Museum (SJBM/2001.656.1 and 2), were gifted to her by Piozzi, presumably as thanks for her assistance obtaining Johnson’s correspondence with Hill Boothby.

composition, evidently conscious of avoiding Boswell's 'slipshod style'. While Seward proposed to divulge the particulars of Darwin's character through extensive studies of 'the peculiar traits of his manners' and his poetry, she is also aware of her own literary reputation. Seward does not want to appear a mere compiler of documents: she intended to foreground her own discernment in selecting and commenting upon materials.

Seward's preference for biographical truth, as opposed to flattery, was tested by her obligation to kindness in *Memoirs*. Her response to Piozzi's edition of Johnson's *Letters* exemplifies a preference for truth. In a letter to Piozzi, thanking her for 'the kind present of your last entertaining, & valuable Publication', Seward commends Piozzi for showing 'the great Man in an infinitely more benign, tho' less resplendent point of view than any other of his writings, or than any veritable record of his conversation cou'd possibly place him'. Seward appreciates the more sedate portrayal of an amiable Johnson because it is more authentic, and therefore more valuable, than other accounts and editions that sought to foreground 'Johnsonian fire'. This appreciation for authenticity is likewise demonstrated in Seward's marginalia relating to Johnson's description of his stepdaughter, Lucy Porter, in her copy of *Letters*. Johnson writes that 'Miss Lucy is more kind and civil than I expected, and has raised my esteem by many excellencies very noble and resplendent, though a little discoloured by hoary virginity'. While Johnson acknowledges Porter's admirable traits, he suggests that her age and marital status reduce her appeal. Seward contends that,

nothing was less to be trusted than the fidelity of Doc Johnson's strokes when he meant they sh<sup>d</sup>. be characteristic. How different from what she really was will Posterity conceive of Lucy Porter from this sentence! How ill do those marginalia & brilliant appellations suit her downright honesty, seldom expanded into generosity, her illiterate shrewdness, cherished vulgarism & mulish obstinacy.

Then there is a strange contradiction in the sentence itself. Hoary virginity may justly be said to discolour personal graces, but those, beyond a round face, tolerable features, & a clean skin, she is said never to have possess'd; & if she had, they are not qualities to raise esteem; while over the splendor, & nobleness of mental properties, a hoary Virginity of two & fifty years cou'd not have cast any dimness (**Figures 2.7 & 2.8**).<sup>138</sup>

For Seward, Johnson's account of Porter is problematic because his flattery distorts her true character, which Seward maintains was actually characterised favourably by generosity and cleverness but also by stubbornness and impoliteness. In the margin, Seward corrects Johnson, instead emphasising Porter's ordinariness, both in terms of appearance and intellect. This correction aligns with Seward's commitment to truth over kindness in *Memoirs*. While Seward values the alternative portrait of Johnson gleaned from his letters to Piozzi, she favours a honest representation that delineates imperfection, indicating she felt it was more valuable to commit the truth to posterity.

While Seward's focus is not on domestic details, she does include minute details about Darwin's character that could only be gleaned from an intimate proximity to him. Though letters are used tentatively, Seward views anecdotes, which were already being circulated publicly, as appropriate for inclusion in *Memoirs*. However, there was one anecdote that the Darwin family took particular offense to. In *Memoirs*, Seward detailed Darwin's response to his son's, Erasmus Darwin Jr., apparent suicide. When Darwin was informed that the body was discovered along the River Derwent, 'he exclaimed in a low voice, "Poor insane coward!" and it is said never afterwards mentioned the subject'.

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<sup>138</sup> SJBM/2001.656.1, 4. Seward copies this passage in her letter of 14 March to Piozzi: JRL/GB133/Eng MS 565/5.

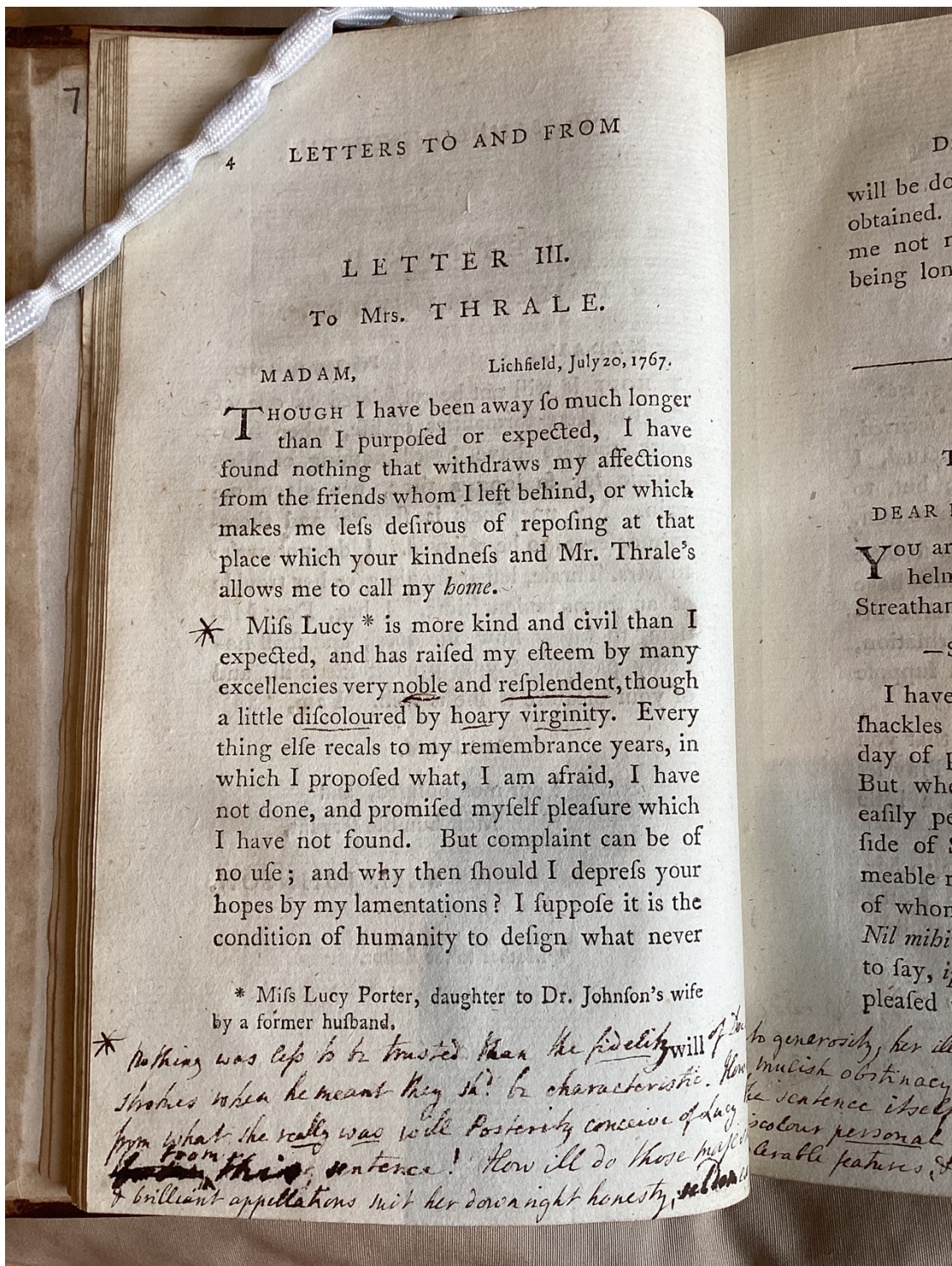


Figure 2.7. Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Letters to and from the late Samuel Johnson, LL. D.* (London: T. Cadell, 1788), 4, SJB/2001.656.1. Annotations in Seward's hand.

The epigram was written on having seen Mr. Kayleg's claim to Genius  
 denied in the public papers. Not being very long I take the liberty of transcribing  
 it  
 Praise, kindred Dunces, from your dear abodes,  
 Where folly nurs'd you, & where envy quads;  
 Praise, till your growing numbers equal those  
 That hurl'd at Pope's bright verse their murky prose!  
 So ye, at length, may rouse th' unwanted ire  
 That Wit, & Genius arm with all their fire,  
 Praise! that another Dunciad swift may save  
 Your groveling Tribe from dark Oblivion's wave,  
 And Kayleg's Gyre, upon the wing of Fame,  
 To Time's last limit bear each reptile name!

Nothing was ~~less~~ to be trusted than the fidelity of Dr. Johnson's strokes  
 when he meant they shou'd<sup>be</sup> characteristic. How different from what she really  
 was, will posterity conceive of Lucy Porter from ~~the~~<sup>a</sup> sentence in these letters.  
 "Miss Lucy has raised my esteem by many excellencies, very noble, & resplendent,  
 tho' a little discoloured by hoary virginity." How ill do those majestic & brilliant  
 appellations suit her downright honesty, <sup>seldom</sup> expanding into generosity;  
 her illiterate shrewdness, cherished vulgarity, & malish obstinacy. Then  
 there is a strange contradiction in the sentence itself. Hoary virginity  
 may be justly said to discolour personal graces, but those, beyond a man's  
 face, & a clean skin, it is said she never possessed - & if she had, they are  
 not qualities to raise esteem; while over the splendor, & nobleness of mental  
 properties the hoary virginity of two & fifty years cou'd have cast no demerit.

Figure 2.8. Letter from Anna Seward to Hester Piozzi, 14 March 1788, JRL/GB133/Eng MS 565/5.

Seward adds that Darwin was seen 'walking along the streets of Derby the day after the funeral of his son, with a serene countenance and his usual cheerfulness of address'.<sup>139</sup>

The family maintained that these accounts of Darwin's response to his son's death were untrue. Writing to Seward, Robert Darwin stated that 'the exclamation at the death of my poor brother is not correct [...] nor was it by any means in unison with his anguish on the

<sup>139</sup> MED, 245.

occasion'.<sup>140</sup> In her reply, Seward apologises and testifies her willingness to publicly 'correct a mistatement' ('Poor insane coward!') as 'unfounded'. However, she also defends herself, arguing that she does not deserve 'to be considered by the Relations of Doc<sup>r</sup>. Darwin as unjust to his virtues and high endowments'.<sup>141</sup> From the outset, Seward had defended her duty as biographer to Robert Darwin. When she had completed the manuscript in 1803, she offered him the chance to read it and reminded him that 'I am, to my best ability, the Recorder of departed Genius, not its indiscriminate Eulogist'. It is, she claims, her duty to 'the Public' to write 'Biography and Criticism' which 'admit neither partiality, nor depreciation, the exercise of those duties may, in some instances, have produced circumstances & observations, which tho' justice might demand them, filial attachment might wish had been avoided'.<sup>142</sup> Seward acknowledges the conflict between the duty of the biographer to transmit the truth and a desire to avoid defaming a friend's memory, but firmly upholds her obligation to impartiality. Though Robert Darwin reminds Seward that she is also duty-bound to 'the individuals nearly connected, to take all the care in his power that the anecdotes related are true', Seward tells him she can make no further amendments to the now-published *Memoirs* because it would 'bring discredit' on her 'biographic writing'.<sup>143</sup> Seward underscores the importance of maintaining her credibility and commitment to truth in biographical writing, even when faced with personal appeals.

Like *Anecdotes*, *Memoirs* was also received unfavourably by reviewers, though not because of any potential inaccuracy of the anecdotes; the issue was less about the

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<sup>140</sup> Robert Darwin to Seward, 10 February 1804, CUL/GBR/0012/MS DAR 227.4/9-11. 1868 transcription.

<sup>141</sup> Seward to Robert Darwin, 22 February 1804, CUL/GBR/0012/MS DAR 227.6/122-123. 1868 transcription.

<sup>142</sup> Seward to Robert Darwin, 10 May 1803, CUL/GBR/0012/MS DAR 227.6/97-98. 1868 transcription.

<sup>143</sup> Robert Darwin to Seward, 19 February 1804, CUL/GBR/0012/MS DAR 227.4/12-13. 1868 transcription. Seward to Robert Darwin, 2 March 1804, CUL/GBR/0012/MS DAR 227.6/125-126. 1868 transcription.



credibility of the biography than about the presentation of the life. The *Edinburgh Review* gave a scathing assessment, complaining that, ‘after having followed her with patience through her eccentric and capricious evolutions, we are unable to say that our progress has been rendered more pleasing by this irregular variety, or that it has afforded us any tolerable compensations for the want of a distinct and intelligible narrative’.<sup>144</sup> The review is reminiscent of Walpole’s censure of Piozzi’s *Anecdotes*, when he argues it is ‘too void of method even for such a farrago’.<sup>145</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, the issue for some readers was that Piozzi presented a series of anecdotes linked by the subjective association of her own memory, resulting in what appeared to be an unsystematic narrative that was more journalistic than artistic. The complaint about Seward’s *Memoirs*, however, reflects the biography’s digression not into further anecdotes but into other short biographies of Darwin’s contemporaries and into literary criticism. Critics evidently found the *Memoirs*’ leaning towards the genres of criticism and history disorienting. Seward, though, saw this as a refinement of the objectives and duties of literary biographical writing. *Memoirs* establishes a portrait of Lichfield intellectual culture more broadly, to which biographies of others are requisite, and draws together biographical authority and literary-critical judgement in the close readings of poems it presents.

The first chapter of *Memoirs* is a pertinent example of such digression. It begins by providing a ‘sketch of Dr Darwin’s character and manners’ and the ‘dawn of his professional establishment in Lichfield’. Seward also introduces ‘a knot of philosophic friends, in frequent visitation’, including Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Thomas Day. The remainder – and majority – of the chapter is dedicated to a biography of Day, in which Seward accounts for his ‘disposition, habits, and destiny’. Whereas Seward

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<sup>144</sup> ‘Art XVIII. Memoirs of the Life of Dr Darwin [...]’, *The Edinburgh Review*, ed. Francis Jeffrey (Edinburgh: A. Constable, 1804), vol. 4, 230-241, 231.

<sup>145</sup> Horace Walpole to Sir Horace Mann, 28 March 1786, in Horace Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole, Fourth Earl of Orford*, ed. Peter Cunningham, 9 vols (London: R. Bentley, 1891), vol. 9, 46.

promises only to provide memoirs of the twenty-three years Darwin resided in Lichfield, her biography of Day extends from cradle to grave; she includes, for instance, details on Day's childhood, his travels to France and subsequent 'aversion to the modern plans of female education', and his marriage to Esther Mills. Seward also reproduces Day's poetry extensively, though she provides little critical commentary upon it.<sup>146</sup> This is unanticipated, especially since a *Life of Day* had been published some years earlier, in 1791, by James Keir.<sup>147</sup> Seward clearly felt she could offer information that Keir had neglected to mention, including details of Day's adoption of two orphan girls, Sabrina and Lucretia, and included his poem, '*Elegy on a Young Lady*', which had not before appeared in print. In doing so, Seward sought to capture ephemeral details of Day's life and literary work and immortalise them in print, foregrounding her discernment in selecting materials and as a disseminator of new literary knowledge.

Ephemeral print is typically assigned a lower literary status than the book. Gillian Russell critiques the marginalisation of ephemeral materials as disposable or insignificant in comparison to books. Russell observes that 'book history has tended to frame the question of ephemera in terms of the centrality of books surrounded by concentric circles of relative ephemerality radiating out into the oblivion or deep space of the truly disposable or meaningless text'.<sup>148</sup> Though for Russell, the range of materials that constitute ephemera are broad, she considers materials that were constituted as such in the eighteenth century and their relative status. Johnson, Russell notes, refers to ephemera as 'fugitive' literature, meaning 'unstable', 'wandering', or 'flying'. The term was applied to 'small books or pamphlets; periodical publications and newspapers'. Johnson, Russell claims, had an idealised vision of collecting such materials together by combining them.

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<sup>146</sup> *MED*, 59, 61, 65, 65-72.

<sup>147</sup> James Keir, *An Account of the Life and Writings of Thomas Day, Esq.* (London: John Stockdale, 1791).

<sup>148</sup> Gillian Russell, *The Ephemeral Eighteenth Century: Print, Sociability, and the Cultures of Collecting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 13.

Yet, even when collected together, or compiled, for Johnson, this cannot equal the ‘genius’ of a book. Rather, this ephemera still ‘supplemented the well-established use of ‘grub’, as in ‘Grub Street’, used to signify a class of hack-writers who, maggot-like, fed on the genius of other writers’. Seward’s efforts in *Memoirs* to preserve ephemeral material aimed to prevent its consignment to oblivion, but resulted in a narrative that is seemingly ‘irregular’ and ‘unsystematic’. This approach, as with *Anecdotes*, threatens the perceived artistry of the *Memoirs*, making it appear less literary and more journalistic. However, specifically discussing playbills, Russell argues that these examples of ephemeral texts, as they are collected and repurposed, ‘signify the ephemerality of sociability and the power of such texts to create an archive of that sociability’.<sup>149</sup> The idea is applicable to Seward’s *Memoirs* because it is the sociability of Lichfield – and an imagined one of the English literary canon (which this chapter later examines more closely) – that she attempts to capture. By preserving such materials, Seward records the literary milieu she inhabited, challenging the notion that, not only ephemeral materials, but these provincial lives and works are of lesser value.

Seward’s reaction to Piozzi’s edition of Johnson’s letters highlights her disappointment with his dismissive portrayal of Lichfield’s intellectual culture. Though Seward praised the *Letters*, her response to the edition, recorded in her *Memoirs*, reveals a grievance with Johnson’s treatment of his birthplace in them. Seward writes:

it was curious that in Dr Johnson’s various letters to Mrs Thrale, now Mrs Piozzi, published by that lady after his death, many of them, at different periods, dated from Lichfield, the name of Darwin cannot be found; nor indeed, that any of the ingenious and lettered people who lived there; while of its mere common-life characters there is frequent mention, with many hints of Lichfield’s intellectual

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<sup>149</sup> Russell, 37, 40, 42, 159.

barrenness, while it could boast a Darwin, and other men of classical learning, poetic talents, and liberal information.

Only 28 letters sent by Johnson from Lichfield were included by Piozzi in the two volumes of *Letters*, which together contain a total of 367 letters. Seward's complaint is not so much directed at Piozzi as it is at Johnson. It is tempting to assume that Piozzi deliberately excluded letters because of potentially mundane content on Lichfield's 'mere common-life characters' and 'intellectual barrenness'.<sup>150</sup> However, in the letters written from Lichfield, Johnson rarely provides any extensive discussion of his hometown itself, stating that 'to write to you about Lichfield is of no use, for you never saw Stow-pool, nor Borowcop-hill'.<sup>151</sup> Johnson's letters instead tend to report on his interactions with individuals (especially his step-daughter, Lucy Porter).<sup>152</sup> The letter of 29 May 1779, in which Johnson records his engagements from that week, is one of the more extensive examples of Johnson's interactions with Lichfield locals. Despite keeping a busy schedule, including a dinner with Garrick, Johnson ends his letter by reflecting that the company in Lichfield does not make him 'forget Streatham' and declares that 'one should dream that all the world was Streatham, of which one may venture to say, *none but itself can be its parallel*'.<sup>153</sup> Though Johnson's allusion is bombastic in its sentimentality, the point holds. Other letters in the volumes also evidence a sustained complaint on the quality of the local company. Writing in 1775, for instance, Johnson notes that he does not expect, 'to find any friends here that could make me wish to prolong my stay'. What Seward believes Johnson sees to be an 'intellectual barrenness' is clear, for instance, in the letter of 19 June 1775, in which Johnson writes that 'Lady Smith has got a new post-

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<sup>150</sup> *MED*, 87.

<sup>151</sup> *LSJ*, vol. 1, 26-27.

<sup>152</sup> *MED*, 87.

<sup>153</sup> *LSJ*, vol. 2, 47. Johnson alludes to a line from Lewis Theobald's 1727 play, *The Double Falsehood*. Theobald claimed the play had been written by Shakespeare. This line was fastened on by Pope as proof that Shakespeare could not have written it.

chaise, which is not nothing to talk on at Lichfield. Little things here serve for conversation. Mrs. Ashton's parrot pecked my leg, and I heard of it some time after at Mrs. Cobb's'. The overall impression Johnson gives is pervaded with the sense that 'nothing extraordinary has happened at Lichfield'.<sup>154</sup> Johnson's subtle positioning of Lichfield against metropolitan sites of intellectual activity are similar to the treatment of the provinces in early biographies of Johnson's life, which implied that Lichfield was not fertile ground in which a genius could flourish.<sup>155</sup>

*Memoirs* presents a defence of literary and intellectual culture in Lichfield, which Seward believed Johnson had slighted and which Darwin embodied. Brewer has also reflected on Seward's attention not only to Darwin but to the lives of associated individuals in the *Memoirs*. Brewer observes that in celebrating the life of Darwin, Seward 'incidentally memorialized the cultural circles of Lichfield where she played such an important part'. Writing a memoir of Lichfield's 'most illustrious figure', Seward found, could be a means to 'publicize Lichfield's culture'.<sup>156</sup> However, Brewer states that Seward's depiction of the wider intellectual network in Lichfield is incidental and, by extension, subsidiary to the life of Darwin. However, I argue that *Memoirs* is a representation of intellectual society in Lichfield, which is consciously constructed. Seward's claim that she is 'the recorder of vanished Genius', extends beyond Darwin to a wider intellectual network in Lichfield, which repudiates the perception perpetuated in Piozzi's *Letters* and other early biographies.

How, then, does Seward capture the intellectual network in a biography of Darwin? In 1800, Seward attended Robert Evans Lloyd's public lecture which illustrated

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<sup>154</sup> *LSJ*, vol. 1, 289, 240, 287.

<sup>155</sup> See, for instance, William Rider, 'Mr. Johnson' (1762) and David Erskine Baker, 'Mr. Samuel Johnson, M.A.' (1764) in *The Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson*, ed. O. M. Brack, Jr., and Robert E. Kelley (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1974), 1-3, 5-7.

<sup>156</sup> Brewer, 455, 469.

a ‘model of the solar system: a larger, mechanical illuminated grand orrery’. Seward’s challenge to Lloyd’s methodology on the ‘juxtaposition of the Earth and the constellations’ inspired her to compose a poem: ‘The Terrestrial Year, on Her Progress thro’ the Signs of the Zodiac’. Remarking upon Seward’s ‘meticulous research’, Barnard shows that she ‘read tracts and books’ and discussed ‘her thoughts and ideas with scientific friends to prove to herself that Lloyd’s lecture was centred on “an exploded system respecting the course of the Sun’s and the Earth’s signs, as relative to each other”, and in doing so achieves ‘a poetic interpretation of scientific theory blended with neoclassical verse’.<sup>157</sup> *Memoirs* is another instance of Seward blending the literary with the scientific. While *Memoirs* was not inspired by scientific theory, the orrery did perhaps inspire the biography’s narrative. The orrery, a mechanical representation of the solar system, with gears and arms working to simulate the motions of planets and moons, provided a relational model for Seward, which she used to depict the interactions and collaborations of the intellectual network that orbited around Darwin. The organisation of the planets as comparable to men was also an image Darwin invoked in *The Botanic Garden*, which likely inspired Seward’s organisation of sociability in *Memoirs*: ‘the Botanic Queen assumes a livelier strain, and compares her little ministers to the planets in an orrery’.<sup>158</sup> The structure of *Memoirs* reflects this gravitational pull by focussing in on various figures in the intellectual circle. For example, though Day temporarily eclipses

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<sup>157</sup> Barnard, ‘Anna Seward’s “Terrestrial Year”: Women, Poetry, and Science in Eighteenth-Century England’, *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 7:1 (2009), 3-17, 3, 4. For Seward’s account of her challenge to Lloyd and inspiration for the poem, see *PWS*, vol. 3, 319-322. Seward’s poem was also published in *PWS*, vol. 3, 323-328.

Seward often draws on her scientific interests for poetic inspiration. Elsewhere, Barnard shows that Seward’s interest in volcanoes was prompted by her reading of Patrick Brydone’s *A Tour through Sicily and Malta in a Series of Letters to William Beckford, Esq. from P. Brydone* (1773), in which he recorded his explorations of Etna, Vesuvius, and Stromboli. Brydone’s *Letters* inspired Seward to compose ‘Mount Etna’. See Barnard, ‘The Lure of the Volcano in the Female Literary Imagination’, in *British Women and the Intellectual World in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Teresa Barnard (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 33-51, 43-51.

<sup>158</sup> *MED*, 154.

Darwin in the first chapter, Seward's larger narrative draws connections between lives, where writing about Darwin naturally leads to recording those such as Lovell Edgeworth, illustrating the collaborative nature of that network.

Seward's system of displaying the lives and works she sought to preserve encourages inclusivity, as she sought to record 'the men whose intellectual existence passed unnoticed by Dr Johnson in his deprecating estimate of Lichfield talents'. However, the individuals Seward depicts have varying degrees of prominence in her panorama of Lichfield intellectual society, and this is determined by their literary contribution. William Seward (no relation), for instance, 'was rather a satellite than a planet in that little sphere'. Though she concedes that Seward's talents were 'above the common level', she argues that his *Anecdotes of Distinguished Persons* (1795), was 'a compilation of more industry in the collection, than grace in the dress'. William Seward is also positioned on the peripheries because he was not resident at Lichfield but rather a visitor of Darwin and Day. In *Memoirs*, Seward notes that he lived in London and 'became known to the literary world as one of Dr Johnson's habitual companions'.<sup>159</sup> He was not, therefore, an example of 'Lichfield talents' but rather, according to Seward, a beneficiary of Johnson's metropolitan literary network. In his 'Preface' to Shakespeare's Plays, Johnson determined that proof of literary excellence is found in the 'length of duration and continuance of esteem'.<sup>160</sup> Seward believed that the critics in metropolitan networks controlled reputation and opportunity to achieve this 'continuance of esteem', often overlooking provincial talents. In *Memoirs*, Seward makes the case for provincial writers, whose work might otherwise have been forgotten because it was not published. As such, the lives and works of more obscure figures than William Seward that orbited

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<sup>159</sup> *MED*, 89, 63.

<sup>160</sup> Samuel Johnson, 'Preface to the Edition of Shakespeare's Plays (1765)' in *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. H. R. Woudhuysen (London: Penguin, 1989), 120-165, 120.

around Darwin are included. One example is William Vyse, ‘another of the Lichfield literati, overlooked by the arrogant Johnson’. According to Seward, Vyse ‘was not only a man of learning, but of Prioric talents in the metrical impromptu’. Seward proceeds to relate an anecdote in which Vyse wrote a poem extempore, which she reproduces in *Memoirs*. As with her inclusion of Day’s unpublished poem, Seward does not here pause to analyse Vyse’s poem, but includes it to preserve it and celebrate Lichfield’s literary talent.

For Seward, representing the wider intellectual network is crucial in the writing of a *Life* of Darwin because it captures him within a particular cultural moment in Lichfield’s history. Unlike other biographies of poets that isolate their subjects, Seward emphasises Darwin’s participation in the local community as a physician and inventor and show how his professional-scientific identities inform his poetry. Indeed, Seward remarks that Darwin ‘lived not, like Pope and Swift, Gray and Johnson, in exclusive devotion to abstract literature’.<sup>161</sup> This broader depiction of Darwin within his intellectual circle is not merely intended as a backdrop to the biography but is the foundation for Seward’s critical analyses in the second half of *Memoirs*. For Seward, *The Botanic Garden* could have only been composed by a poet with Darwin’s scientific expertise and character, shaped by his professional and social interactions in Lichfield. By positioning Darwin’s achievements within this collaborative network, Seward demonstrates how his poetry was a product of both inherent genius and communal influence.

Before moving on to a discussion of Seward’s criticism of Darwin’s poetry, I want to draw another point of comparison between *Memoirs* and Piozzi’s *Anecdotes*. I have shown that Seward envisages a larger purpose than *Anecdotes* to capture not a small domestic sociability within a single house, but a more expansive literary-intellectual

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<sup>161</sup> *MED*, 52, 87-88.



sociability operating in Lichfield. However, like Piozzi, Seward recognises that the anecdote device is an inherently sociable form, thus enabling Seward to articulate her own position in Darwin's 'little sphere' and signify her close proximity to him. Like Piozzi in relation to Johnson, Seward appears to depict herself modestly as Darwin's subordinate assistant. Writing in the third person, Seward relays an anecdote in which she attends Lady Northesk's consultation with Darwin and subsequently offers to provide Darwin with her own blood for a medical experiment:

Miss Seward then said — "If the trial should be determined upon, perhaps Lady Northesk would prefer a supply from an healthy human subject, rather than from an animal. My health is perfect, neither am I conscious of any lurking disease, hereditary or accidental. I have no dread of the lancet, and will gladly spare, from time to time, such a portion from my veins to Lady Northesk, as Dr Darwin shall think proper to inject".<sup>162</sup>

By framing herself a modest, supportive figure, Seward cultivates an image of feminine virtue – self-sacrifice, care, and generosity. However, her self-effacement here is strategic. Just as Piozzi invites the reader to distinguish between 'Mrs Thrale' the hostess and 'Mrs Piozzi' the author, Seward encourages her reader to recognise the distinction between the identities of 'Miss Seward' the assistant and Seward the biographer. In the intimate act of offering her blood, Seward aggregates authority to the domestic and claims power within that space by exploiting her proximity to Darwin to bolster her credibility as biographer. This dual identity as both character and author strengthens her own position within the community she documents.

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<sup>162</sup> *MED*, 63, 103.

Aggregating her authority to her gender, Seward refers to *Memoirs* also as a ‘feminine Darwiniana’.<sup>163</sup> Seward’s presentation of her femininity extends to her literary exchanges with Darwin. Though Seward refuses to include samples of Darwin’s correspondence, she does include ‘a playful correspondence passed between Dr Darwin and Miss Seward, in the name of their respective cats’, which occurred in 1780. While Seward claims that she ‘is apprehensive that they may be considered below the dignity which a biographic sketch of deceased Eminence ought perhaps to preserve’, she suggests they are useful biographical evidence because they show Darwin ‘in a new light of comic wit and sportive ingenuity’.<sup>164</sup> In one respect, Seward’s inclusion of this exchange seeks to preserve the letters, which also include poems, through publication. However, Barnard argues that they are

more than a portrait of Darwin’s ingenuity and poetic ability. Under the cover of light-hearted dialogue, Seward clearly reaches a self-realisation and declares her new self-sufficiency. Even as the exchange emphasises the authors’ shared literary ventures at a time when each was considering writing for publication, the contents of the letters and poems disclose the tensions present in their literary and personal relationships.<sup>165</sup>

Though Barnard does not substantiate her claim, the tensions she refers to are presumably evident in Mr Snow’s (Darwin) pining after Po Felina (Seward), which is not reciprocated. Snow writes that he sits at Felina’s window singing ‘serenades’ with a ‘fluttering heart’, and since she does not respond, he accuses her of ‘contented insensibility’. Snow ends the letter asking Felina to join him in singing a song he has written. In her letter, Felina criticises Snow’s song, accusing him of not subduing his

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<sup>163</sup> *LAS*, vol. 6, 94.

<sup>164</sup> *MED*, 111.

<sup>165</sup> Barnard, *A Constructed Life*, 114.

‘carnivorous desires’, and while she tells him she will sing his song ‘if you extremely wish it’, he must allow her ‘to sing a song of my own composition’. Presenting herself in the feminine domestic setting, Seward gains biographic authority for the anecdotes she includes. However, unlike Piozzi, who continues to assume a subordinate position to Johnson, Seward’s inclusion of the cat letters subtly asserts her autonomy, especially in literary endeavours. This approach not only preserves the memory of their shared intellectual exchanges, but positions Seward as an autonomous figure, not subject to the gravitational pull of the solar system orbiting Darwin she defines.

Seward’s positioning of Po Felina’s letter to Mr Snow in *Memoirs*, which attests to Seward’s independence from Darwin, is also significant. The letter concludes the third chapter, which is the final chapter before Seward’s analysis of *The Botanic Garden* commences. As such, Seward uses the letter to distance herself from Darwin’s influence and demonstrate her independent judgement and critical thought, which would be necessary for her evaluation of his literary work. Though, as we will see, Seward does not adopt a wholly objective critical approach, she nonetheless assumes a similar position of authority in *Memoirs*, signalling that her critical appraisal of Darwin’s work will not be sullied by personal loyalty. Yet, like Johnson, Seward recognised that a poet’s work cannot be understood in isolation from an examination of their life. As Adam Sisman notes, Johnson recognised that poets’ ‘works could be fully understood only in the context of their lives. The interaction between character and circumstance was the crucible in which art was made’.<sup>166</sup> It is this interplay between biography and poetry that Seward explicates in *Memoirs*. Positioning herself as both Darwin’s biographer and critic, Seward uses her privileged personal knowledge of Darwin to bolster her authority but frames her insight in a way that gives an impression of distance. For instance, in *Memoirs*, they are

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<sup>166</sup> Adam Sisman, *Boswell’s Presumptuous Task* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000), 167.

never seen interacting as authors; only in their roles as Po Felina and Snow, or Dr Darwin the physician and Miss Seward the assistant. This carefully negotiated distancing allows her to claim impartiality while subtly drawing on her intimate knowledge of Darwin to lend depth to her critical judgement. In doing so, Seward creates a biographical foundation for her literary authority, blending personal insight with the intellectual rigour expected of a critic. The final part of this chapter examines the influence of *Lives of the Poets* in *Memoirs* in the blending of biography and criticism.

While Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* aimed to establish an English literary canon, Seward critiqued its exclusivity and advocated for a more equitable assessment of the poets. Lawrence Lipking has showed that 'there was no great native history of art, no canon of what was best, no model of a standard of taste' before the mid-eighteenth century, until 'literary history was generated in the minds of a few men'. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* was one such attempt to respond to 'a national desire for an evaluation of what English poets had achieved', but it also met a call for 'a history of English poetry aimed at a wider audience than the poet and the critic' which 'would be inclusive, flexible, and accurate'.<sup>167</sup> Seward, however, believed Johnson had been too exclusive. She complains, for instance, that Johnson had not allowed 'Chatterton a place in those volumes in which Pomfret and Yalden were admitted'.<sup>168</sup> Seward also contended that the poets that were included in *Lives* were victim to Johnson's envious criticism. In a letter to the antiquary and literary editor Thomas Park in 1797, Seward states that Johnson's 'first ambition, early in life, was poetic fame'. Later 'disappointed in the darling wish, indignant of less than first-rate eminence, he hated the authors, preceding or

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<sup>167</sup> Lawrence Lipking, *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 3, 19, 328, 347.

<sup>168</sup> *LAS*, vol. 5, 273. Roger Lonsdale notes that 'Johnson himself always insisted that he had little or no responsibility for the contents [...]. By his own account, he recommended only the inclusion of Pomfret, Yalden, and Watts'. See *LEP*, vol. 1, 9.

contemporary, whose fame, as poets, eclipsed his own. In writing their lives, he gratified that dark passion'.<sup>169</sup> The poet Anna Rogers Stokes proposed that Seward should undertake to write an alternative history of English Literature to Johnson's. Seward declined, describing it as 'the task of attempting to stem that overwhelming tide of injustice and malignity'.<sup>170</sup> Nonetheless, Seward's *Memoirs* represents an extension, rather than reappraisal, of the canon Johnson created with his *Lives* as she sought to determine a place for Darwin within it.

As previously discussed, Johnson's and Seward's writings often demonstrate opposing critical tendencies. Seward favoured close readings that thoroughly assessed the particulars of a work but fairly demonstrated an appreciation of it. Johnson's earlier critical writing, John Wain shows, was similarly founded on close readings of texts, which focussed intently 'on particularities of versification and structure'.<sup>171</sup> However, his mature critical writing – namely *Lives of the Poets* – departs from such dissections. For instance, in the *Life* of Milton, Johnson considers diction, versification, and rhyme in turn, but his observations are general, rather than presenting the particulars of a close reading. This is especially pertinent in this *Life*, since Johnson argues that 'Milton's style was not modified by his subject: what is shown with greater extent in *Paradise Lost*, may be found in *Comus*'.<sup>172</sup> Despite the divergences in their tenets of literary criticism, Seward follows Johnson's example more than her censure of *Lives* in her correspondence might imply.

Seward sought to expand the emerging canon by positioning Darwin within it. By the 1750s, Shakespeare's works were recognised the pinnacle of English literature. By the

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<sup>169</sup> *LAS*, vol. 5, 31, 31-32.

<sup>170</sup> *LAS*, vol. 3, 351.

<sup>171</sup> John Wain, *Johnson as Critic* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 16.

<sup>172</sup> *LEP*, vol. 1, 293.

1780s, Milton had joined him in what Seward terms the ‘Temple of British Muses’.<sup>173</sup> Johnson’s censure of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as a work that ‘none ever wished [...] longer than it is’, is often cited as an example of Johnson’s disdain of the poet. However, Johnson also declares Milton’s pre-eminence when he states that ‘from this book alone the Art of English Poetry might be learned’.<sup>174</sup> As a result of his elevation in status, Milton’s poetry became a cornerstone of an emerging English literary canon. Milton’s elevation was also guided by patriotism; Lipking demonstrates that ‘English literary history was shaped by the need for a definition of the superiority of the national character’. Milton was particularly suited for this purpose because he inspired a freeing of ‘English pens to outstrip the cloistered conservative rule-bound verses of less favored nations’. This prompted a canonical ‘line of succession’, enabling a number of mid-century poets including Thomson, Akenside, Collins, Gray, Mason, and Smart, to be endorsed in his wake. In response to this expansion of the canon, it is therefore not inconceivable that Seward should attempt to identify Darwin, whom she recognises as upholding this sense of poetic freedom from his predecessors, as one such ‘British Muse’ and find a place for him in the ‘Temple’. *Memoirs* relies on existing conceptualisations of the canon and seeks to expand it, rather than redefine it. Moreover, it was not inconceivable that Seward should be the one to canonise Darwin. Lipking notes that the literary biographies that culminated in the eighteenth century were ‘by men who had established reputations as poets’.<sup>175</sup> There was an established precedent of the poet turning biographer, whether by the production of a comprehensive biography of a single-author (such as William Mason’s *Memoirs of Thomas Gray (1775)*) or the incorporation of biographical writings into critical assessments (such as Thomas Warton’s *History of*

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<sup>173</sup> Seward to Piozzi, 15 April 1790, JRL/GB133/Eng MS 565/11.

<sup>174</sup> *LEP*, vol. 1, 290, 293.

<sup>175</sup> Lipking, 329, 333.

*English Poetry* (1774-1781)). Though she was a woman, Seward had an established reputation as a poet that she could draw on to assert her critical authority as a biographer, as Johnson, Mason, and Warton, had done before her.

In *Memoirs*, Seward navigates several competing imperatives: her personal relationship with Darwin; a commitment to objective criticism; and the challenge of asserting her authority as a female critic. Resultantly, these factors, which often appear at odds, all inflect her criticism of *The Botanic Garden*. Though in the biographical chapters of *Memoirs* Seward stakes her claim to impartiality, the critical chapters are marked by her obligation to Darwin's memory, which appear to outweigh her pledge to practise objective criticism. In her letter to Piozzi of April 1790, Seward writes of her pride in Darwin's poem as 'the Production of a creative, brilliant & elevated Imaginative' work, which is 'polished into higher blaze than even Pope's'.<sup>176</sup> Seward's admiration of the poem, and her assertion of Darwin's superiority over other canonical poets, continues in *Memoirs*. Asserting his superiority over other canonical poets and elevating his poetic descriptions as exemplars 'of excellence yet unequalled in its kind, and never to be excelled in the grandeur of its conceptions', even by *Paradise Lost*. Darwin is, for Seward, a 'Genius', since only 'Genius alone, bold, original, creative, and fertile in the extreme' could have produced such a work. She emphasises the beauties, rather than faults of *The Botanic Garden*, noting: 'far from censuring the very infrequent repetitions, which we may find through this great work, wonder and praise will rise in the mind of every true lover of the poetic art, contemplating that exhaustless variety of ideas, imagery and expression [...] kindled at the orb of Genius'.<sup>177</sup> Seward's prioritising admiration and

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<sup>176</sup> JRL/GB133/Eng MS 565/11.

<sup>177</sup> *MED*, 144, 148, 172. In this way, Seward can be seen to be aligning herself with an Addisonian approach to criticism. Diedre Lynch explains that Addison argues that "one of the characteristic of a true critic" is dwelling on "beauties rather than faults," but Johnson corrects him: "the duty of criticism is neither to deprecate, nor dignify by partial representations, but to hold out the light of reason, whatever it may discover.", 195.

enthusiasm in her critical appraisal exemplifies the tensions in her critical writing seen earlier in marginalia. Her tendency to praise with ‘little discrimination’ (as Constable observed) and to abandon thought for feeling (as Monk argues) reflects the challenge of balancing personal loyalty with critical rigour.

In *Memoirs*, a gendered rhetoric emerges. In her marginalia and letters, Seward sought to disavow a gendered rhetoric, cultivating an assertive independence in her critical judgements. Seward’s disavowal of the gender-inflected critical rhetoric that Castle identifies suggests her desire to transcend the limitations imposed on women’s critical writing. This shift can be attributed, in part, to the public nature of the biography, which she perhaps felt required a more tentative, modest tone that could be perceived as more appropriately feminine. This is not to say, though, that *Memoirs* eschews strong critical judgement. Instead, Seward balances this with a respectful engagement with the reader, fostering an intellectual relationship that contrasts with the more assertive style of male critics like Johnson. For example, Seward invites the reader to appreciate Darwin’s poetic genius by appealing to the reader’s perception of beauty:

if the reader is susceptible to poetic beauty; if he can feel that what never can be seen in reality, may yet be painted naturally; a strict survey of this poetical ascension will enable him to perceive, what indeed countless other instances in this Poem evince, that its author most eminently possessed that rare talent.<sup>178</sup>

Here, Seward demonstrates a rhetoric that combines authority with modesty. Her authority is evident as she guides the reader through the poems’ beauties to recognise Darwin’s talent. Seward does not merely offer her own opinion but proposes a method for the reader to follow – ‘a strict survey’ – that leads them to the same conclusion about Darwin’s ‘rare talent’. Seward’s instructional approach indicates a confidence in her

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<sup>178</sup> *MED*, 167.



critical judgement and the validity of her analysis. At the same time, her rhetoric is markedly modest. Seward frames her critical insight as an invitation or challenge rather than a command ('if the reader is susceptible'; 'if he can feel'), which acknowledges readers' individual sensibility. Seward's approach here contrasts with the more assertive, prescriptive criticism of Warburton and Johnson, who positioned themselves as final arbiters of taste ('the critic always has the last word'); Johnson 'insists upon his right to criticize whatever he sees on its own merits, without excisions and without excuses'.<sup>179</sup> Elevating the reader by appealing to their own ability to appreciate poetic beauty, Seward fosters a collaborative intellectual engagement.<sup>180</sup> As such, her approach reflects a personal connection to Darwin and a strategic positioning of him within the literary canon, where she appeals to readers' capacity to appreciate poetic beauty. This intersection of critical independence and modesty in Seward's criticism underscores the ways in which gender shapes her persona as a literary critic in the transition from private (marginalia) to public (print) discourse.

While Seward combines a rational approach with one of feeling and appreciation, typical of women's critical writing in the period, this balance is less evident in *Memoirs* compared to the marginalia. In the biography, she struggles to practise a more rational objectivity characteristic of Augustan criticism due to the competing imperatives she is required to navigate. Yet, Seward recourses to evaluative strategies to regain authority. She extends the comparative methodology she previously employed in marginalia to her treatment of Darwin's poetry in *Memoirs*, drawing parallels with Johnson's own approach to literary evaluation. In the *Life of Dryden*, for example, Johnson concludes that Dryden

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<sup>179</sup> Lipking, 344, 345, 430-431.

<sup>180</sup> Betty A. Schellenberg describes how women novelists in the eighteenth century built a rapport with their readers by elevating the readers' status and writing prefatory material in a distinctly modest rhetoric. See "To Renew Their Former Acquaintance": Print, Gender, and Some Eighteenth-Century Sequels', in *Part Two: Reflections on the Sequel*, ed. Paul Budra and Betty A. Schellenberg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 85-101.

‘had more musick than Waller, more vigour than Denham, and more nature than Cowley’.

Illustrating the comparison to Cowley, Johnson asserts Dryden’s superiority: ‘if Cowley had sometimes finished a line, he had it by chance. Dryden knew how to chuse the flowing and the sonorous words; to vary the pauses, and adjust the accents; to diversify the cadence, and yet preserve the smoothness of his metre’.<sup>181</sup> In doing so, Johnson begins to define Dryden’s poetic particularities that account for his superiority.

Responding to a parody in imitation of Darwin’s *the Loves of the Plants*, entitled the ‘Loves of the Triangles’, Seward remarks that ‘the verse of this ironical poem is not only Darwinian, but it is beautifully Darwinian’.<sup>182</sup> What exactly does it mean to be ‘Darwinian’? To answer this, Seward conducts comparative analyses to revered examples of epic poetry. In her examination of *The Botanic Garden* as an epic poem, Seward aligns it with Pope and Cowper’s respective translations of *The Iliad* to gain ‘a just estimation of poetic merit’. In comparison to Cowper, Seward establishes that Pope’s translation ‘is grander and more graceful as well as more simple’, and it more effectively meets her criteria for ‘perspicuity, elegance, and interest; the grade of picture, and the harmony of numbers’. However, Seward argues that ‘poetry has no picture more exquisite than we meet in the second, third, and fourth lines [of Pope’s translation]; but an infinite number, equally vivid and beautiful, rise to the reader’s eye, as it explores the pages of Doctor Darwin’s *Botanic Garden*’.<sup>183</sup> Situating Darwin within this tradition of modern epic, the comparisons serve to position Darwin within a line of succession, legitimising his place in the canon.

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<sup>181</sup> *LEP*, vol. 2, 153.

<sup>182</sup> *MED*, 148. Wilson et. al. explain the context in which the parody, attributed to George Canning, John Hookham Frere, and George Ellis, was written. It was ‘designed to destroy Dr Darwin’s ideas which, the authors deemed, undermined the established Anti-Jacobin government and the Anglican religion’. Resultantly, the critique ‘dramatically diminished Darwin’s reputation as a poet’, 177.

<sup>183</sup> *MED*, 157, 127, 158, 127.

For Seward, the adjective ‘Darwinian’ characterises verse that not only celebrates scientific knowledge through imaginative ‘picture’ but also reflects Darwin’s advocacy for the union between science and art. This characterisation – the personification of nature and making it the hero of the epic narrative, to educate as well as entertain, and the establishing of a modern approach to a classical genre – mirrors Seward’s perception of Darwin’s unique contributions and commitment to integrating the scientific and poetic imaginations. For Seward, Darwin’s identity as an epic poet cannot be separated from his identities as a physician, scientist, and public figure; rather, these professional identities enhance her positioning of him within the epic tradition and are the terms of which she canonises him.

Observing that ‘a man writes much better than he lives’, Johnson acknowledges that there is often a ‘striking contrariety between the life of an author and his writings’. Though Johnson discourages eisegetical readings, – Lipking shows that Johnson distrusted connections between the life and the works and ‘could not indulge the vulgar fallacy of confusing the personality revealed by the poet’s life with the genius and powers manifested by his poems’ – *Lives of the Poets* sees Johnson ‘joining his critical abilities with his lifelong analysis of human behavior’ as he examines how individual poets’ experience and behaviour shapes their creative output.<sup>184</sup> Indeed, Johnson was desirous for such connections to be made in other works of biography and literary criticism he read. In a letter to Piozzi, he criticises Elizabeth Montagu for ‘negligence of transition’ between biography and criticism in her *Essay on Shakespear*. The letter to Piozzi also acknowledges the difficulty Johnson encountered when connecting the life and work: ‘I am seeking something to say about men of whom I know nothing but their verses, and

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<sup>184</sup> Lipking, 420, 413.

sometimes very little of them'.<sup>185</sup> Indeed, the success of Johnson's desire to offer a smooth transition varies between the *Lives*.

The *Life* of Dryden, for instance, is peppered with vignettes that surmise the effect of Dryden's life and character on his literary output. Johnson critiques Dryden's character as influencing the quality of his poetry when he observes that 'he had no care to rise by contending with himself; but while there was no name above his own, was willing to enjoy fame on the easiest terms'. According to Johnson, Dryden 'was no lover of labour. What he thought sufficient, he did not stop to make better; and allowed himself to leave many parts unfinished, in confidence that the good lines would overbalance the bad'. Johnson here suggests that Dryden's contentment with his work led to complacency; had Dryden been more ambitious, his output could have been even greater. Johnson also suggests that underdeveloped aspects of Dryden's work can be attributed to his precarious financial situation. Dryden was forced to pursue writing drama, 'compelled undoubtedly by necessity', which led to work that Johnson perceives as lacking in quality. Johnson interprets this as evidence that Dryden 'appears never to have loved that exercise of his genius'. The unevenness of his literary output is also attributed to other motivations throughout Dryden's life, such as his religious conversion motivated by political expediency.<sup>186</sup> The *Life* of Dryden uncovers the connections between the poet's work and their circumstances – Dryden operated in a milieu of literary-political patronage in which factional allegiance determined success, and these factors exacerbated tendencies towards expedience and indolence.

In Johnson's *Life* of Milton, however, connections are rather drawn between poetry and character. Johnson had earlier noted in his *Rambler* essay that the exception to

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<sup>185</sup> *LSJ*, vol. 2, 101, 100.

<sup>186</sup> *LEP*, vol. 2, 81.

his rule was Milton: he is ‘found equal to his own character, and having preserved in a private and familiar interview, that reputation which his works had procured him’.<sup>187</sup>

Johnson found that Milton’s poetry, in its dealing with literary imagination, was insincere because Milton failed adequately to engage with human emotion. Johnson suggests that Milton was not a good observer of people, for ‘he knew human nature only in the gross, and had never studied the shades of character, nor the combinations of concurring, or the perplexity of contending passions. He had read much, and knew what books could teach; but had mingled little in the world, and was deficient in the knowledge which experience must confer’. This deficiency, according to Johnson, renders *Paradise Lost* as having a ‘want of human interest’ because

it comprises neither human actions nor human manners. The man and woman who act and suffer, are in a state which no other man or woman can ever know. The reader finds no transaction in which he can be engaged; beholds no condition in which he can by any effort of imagination place himself; he has, therefore, little natural curiosity or sympathy.

In short, ‘reality was a scene too narrow’ for Milton because his mind, ‘fermented by study’, was ‘exalted by imagination’.<sup>188</sup>

While Seward observed in Cowper, much as Johnson did with Dryden, a ‘striking contrariety between the life of an author and his writings’, her view of Darwin, like Johnson’s on Milton, instead emphasises a close connection between poetry, life, and character. In her assessment of *The Botanic Garden*, Seward suggests that Darwin’s contribution to the genre lies in his ability to unite scientific knowledge with poetic imagination. In her assessment of *The Economy of Vegetation*, Seward observes that

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<sup>187</sup> Johnson, ‘No. 14. Saturday, 5 May 1750’, in W. J. Bate, and Albrecht B. Strauss, (eds.), *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Volume III, The Rambler* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), 74-80, 74.

<sup>188</sup> *LEP*, vol. 1, 289-290.

Darwin's metaphorical depiction of 'operations on the water' parallels 'the progressive and returning course of the blood, intertwining natural processes with physiological functions. Darwin's portrayal of blood enlivening 'the fair complexion of youthful beauty', bringing a 'warm glow to her hair' and 'lightning to her eyes', forms 'a lovely picture in this simile'. Seward further highlights how Darwin seamlessly transitions into 'a medical observation in fine poetic figure', as the blood returns 'to the warm concave of the vital urn'. Seward notes the 'artful grace with which this Poet subdues the difficulty of rendering all sorts of science. Subservient to the purposes of high heroic verse; or to observe how seldom even the most technical terms diminish the harmony of his measure, or the elegance of his imagery'.<sup>189</sup> In her analysis, Seward sees scientific accuracy enriching, rather than diminishing, the beauty of Darwin's verse. Moreover, Seward sees this union of the art and science as Darwin's redefinition of the boundaries of epic poetry, transitioning away from its traditional focus on historical and mythic themes to a modern, intellectual framework. For instance, in Darwin's reinterpretation of the epic tradition, nature becomes the heroic protagonist. Seward highlights how Darwin elevates even small elements of the natural world, exemplified in his treatment of the *Draba* plant. Though it is 'one of the Alpine grasses', typically 'minute and dwarfish', *Draba* is transformed into a 'vast, commanding, and imperial' figure upon Mount Tenerif.<sup>190</sup> Darwin's ability to magnify the apparently humble into epic proportions, for Seward, exemplifies his poetic imagination, which blends scientific detail with mythic grandeur. Much like classical epics, which sought to impart moral and philosophical lessons through the deeds of their heroes, Darwin's poetry aims both to entertain and to educate.

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<sup>189</sup> MED, 155. Seward is specifically discussing lines 47-56 of *The Botanic Garden, Part I. Containing The Economy of Vegetation. A Poem* (London: J. Johnson, 1791), 118.

<sup>190</sup> MED, 193. Seward is specifically discussing lines 251-258 of *The Botanic Garden, Part II. Containing The Loves of the Plants. A Poem* (London: J. Johnson, 1791), 27.

However, the triumphs and struggles depicted in *The Botanic Garden* are not mythological but scientific, positioning him as a poet of modern knowledge.

Seward's portrayal of Darwin as a benevolent figure also aligns with the traditional values of epic poetry, where heroes are defined by their moral virtues alongside their intellectual or physical prowess. In classical epics such as *The Aeneid* or *The Iliad*, the hero's sense of duty, benevolence, or moral righteousness is an archetypal trait. In *The Botanic Garden*, Darwin's scientific knowledge and humanitarian spirit similarly become the moral essence of the poem, as the poem embodies not only intellectual brilliance but moral integrity. Seward reads Darwin's critique of the slave trade in *The Loves of the Plants* as one such example. She describes his denunciation of slavery as 'another sublime philippic' against 'the plague-spot in the moral and religious health of Britain', indicating that the institution is not only a social evil but a moral failing of the nation. In praising Darwin's 'striking appeal to our senators', Seward links Darwin's poetic expression to his political activism. She further emphasises Darwin's admirable dropping of 'the curtain of moral truth and humanity over the tissues of fancy', indicating his ability to transition from imaginative descriptions of nature and science to immediate social issues. For Seward, this passage, which she describes as 'the grandest of his second-part Cantos', demonstrates Darwin's mastery of merging poetic creativity with an ethical challenge to his readers.<sup>191</sup> In doing so, Seward sees him redefining the epic genre, where moral activism, not mythic heroism, becomes central.

By connecting Darwin's biography to his poetry in these respects, Seward suggests that his poetry is not merely an artistic endeavour but an extension of his broader contributions to society. His roles as a physician and intellectual leader of the Lunar Society inform Seward's reading of Darwin's poetry, where the heroism of nature reflects

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<sup>191</sup> *MED*, 211-212. Seward is specifically discussing lines 439-462 of *The Botanic Garden, Part II*, 131-132.

his dedication to advancing knowledge. In *The Botanic Garden*, Darwin personifies the vine as a ‘Bacchanalian Female’, who entices ‘sweet youths’ to indulge in wine. The seductive *Vitis* is juxtaposed with the introduction of the malevolent *Chemia*, who ‘scowls’ over the feast and ‘mingles poison in the nectar’d bowls’.<sup>192</sup> *Chemia*’s interference is intended to reveal the destructive potential of indulgence and the danger beneath seemingly pleasurable pursuits. Seward observes that Darwin’s image here reflects his professional medical perspective, stating that ‘the Doctor introduces, and enforces his just and favourite system, of considering the free use of vinous fluid, in all its stages, and the source of our most fatal chronic diseases’. The critique is underscored by Darwin’s explanatory note, which Seward deems deserving of being ‘engraved on every man’s memory’ as it attests to his extensive medical expertise.<sup>193</sup> As such, Seward draws on Darwin’s professional identity to validate his poetic contributions, illustrating how his professional identities inform his imaginative work. By integrating scientific knowledge into poetry, *The Botanic Garden*, for Seward, demonstrates how artistic achievement is connected to Darwin’s broader contribution to society. The heroism of nature and moral warnings embedded in verse reflect his dedication to advancing knowledge and improving public health.

This chapter has shown how Seward positioned herself as an authority on poetry in the world of eighteenth-century letters and sought to contrast her approach to that of her contemporaries. Her extensive reading and participation in literary networks shaped her critical methodology, blending Augustan technical precision with emerging Romantic sensibilities. Seward’s annotations in books are crucial in this regard, as they constitute her attempt to formulate an ideal literary criticism that balanced the demands of a more

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<sup>192</sup> *The Botanic Garden, Part II*, 124.

<sup>193</sup> *MED*, 209-210.



objective, technical reading with valorisation of emotional resonance. In navigating a largely patriarchal tradition of literary criticism, Seward strategically blends assertive judgements with a modest, instructional rhetoric, that enables her to contribute seriously to intellectual-literary debate. As a biographer, Seward's *Memoirs* of Darwin merges her personal knowledge of him with her critical acumen, positioning him within the English literary canon and thereby defending Lichfield's intellectual culture against Johnson's dismissive portrayal. In doing so, Seward's approach blends biography with literary analysis, using her intimate relationship with Darwin to inform her critical evaluation of his work.

Like Piozzi, Seward rejects detached, public accounts of literary figures, asserting that personal insight and intellectual rigour provide a deeper, and more authoritative, understanding of the biographical subject. Seward's biographical method grants her portrayal an authoritative voice that bridges personal engagement with critical evaluation. In this way, Seward challenges dominant, patriarchal literary hierarchies, positioning herself at an intersection between biographer and critic, which advances a more inclusive and personal model of critical discourse. Chapter Three continues the study of Seward's life-writing, turning towards an examination of her posthumously published *Letters*. Seward found a compilation of her correspondence an apt form for autobiography, presenting moments of intense feeling and insight alongside critical acuity in her responses to literature, using those responses to display her selfhood.

## Chapter 3

### Epistolary Self-Fashioning: Anna Seward's Letters

In her correspondence, Anna Seward refers to the novelist Samuel Richardson as the cornerstone of British epistolary writing; for her, he was the 'Shakespeare of prose'.<sup>1</sup> In 1787, Seward publicly stated her preference for Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-1748) to Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones* (1749). Seward's essay was prompted by an article on novels by Richard Cumberland published in his *Observer*, and in it she accuses him of lavishing undue 'praise' on *Tom Jones* while holding *Clarissa* in 'contempt'.<sup>2</sup> Seward argues that it is Richardson's use of letters in the novel that 'in the master-strokes of truth, and nature, [...] delineate the mind, and the manners of the supposed writer; besides throwing strong collateral light, and colouring, upon other characters in the work'.<sup>3</sup> Richardson's epistolary novels, were, Teresa Barnard notes, what prompted Seward to see her own correspondences as autobiographical artefacts. Barnard contends that 'there is, undeniably, a prevailing literary influence at work in her juvenile letters. The fiction writers to whom Seward best related in her youth wrote in the epistolary genre which dominated the eighteenth-century European literary canon'.<sup>4</sup>

Seward's early letters, written when she was in her early twenties, between 1762 and 1768, were addressed to an imaginary correspondent, 'Emma'. The letters to Emma, as per Seward's request in her will, were published by Walter Scott in his *Poetical Works of Anna Seward* in 1810, and thus kept separate from her actual, and mature, correspondence to be published by Archibald Constable the following year.<sup>5</sup> Barnard's

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<sup>1</sup> *LAS*, vol. 2, 390.

<sup>2</sup> Seward, 'On the *Clarissa* of Richardson and Fielding's *Tom Jones*', in *Variety: A Collection of Essays. Written in the year 1787* (London: T. Cadell, 1788), 214.

<sup>3</sup> Seward, *Variety*, 223.

<sup>4</sup> Teresa Barnard, *Anna Seward: A Constructed Life* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Seward's will states, 'this bequest to Mr. Scott consists of all my writings in verse, which have passed the press, together with those which yet remain unpublished; also a collection of my juvenile letters, from the

study of the juvenile letters, which she argues constitute a journal, demonstrates that the letters were intended to function as life-writing. In them, Seward provides ‘detailed accounts of her early life and upbringing [...] family history, educational background [...] and the cultural pressures and constrictions that were present during her formative years’.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Seward’s first letter to Emma, written in 1762, states her aim to disclose biographical detail within her correspondence in response to Emma’s imagined inquisitiveness: ‘it is my wish that you should better know the heart in which you possess so lively an interest’.<sup>7</sup> Seward’s letters to Emma go beyond factual narration because they also offer a more intimate and emotional self-expression, blending moments of introspection with details of daily life. As such, Seward presents her life not as a detached chronicle of events but as a series of personal reflections and record of feelings on those events, both daily and local, and national and historical.

James L. Clifford, however, has warned against using Seward’s mature *Letters* as an authentic biographical source. Clifford works with an understanding of factual reliability rather than authorial self-fashioning and performative identity, and so his approach is misaligned with the intention of the correspondence. He argues that the six volumes ‘do not represent what Anna Seward originally wrote but rather what she decided in late life would better enhance her reputation’.<sup>8</sup> Using the twelve autograph letters written by Seward to Piozzi, Clifford briefly explores Seward’s textual adjustments to the original manuscripts.<sup>9</sup> His main issue is that ‘none of the original letters [...] bears the same date as its corresponding printed version’. Though, as Clifford reminds us, it

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year 1762 to June 1768’. See ‘Will of Anne otherwise Anna Seward of Lichfield, Staffordshire’, NA/PROB11/1502/15. Seward’s will is reproduced in W. C. Oulton, *The Beauties of Anna Seward, Carefully Selected and Alphabetically Arranged, under Appropriate Heads* (London: C. Chapple, 1813), viii-xvi, xiii.

<sup>6</sup> Barnard, 16.

<sup>7</sup> *PWS*, vol. 1, xlvi.

<sup>8</sup> James L. Clifford, ‘The Authenticity of Anna Seward’s Published Correspondence’, *Modern Philology*, 39 (1941), 113-122, 113.

<sup>9</sup> Seward’s letters to Piozzi, written between 1787 – 1790, JRL/GB133/Eng565 and JRL/GB133/Eng892/12.

was common practice in the period ‘to place the postmark on a letter upon its arrival in London rather than at the provincial place of posting’, he notes that Seward’s intervals of up to ‘fifteen and sixteen days are much too long’, and so argues that ‘the printed dates are spurious or at least only approximately correct’. Based on these inaccuracies, Clifford concludes that ‘the 1811 edition cannot be implicitly trusted for facts or contemporary opinions and not even for a strict chronology of the period’.<sup>10</sup> My argument in this chapter is that, by dismissing the *Letters*’ authenticity based on their supposedly dubious chronology, Clifford critically overlooks their wider value. *Letters* is a set of diffuse documents that Seward uses to piece together a cohesive identity as a literary intellectual, and gain interest in their intersecting personal reflection, literary criticism, and presentation of epistolary relationships. *Letters* contribute to the redefinition of literary biography in this period by demonstrating how intellectual authority can emerge from the letter as an intimate mode of life-writing. Seward’s *Letters* are thus central to positioning women’s life-writing as a legitimate and influential form of literary-biographical knowledge.

This chapter will show that Seward’s *Letters* reveal insights into her intellectual and domestic life in Lichfield, the literary network she was part of, and how an author’s letters could be compiled and edited to constitute a literary (auto)biography. Editions of letters abounded in the eighteenth century, with the publication of Alexander Pope’s letters in 1735-1737 establishing an important precedent in the genre. Thereafter, editions of correspondence were published in their lifetime (such as Pope’s) and after their death (such as Johnson’s). Letters, or excerpts of letters, were also woven into biographical accounts prefaced or appended to editions (such as William Hayley’s *The Life and Letters of William Cowper* (1812) or William Mason’s *The Poems of Mr. Gray. To which are*

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<sup>10</sup> Clifford, 121-122.

*prefixed Memoirs of his Life and Writings* (1775)). Seward's *Letters* is an exceptional example of a British woman writer's epistolary writing in the period. It is an extensive collection, and Seward's selection and editing of the letters show that it was an ambitious, and in many ways itself unprecedented, literary endeavour. The value of *Letters* lies not in its reliability as a record of events but in Seward's innovative use of the genre to coherently fashion her identity as a literary author, critic, and chronicler of eighteenth-century British literature and literary culture in Lichfield in her time. I approach published letters through an understanding that print identities are performances of identity.<sup>11</sup> Letters – which purport to be authentic documents – are especially interesting in this respect because while they appear to be both momentary and singular (written from a sender to a recipient on a particular date), they also operate as a collective to reveal the ostensibly unguarded thoughts, feelings, and judgements of a single identity. Seward observed Richardson do this in his epistolary novels, and this influenced her to present herself, at her life's end, in an edition of letters, rather than through a Boswellian biography.

Understanding Seward's self-fashioning in this epistolary, literary act of life-writing is the focus of this chapter. First, the chapter discusses the broader context of letter-writing and publishing correspondence in the eighteenth century and explores the precedents (which Seward read) set by Pope, Richardson, Swift, and Johnson to determine the extent to which Seward uses those examples to justify the tenets of her own edition, theoretically engages with them, or departs from them. The correspondence

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<sup>11</sup> Melanie Bigold, in her study of the earlier women letter-writers Elizabeth Rowe, Catharine Cockburn, and Elizabeth Carter, similarly argues that 'the familiar letters' of women writers 'function as epistolary performances', because the letter has the 'ability to make absence presence and as a way of articulating the paradox at the heart of authorial agency: the experience of both creating and viewing textual representations of oneself'. See *Women of Letters, Manuscript Circulation, and Print Afterlives in the Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 14. See also Bruce Redford, *The Converse of the Pen: Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-Century Letter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). While Redford acknowledges that letter-writers can be situated on a spectrum between 'private' and 'public' personas, he contends that those in this period 'perfected a public voice', 206.

Seward selected for *Letters* represent a fraction of the letters wrote in her lifetime, and indeed between 1784 and 1807. Therefore second, the chapter examines Seward's editorial decisions through a study of two tranches of unpublished correspondence: the first to her friend and confidante Anne Parry Price; the second to her literary editor, John Nichols. The analysis of those manuscripts identifies the scope of material that would be suitable for publication and shows that Seward was careful in her selection of epistles, which were polished to achieve that desired self-fashioning as a literary intellectual within the bounds of an appropriate feminine modesty. Third, this chapter presents a reading of *Letters*, which argues that Seward's choice of the letter edition serves to construct a cohesive representation of her identity as intellectual, literary, creative, and affective. Through her emphasis on a Romantic aesthetic that intertwines insights into the literature, her personal experiences, and Lichfield sociability, Seward situates her autobiography within a broader sociocultural context that anticipates Maria Edgeworth's understanding of the relationship between the individual biographical subject and history, which is examined in Chapter Four.

### Biography and Literary Letters

A selection of Seward's correspondence, written between 1784 and 1807, was published by Constable in six volumes. The letters included by Constable in the 1811 edition not only belie the volume of correspondence Seward maintained over the course of her life, but undermined Seward's own editing and organisation of the letters for the posthumous print edition. Though Seward requested that her letters, which she believed, 'appeared to me *worth the future attention of the public*', be published in 'twelve half-bound quarto volumes', as Francesca Blanch-Serrat notes, Constable 'not only reduced the original thirteen letter books into six volumes', but removed all names, passages, and reflections

that were uncomfortable to him or his acquaintances'.<sup>12</sup> While Constable praised Seward's letters for showing 'many intellectual and moral excellencies', he criticised her style, suggesting that 'several affectations of style, arising mostly from too free an use of poetic imagery, may tend somewhat to obscure their real merit'.<sup>13</sup> His critique reflects the gendered expectations of familiar letters, where poetic language was seen as out of place, contrasting sharply with Seward's own outlook, shaped by her engagement with literary forms like her epistolary novel in verse, *Louisa* (1784). The respective reception of Scott's and Constable's publications of the juvenile and mature letters reveals that readers also took issue with the mature correspondence. Thomas Constable edited his father's correspondence, and complains of the artificiality of Seward's mature letters, stating that in the earlier letters 'given by Sir Walter Scott in the extracts from her correspondence prefixed to his edition of her Poems, her style seems to have been less artificial in youth than it afterwards became'.<sup>14</sup> Writing these memoirs in the 1870s, Thomas Constable firmly favoured 'the language of ordinary life' to the elevated style Seward practised almost a century before.<sup>15</sup> Seward's belief in the lasting value of Augustan poetry extended to her letters, where she adopted an elevated literary style she deemed fitting for a poet to reflect upon the literature of the age. However, writers increasingly moved away from this mode of epistolary expression, and by the nineteenth century, a 'natural' rhetoric was not only preferred but was commonplace. When Jane Austen's letters, which were written between 1796 and 1817, were published by Edward Brabourne in 1884, they were praised for 'the great merit of being entirely natural'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Oulton, xv. Francesca Blanch-Serrat, 'To "Leave my name in life's visit": The Intersection of Age and Gender in the Literary Afterlife of Anna Seward', *Age, Culture, Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 5 (2021), 1-25, 15.

<sup>13</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, vii.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Constable, *Archibald Constable and his Literary Correspondents*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1873), vol. 2, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Constable, 11.

<sup>16</sup> *The Times*, 6 February 1885, cited in Jane Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), x.

Constable's complaint reflects these changes in desirable literary-epistolary style. Louise Curran notes that epistolary writing in Britain shifted from the courtly, "precious" style associated with the seventeenth-century French authors [...] to a more simple, "easy" style, derived from the humanist tradition and characterised (after Seneca's expression) as "talking on paper".<sup>17</sup> Susan Whyman echoes this, noting that by the 1760s, a distinct British model of letters had emerged, because 'a more confident English public was now focusing on its own language and the gentrification of its prose. Instead of looking to French models, the British epistolary ideal embraced an easy natural style of writing'.<sup>18</sup> This 'natural' mode was one writers aspired to long before the mid-eighteenth century. In 1653, Dorothy Osborne, whose letters to her husband, Sir William Temple, were published in 1888, argues that

all Letters mee thinks should bee free and Easy as ones discourse, not studded, as an Oration, nor made up of hard words like a Charme; tis an admirable thing to see how some People will labour to finde out term's that may Obscure a plaine sense, like a gentleman I knew, whoe would never say the weather grew cold, but that Winter began to salute us.<sup>19</sup>

The notion that letters should be reminiscent of 'ones discourse' was similarly picked up by William Walsh in the preface to his *Letters and Poems, Amorous and Gallant* (1692). Walsh articulates the ideal 'stile of Letters' as 'easy and natural; as near approaching to familiar Conversation as possible'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Louise Curran, *Samuel Richardson and the Art of Letter-Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 30.

<sup>19</sup> Dorothy Osborne to Sir William Temple, September 1653, in Dorothy Osborne, *The Letters of Dorothy Osborne to William Temple*, ed. G. C. Moore Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), 90-91.

<sup>20</sup> William Walsh, *Letters and Poems, Amorous and Gallant* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1692).



Approaching the turn of the eighteenth century, for Daniel Defoe, a simple epistolary style, similar to the mode Osborne hints at, is a practical necessity. Nicholas Seager shows that ‘Defoe extends his recommendation of an unadorned style beyond the functional missives of tradesmen to characterise ideal communication in all walks of life’.<sup>21</sup> Defoe’s guidance in *The Complete English Tradesman* (1725-1727) suggested that: ‘the tradesman who ostentatiously embellishes his prose betrays his profligacy and vacuity, showing off to his correspondent rather than cultivating a productive equality of exchange’.<sup>22</sup> Seward was capable of a range of epistolary styles, suited to the occasion and recipient. Her letters to the publisher John Nichols, not included in Constable’s edition, generally adopt a more lucid style suited to the nature of their purpose. The letters to Nichols, which will be examined in more detail later in this chapter, are primarily business transactions concerning matters surrounding her publications in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, of which Nichols was editor. Though these letters present an example of Seward practising ‘an unadorned style’, even in her response to one reviewer’s criticism of her ‘Ode to General Elliot’ as ‘obtrusive Trash’, she admits to Nichols that ‘I repeated the words of Caesar when he felt the dagger of Brutus’.<sup>23</sup> Seward here expresses the same sentiment to Nichols (who was not only her publisher but, as the letters indicate, her friend) upon her discovery that he allowed such harsh criticisms of her poem to be published in the periodical. While Nichols would have understood the reference to *Caesar*, Thomas Constable’s problem with such allusions is that they elevate the content to a literary, and often classical realm, and so feel artificial. Constable illustrates Seward’s

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<sup>21</sup> Daniel Defoe, *The Cambridge Edition of the Correspondence of Daniel Defoe*, ed. Nicholas Seager (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), liv.

<sup>22</sup> Seager, liv.

<sup>23</sup> Seward to John Nichols, 28 September 1788, SJB/M/2001.77.4. In Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, when Caesar is stabbed by Brutus, his last words are ‘*Et tu, Brute?*’, signifying his surprise that Brutus, whom he believed to be his ally, was among his assassins. See William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. Arthur Humphreys (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), III. i. 77, 24.

epistolary prolixity with her reference to securing a franking stamp as a '*senatorial freedom*' and her description of an impending marriage as 'Hymen [...] lighting his torch with the sprays of a cypress wreath'.<sup>24</sup> Such figures not only make the letters potentially impenetrable for the common reader but their poetic diction jeopardises their authenticity as biographical artefacts. Transgressions of style become transgressions of substance for a mode – the familiar letter – that promised transparency, and which should model mutual and reciprocal exchange.

In the mid-century, similarly to Defoe, Richardson favoured a natural style in his correspondence and fiction. For Richardson, as Curran shows, 'having too much of a 'design' in letters was always problematic' since he was aware of 'letters' capacity for indirection and deception'. Richardson is alert to 'how language can mean one thing and say another; and the difficulties inherent in making writing completely intelligible'.<sup>25</sup> Clare Brant notes that letter-writing manuals, the publication of which proliferated in the eighteenth century, 'tried to steer round the paradox of letter-writing as something both natural and teachable', by promoting that ideal writing style that William Walsh identified in 1692 as 'conversational'. At the same time, such manuals, 'playing into class anxieties', also aimed to teach letter-writers how 'to adopt polite standards in order to secure a self-fashioned identity as ladies and gentlemen'. However, writing in an artificial style, or 'not to be what you seemed or seem what you were in letters', could also result in 'downward class mobility'.<sup>26</sup> Letter-writing, then, was a potentially perilous, and seemingly contradictory business. Moreover, letter-writing functioned as a vehicle for the

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Constable, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Curran, 9-10.

<sup>26</sup> Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Literary Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 34-35.

emerging understanding of selfhood as constructed and performative, a notion most powerfully articulated by Hume.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, as Curran notes, in this period, such embellishment and ‘eloquence is associated with a libertine verbal excess and moral absence’.<sup>28</sup> Seward’s trespass, however, is not to seem like a designing libertine but rather a learned lady. Seward is emphasising her status as a respectable writer at a time when women writers were required to demonstrate that they were virtuous, which itself, as Clarke describes, ‘was identifiable by modest behaviour, not just sexual modesty but modesty about having talent’. The reaction to the figure of the intellectual woman in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries does not need rehearsing, other than to note that ‘the female right to literature was a much more muddled affair in the minds of men and women alike by the 1790s’ than earlier in the century. Though the ‘bluestockings had made high achievement praiseworthy’, an ‘independence of mind’ cultivated through reading, conversation, and writing threatened a ‘general loosening of restraints’.<sup>29</sup> Concerns with the degree to which Seward effectively projected suitable modesty in her letters (Seward often combines her claims to modesty with self-aggrandisement) account for why Constable’s keenness to stress Seward’s ‘moral excellencies’ in the preface to the *Letters*.<sup>30</sup>

However, Richardson’s promotion of epistolary plainness was not simply, like Defoe’s, a practical endeavour, but enacted to ‘distinguish himself from a Scriblerian literary tradition’. As a letter-writer Richardson depicted himself as ‘a plain writer: a sincere well-wisher: an undesigning scribbler; who admire none but the natural and easy

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<sup>27</sup> See Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 273.

<sup>28</sup> Curran, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Norma Clarke, *The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Letters* (London: Pimlico, 2004), 7, 336, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Constable, vii.

beauties of the pen'.<sup>31</sup> Pope was the first British author to publish his correspondence at length. Pope also claimed that he wrote in a natural, conversational mode. On the style of his correspondence with Jonathan Swift, Dustin Griffin notes that 'one might "converse" in a face-to-face encounter or by means of their letters. "You see how I like to talk to you," Pope wrote to Swift, "(for this is not writing)"'.<sup>32</sup> Yet, as Brant points out, the 'letters of literary men and occasionally women were read for how they illuminated the writer in relation to the person – so readers were dissatisfied with Pope's letters because they seemed to draw attention to their writerliness'.<sup>33</sup> Thomas Constable's complaint about Seward's *Letters* echoes that of Pope's in this way. As James Anderson Winn observes, the 'imaginative and rhetorical processes Pope employed in writing his letters are often analogous to those he used in writing his poetry'.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, earlier in 1720, Swift (the Editor of Temple's *Works* and correspondent of Pope) noted that Temple's epistolary 'style is of the same Nature, fine and Polite, but still more Beautiful than Correct, and more perhaps for Delight, than for Imagination'.<sup>35</sup> This can be applied to Pope. While beauty is admirable, writing 'prettily' threatened to descend into artifice, and so it is 'correctness' (that is to say, words suited to the expression that work in accordance with a moral propriety) that was to be aspired to. It was not only to be aspired to in terms of maintaining a polite epistolary discourse but would also be necessary for the author who wished their letters to constitute an (auto)biography, since readers came to expect biography to promote 'truth' of character.

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<sup>31</sup> Curran, 11, 9. Curran cites Samuel Richardson to Sarah Wescomb, 27 August 1746, in Samuel Richardson, *The Cambridge Edition of the Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, ed. John A. Dussinger, 12 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013-), vol. 3 (2014), 8.

<sup>32</sup> Dustin Griffin, *Swift and Pope: Satirists in Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>33</sup> Brant, 14.

<sup>34</sup> James Anderson Winn, *A Window in the Bosom: The Letters of Alexander Pope* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1977), 9.

<sup>35</sup> William Temple, *The Works of Sir William Temple, Bart.*, 2 vols, (London: A. Churchill et. al., 1720), vol. 1.

By contrast to Pope, Swift's sixty-five letters to Esther Johnson and Rebecca Dingley, written between 1710 and 1713, which were published posthumously in 1766 as *Journal to Stella*, are a 'hybrid' series 'that fused historical memoir, scandal narrative, intimate correspondence and quotidian diary'.<sup>36</sup> Abigail Williams has noted some critics' perception of Swift's *Journal* as an attempt 'at relatively transparent self-disclosure', which depicts 'the honest and playful unburdening man before his two closest friends'.<sup>37</sup> Thomas Keymer makes a similar remark about Johnson's letters to Piozzi. In these letters, Keymer argues, Johnson 'could temporarily shed the duties of weighty signification and exemplary style that went with these formal roles. He could throw off, or at least suspend, the identity as a public writer and public figure which otherwise dominates his literary output'.<sup>38</sup> However, Williams argues, rightly, that Swift, in his letters, 'is constantly striving, stylistically, to represent a form of literary dishabille, the presentation of a self and life unmediated by polite conversation, which is nonetheless a performance'. While Seward's *Letters* provides insights into her domestic life and occasionally reveals her suspending her identity as a public writer, she favours a more Popean approach, selecting letters that offer particular insights into her thoughts and experiences from her perspective as a literary author.

Like any text, it was necessary for letters to be edited before publication to manage the reputation of their author. Pope's and Swift's respective efforts to adorn or obscure the content of their letters was a decision taken partially in response to their anxiety about their letters being circulated beyond the intended recipient, including at the

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<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Journal to Stella: Letters to Esther Johnson and Rebecca Dingley, 1710-1713*, ed. Abigail Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), li.

<sup>37</sup> Abigail Williams, 'The Difficulties of Swift's "Journal to Stella"', *Review of English Studies*, 62 (2011), 758-776, 758, 759.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Keymer, "'Letters about nothing": Johnson and Epistolary Writing', in *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 224-239, 233.

Post Office. As Williams notes, ‘the practice of opening letters at the Post Office was widespread, and the fear of it was even more so’.<sup>39</sup> Swift claimed, ‘my Letters would be good Memoirs, if I durst venture to say a thousd things that pass; but I hear so much of Letters opening at your Post Office, that I am fearfull’.<sup>40</sup> By comparison, referring to the publication of his letters to William Wycherley (which he claims were ‘printed not without the concurrence of a noble friend of mine and yours’), Pope more playfully asserts that

there is nothing for me to be ashamed of, because I will not be ashamed of anything I do not do myself, or of anything that is not immoral but merely dull (as for instance, if they printed this letter I am now writing, which they easily may, if the underlings at the Post Office please to take a copy of it).<sup>41</sup>

Though Swift perhaps exercises more caution, and while Pope, despite his bravado, shows at least an awareness of the potential consequences of disclosing biographical detail in letters, they both acknowledge that the letter is a mode of life-writing that, collected, would constitute a biography. As Curran notes, ‘in the period 1726 to 1736, Pope requested the return of his letters more insistently, and began to envisage his letter collections as “an innocent, history of myself”’.<sup>42</sup> If authors collected, organised, and edited their own letters, then they could attempt to deliver and control an authoritative narrative of their life.

Seward would develop her own distinctive epistolary rhetoric and scope of insights, drawing on these earlier examples of letters as personal history and their experimentation in constructing a biographically authentic and authoritative account of an

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<sup>39</sup> Williams, 760, 772.

<sup>40</sup> Swift, cited in Williams, 772.

<sup>41</sup> Pope to Swift, 28 November 1729, Alexander Pope, *The Major Works*, ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 240.

<sup>42</sup> Curran, 6-7. Curran cites Pope to John Caryll, 8 July 1729, in Alexander Pope, *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. George Sherburn, 5 vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1956), vol. 3, 38.

author. However, Pope, Swift, and Richardson (in his epistolary novels) set precedents for the presentation of a life in letters that Seward could look to when shaping her own edition of letters. Like Pope, Swift, Richardson, and, in fact any letter-writer, Seward's letters assume a persona, and since they are performative acts, they are both biographical and literary. Writers' letters are, of course, revealing biographically, but their biographical value is tempered by their literariness. Johnson was aware that writers' letters were particularly susceptible to artifice since 'wherever we are studious to please, we are afraid of trusting our first thoughts, and endeavour to recommend our opinion by studied ornaments, accuracy of method, and elegance of stile'.<sup>43</sup> In his *Life of Gray*, Johnson writes that he is 'willing to adopt' Thomas Gray's character 'from a letter written to my friend Mr. Boswell, by the Rev. Mr. Temple, rector of St. Gluvias in Cornwall; and am as willing as his warmest well-wisher to believe it true'. In his *Life of Savage*, Johnson reproduces a letter written by Richard Savage after his arrest 'for a debt of about eight pounds.' Johnson claims this letter 'is too remarkable to be omitted'. For Johnson, the letter could act as an evidential tool with which to unveil character, especially if the subject was not a personal acquaintance, signal a well-researched biography built on material evidence, and impress conversation, giving privileged access to the deceased through the reproduction of letters. However, Johnson was also wary of using letters as biographical artefacts. This is articulated in his *Life of Pope*: 'there is, indeed, no transaction which offers stronger temptations to fallacy and sophistication than to epistolary intercourse'. Johnson argues that though it 'has been so long said as to be commonly believed that the true characters of men may be found in their letters, and that he who writes to his friend lays his heart open before him', in reality, 'few can boast of

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<sup>43</sup> Samuel Johnson, 'No. 152, Saturday, 31 August 1751', in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Volume V, The Rambler*, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), 42-47, 46.

hearts which they dare lay open to themselves'.<sup>44</sup> While Johnson is willing to use them as sources of information, these objects of 'deliberate performance' are potentially, even if innocently, deceptive for the biographer. Johnson here harks back to Pope's sentiment that 'the old project of a Window in the bosom to render the Soul of Man visible, is what every honest friend has manifold reason to wish for'.<sup>45</sup> As Winn states, in reality, the window Pope 'made in his bosom in his published letters was carefully constructed to reveal only a few aspects of his mind, selected and polished for public display'.<sup>46</sup> While Johnson exercises caution toward the veracity of the letter and biographical document, Seward's treatment of her letters aligns with Pope's; the letters Seward compiled for the posthumous edition to be published by Constable were selected to give insight into her literary life and times and a careful curation of insights was requisite to the representation of herself as a respectable literary author.

### Unpublished Letters

Constable's extensive editing of the letter books Seward compiled makes it difficult to determine which of the surviving, unpublished letters, she intended for publication. Since few of the manuscript letters bear any editorial markings, it is often unclear whether they were sent to Constable or never included in the original letter books. By the time Seward knew she intended to publish an edition of her letters, she began making copies, rather than have them returned, and so many of the manuscript letters that survive today are the original copies of letters received by the addressee. Seward's epistolary archive is dispersed across both sides of the Atlantic. In the UK, the most significant collections of Seward's letters are held at the British Library, Cadbury Library, Cambridge University

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<sup>44</sup> *LEP*, vol. 4, 179; vol. 3, 179; vol. 4, 58.

<sup>45</sup> Pope to Charles Jervas, 12 December 1718, in *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, vol. 2, 23.

<sup>46</sup> Winn, 200.



Library, John Rylands Library, National Library of Scotland, Samuel Johnson Birthplace Museum, and Staffordshire Archives. In the US, there are two major collections: one at the Houghton Library; the other at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. These are accompanied by a handful of letters at the Huntington Library. The letters held in archives, along with those published, represent a fraction of what was written. Seward herself complains about her time-consuming obligation to respond to her many correspondents: 'I am so continually chained at home, to the writing desk'.<sup>47</sup> The unpublished letters continue to expand the breadth of her epistolary network displayed in *Letters* and the archival collections reveal new correspondents, including her literary editors John Nichols and Richard Alfred Davenport. Occasionally, manuscript letters appear in a revised form in *Letters*, such as a letter sent to George Hardinge in October 1786.<sup>48</sup> The reconstruction of the original manuscript is superficial (the content is rearranged rather than adding any new text) and, in the omission of trivialities, maintains a commitment to imparting her literary insight in *Letters*. The majority of the manuscript letters, however, remain wholly unpublished.

The following section of this chapter examines two tranches of these unpublished letters, and these correspondences have not previously received any scholarly attention. The first examines the fourteen familiar letters Seward sent to Anne Parry Price between 1788 and 1807, now held at the British Library.<sup>49</sup> The most extensive study of Seward's familiar letters to date is Barnard's *A Constructed Life*, which uses Seward's correspondences with her friends, Mary Powys and Dorothy Sykes to shed new light on Seward's life in the 1770s, which Barnard identifies as the 'lost middle period of her life' after her relationship with John Saville was exposed and 'seriously damaged' her 'moral

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<sup>47</sup> Seward to Anne Parry Price, 2 November 1795, BL/Add MS 46400/291-292.

<sup>48</sup> SJB/2001.73.1.

<sup>49</sup> One of Seward's letters to Price was selected for publication, though heavily edited, in *LAS*. BL/Add MS 46400/295-296 is printed in *LAS*, vol. 4, 243-247.

reputation'. Subsequently, her parents 'threatened her with disinheritance', her aspirations to become a serious writer 'began to fade', and she 'suffered a crisis of faith'.<sup>50</sup>

Essentially, Barnard's attention to these letters bridges the gap between the juvenile and mature letters. While the Price letters reveal new insights into Seward's life and character during her later years, they also reveal her wrestling with the epistolary persona she sought to construct; the figure of the learned lady in these letters soon falls away into an unguarded candour. The letters' remarkably indiscreet content confirms that when it came to choosing epistles for *Letters*, Seward was highly selective. Much like Pope's, those letters were 'selected and polished for public display'.<sup>51</sup> I then examine eleven letters Seward sent to her editor, John Nichols, between 1785 and 1801, now held at the Samuel Johnson Birthplace Museum. Though these letters pertain to an important aspect of Seward's work as an author, they too are omitted from *Letters*. Seward's manuscript correspondence with men has received far less scholarly attention than that with women, and these letters yield new insights into Seward's identity as a professional author and her anxieties surrounding the management of that position.<sup>52</sup> The exploration of these unpublished letters not only enhances understandings of Seward's personal experiences and relationships but also underscores that letter-writing is a form of life-writing, allowing for expressions of identity that transcends the more polished representations found in the published *Letters*.

In a letter penned to Anne Parry Price at the end of 1795, Seward apologises for her tardiness in responding and explains that her absence from Lichfield has prevented

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<sup>50</sup> Barnard, 70.

<sup>51</sup> Winn, 200.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Mayer has written about Seward's correspondence with Walter Scott in the context of mentorship. Scott chose Seward 'for the role of literary mentor' and their letters are 'characterized by a mixture on Seward's part of lavish praise and freely offered criticism'. See *Walter Scott and Fame: Authors and Readers in the Romantic Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 38.

her from keeping up her correspondence. On this occasion, Seward asked her cousin, Henry (Harry) White,

to open my letters in my absence, instead of their waiting my return with unbroken seals. To have had them sent after me w<sup>d</sup>. have taken away all the use, & pleasure of my excursion, by chaining me, as I am so continually chained at home, to the writing desk.<sup>53</sup>

She goes on to declare to Price that ‘this ought not to be the life of a Creature, that loves its books, & must scribble eternally, or neglect all the duties of correspondence’.<sup>54</sup>

Seward, then, sees writing letters as a duty to be fulfilled, that is, a social obligation, rather than the literary endeavour that she intended the posthumous edition of her letters to be. Anne Parry Price (née Puleston) inherited Emral Hall, Wrexham, from her father, Thomas Puleston. Anne married Richard Parry Price, in 1764, in Biddulph, Staffordshire. While it remains unclear when and how Price and Seward first became acquainted, Seward’s letters show the women shared mutual friends and travelled between Emral and Lichfield to spend time in each other’s company, particularly after Richard’s death in 1782. In 1795, Seward writes to Price, tenderly exclaiming,

since we separated at Emral, no waking hour has passed without presenting your image, and the remembrance of that fortnight which your kindness, our mutual friendship and confidence, rendered so interesting; how they illuminated my hours of ease and cheerfulness, and how sweetly they soothed those of pain and apprehension.<sup>55</sup>

Seward publicly declared her affection for Price in her ‘Verses on Wrexham’ (1796), which describes the

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<sup>53</sup> Seward to Anne Parry Price, 2 November 1795, BL/Add MS 46400/291-292.

<sup>54</sup> BL/Add MS 46400/291-292.

<sup>55</sup> *LAS*, vol. 4, 112.

friendly PRICE, as happy, free and gay,  
As when, in Life and Beauty's rosy May,  
She shone, the Hebe of her green retreat,  
With half the youth of Cambria at her feet.<sup>56</sup>

Price was an ideal correspondent for Seward: they not only approached middle-age together, but Seward appears to find communion in Price's widowhood. While Seward was not a widow herself, in her letters to Price she often reflects upon her feelings toward recent engagements and marriages of her peers in Lichfield. In one letter, Seward writes: 'thus do almost all my Lichfield Contemporaries vanish from the Celebaic Circle in demi-centennial maturity. – I must [ever?] be left alone on the barren mountain – yet I question if they will find their Hymenial Vales more fruitful – in content I mean'.<sup>57</sup> Seward is guilty here of the bloviation she would later be accused of, not least in her imagining the middle-aged, unmarried women of Lichfield as 'Celebaic Circle in demi-centennial maturity'. This exalted register, however, is not maintained in the letters to Price. Seward's confidence in Price encourages an unguardedness, which is candid in both tone and content. Writing to Price offered Seward the opportunity to suspend her identity as a public writer, similar to the affordances Keymer describes of the correspondence with Piozzi for Johnson.

Seward's letters to Price are marked by their immediacy and unfiltered authenticity and reflect both the practical constraints of letter-writing in the period and the spontaneous interruptions that inflect her style. In 1788, Seward reflects on the disorganisation of her letter, due to the distraction her company presents:

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<sup>56</sup> Seward, 'Verses on Wrexham, and the Inhabitants of its Environs', in *Llangollen Vale, with Other Poems* (London: G. Sael, 1796), 12-14, l. 11-14.

<sup>57</sup> Seward to Price, 15 January 1788, BL/Add MS 46400/280-283.

M<sup>rs</sup>. Mompessan, who has loved me from my days of Girlhood, is at present my Guest. She has luxuriated with us on the divine harmony of your Orpheus. He has been playing to her, M<sup>r</sup>. Saville, & M<sup>rs</sup>. Smith, the whole time I have been writing. You will suppose how often I have laid down my pen & listened, & it will preclude your exclamations over the resulting blunders & incoherent style of an attention so wandering & broken.<sup>58</sup>

The letters to Price give an impression of immediacy less apparent in the edited *Letters*, not only evident in depictions of the scene in which Seward writes the letter but reflected on the page itself. One such example written in 1795 shows Seward using all the available space, including the folds of the paper, to write her letter (**Figure 3.1**).<sup>59</sup> There was a practical reason for doing so. As Richard Terry explains, though ‘the presence of unused space’ could ‘indicate the affluence of the sender or suggest a tone of deference’, in this period, particularly among the familiar, ‘letters tended to be crowded with writing, given the cost of running to an additional sheet’. As such, letter-writers ‘became very adept at cramming the maximum wordage onto the page’. However, ‘the need to fill the single sheet, but not to spill over on to an additional one, inevitably placed an artificial check on epistolary flow’.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Seward is forced to conclude as she exclaims, ‘behold my desire of conversing with you longer limited by the exhausted bounds of my Paper!’.<sup>61</sup> Though the bounds of Seward’s paper prevent her ‘epistolary flow’, these letters to Price indicate Seward writing ‘in the moment’, framing the missive as a conversation and enjoining Price to imagine herself present at its composition. Furthermore, these letters’

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<sup>58</sup> BL/Add MS 46400/280-283.

<sup>59</sup> Seward to Price, 26 April 1795, BL/ Add MS 46400/284-285.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Terry, ‘P.S.: The Dangerous Logic of the Postscript in Eighteenth-Century Literature’, *Modern Language Review*, 109 (2014), 35-53, 37, 40.

<sup>61</sup> Seward to Price, 26 April 1795, BL/Add MS 46400/284-285.

candid unguardedness suggests an unedited authenticity in comparison to the constructed literary persona presented in *Letters*.

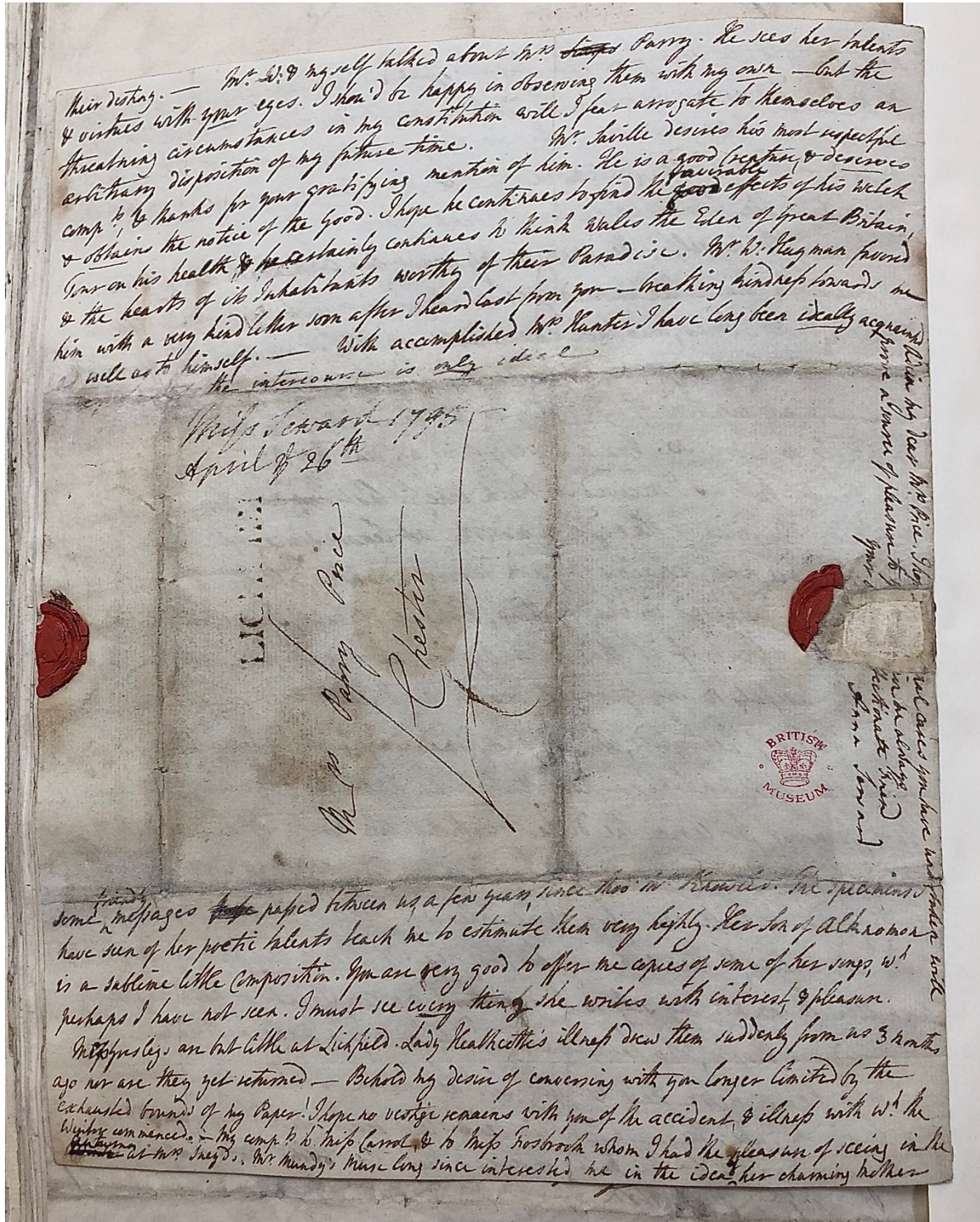


Figure 3.1. Letter from Anna Seward to Anne Parry Price, 26 April 1795, BL/ Add MS 46400/284-285.

Seward's letters to Price, offer a glimpse into a vulnerability that contrasts with the more measured tone in her published correspondence. In her discussion of the health trials Seward encountered throughout her life, Barnard explains that 'following an accident where she fell against the fireplace and injured her breast', Seward 'developed an extreme horror of breast cancer, which even the reassurance of top medical specialists could not dismiss'.<sup>62</sup> To select female correspondents in the *Letters*, Seward updates them on the status of her 'bosom-pain'.<sup>63</sup> The letters to Price, however, not only express this anxiety in far greater detail, but her fear is palpable in her candid address. Seward writes that 'Doc<sup>r</sup>. Darwin, & Doc<sup>r</sup>. Jones, who have examined it say they do not think the induration greater than may be perceived in the bosom of many other women, who are full breasted, & at my time of life; — they do not think it of the nature I have dreaded, or likely to prove so'. In spite of their assurances, Seward confides in Price that 'the pain in my breast has continued to annoy, & excite my terrors in much the same degree as when I wrote last to you'.<sup>64</sup> Seward also states her interest in an American physician, a Doctor Tate, who claims he can cure such ailments. A later letter to Price, though, indicates that Price warned Seward about Tate's questionable practice. Seward claims that 'from the accounts I had heard, similar to that you are so good to transmit, being determined not to suffer his torturing experiments, I was afraid of encountering him, & of being teized to let him examine my breast'.<sup>65</sup> While it is unclear what 'torturing experiments' Tate offered, as Barnard notes, procedures to treat breast cancer in the period, including mastectomy, 'were fearful to all women'.<sup>66</sup> Frances Burney's account of her experience is perhaps the best-known, first-hand account of such treatment in the period. As her biographer,

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<sup>62</sup> Barnard, 103.

<sup>63</sup> See *LAS*, vol. 4, 163, 313.

<sup>64</sup> BL/Add MS 46400/284-285.

<sup>65</sup> Seward to Price, 15 September 1795, BL/Add MS 46400/286-287.

<sup>66</sup> Barnard, 103.

Margaret Anne Doody, has recounted, ‘Burney developed swelling in the breast’ and was later ‘diagnosed as having cancer’. In 1811, Burney ‘underwent a radical mastectomy’, which ‘took place in her own home’. Doody stresses that ‘the courage involved in daring to endure such an operation as Burney underwent can hardly be exaggerated’, since the operation ‘was performed without anaesthetic’.<sup>67</sup>

Julia Epstein argues that Burney’s ‘mastectomy narrative imaginatively reenacts the anatomization of the author’s body, a private body violated and made public through the experience of surgery.’ After the operation, Burney ‘would have wanted her sisters near, not for moral support but “to protect – adjust – guard me” from the intrusion of these black-robed men who outnumber her’.<sup>68</sup> It is clear to see why Seward’s accounts of her injury would be suppressed from publication: her detailing of her anatomy as ‘full breasted’ along with the image she conjures of Darwin and Jones examining her breast in print would offer an indecent transgression into privacy.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, Seward’s fear of being violated by Tate and subsequently seeking consolation in Price is much like how Burney feels the need to be guarded by her sisters after her operation and reveals Seward’s vulnerability. In these unpublished letters, Seward is profoundly, and foremost, a woman, because the threat of violation by Tate reinforces her femininity. Including such content in *Letters* would have threatened the delineation of a carefully constructed author who resists definition by her gender, which we will later see is the purport of the printed edition.

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<sup>67</sup> Margaret Anne Doody, *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 314-315.

<sup>68</sup> Julia L. Epstein, ‘Writing the Unspeakable: Fanny Burney’s Mastectomy and the Fictive Body’, *Representations*, 16 (1986), 131-166, 131, 146.

<sup>69</sup> In her annotated copy of *Letters to and from the Late Samuel Johnson*, Piozzi’s marginalia include intimate details of gender-specific ailments. Johnson wrote to her complaining of a ‘malady’, which she claims ‘was a Sarcocele’, *LSJ*, vol. 2, 321. While by revealing Johnson’s ailments Piozzi perhaps intended to emphasise that he was a long-suffering genius, Seward’s decision to suppress accounts of her own injury reflects her awareness that for a woman writer, such personal revelations would not be conducive to the authorial persona she sought to portray in *Letters*.



Seward also keeps Price informed of her interactions with a Mrs Temple, with whom she had a longstanding dispute over the past affections of Colonel Temple.<sup>70</sup> That exchange is partially included in *Letters*. The full account of that interaction in the letters to Price shows how Seward selected letters to construct and control her reputation as a respectable woman writer, and why it was necessary to do so. In March 1796, Seward responded to a letter from Mrs Temple, which presumably inquired as to the true nature of Seward and Colonel Temple's acquaintance. Seward defends herself against Temple's claim that her husband's attachment to Seward 'is indelible'. While Seward admits she and Colonel Temple were friends 'in the flower of our mutual youth', and that he intended to propose when he 'returned to England, with the hope that an acquisition to his fortune would induce my father to consent to our union', Seward assures Temple that 'friendship' was mistaken 'for love'. Seward adds, 'not one of his letters had ever breathed a tenth part of the enthusiastic partiality to me of which yours is so full'. Temple's letter to Seward was evidently permeated with embarrassing flattery, as Seward tells Temple,

you are under a spell, a strange potency, respecting me. It is enough to make me dread our meeting, aware as I am of the consequences of high-raised expectations; — that it is with them as with the sea,

“The higher their full tides impetuous flow,  
The farther back again they ebbing go.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Though she does not utilise these manuscript letters, Margaret Ashmun provides a detailed account of Seward's interactions with Temple in *The Singing Swan: An Account of Anna Seward and Her Acquaintance with Dr. Johnson, Boswell, & Others of Their Time* (New York, Greenwood Press, 1968), 220-224.

<sup>71</sup> Louise Curran has noted, in eighteenth-century letters, 'the line between civility and flattery was a precarious one', and discusses Johnson's response to excessive flattery in correspondence, which he disliked. See 'The Form of Samuel Johnson's Letters', *Essays in Criticism*, 73:2 (2023), 156-193, 161-164.

Seward even must deny Temple's request for a portrait of her, which she had 'so fervent a desire to possess'.<sup>72</sup> A unpublished letter written to Price later that month, however, reveals Seward's true thoughts on the sincerity of Temple's admiration for her:

mercy on me, dear Friend, who cou'd it be that sent M<sup>rs</sup>. Temple such a portrait of me flattered out of every shadow of resemblance? If she has any sincerity her enthusiasm about me needed not such fewel to its blaze. Surely it is kindled from the strangest source that ever female friendship sprung:— the conviction that her husband's heart had been too unalienably attached to me to be capable of feeling more than friendship for her. [...] surely M<sup>rs</sup>. Temple is the first woman that beneath a strange, & I dare say groundless belief of this sort, ~~that~~ ever idolized a Rival's image, & took delight in adorning it with imaginary graces, & endowments.<sup>73</sup>

Seward's letter to Price confirms her bewilderment at Temple's effervescent admiration for her considering her initial accusation. The contrast between the private and published correspondence reflects the necessity of maintaining a respectable reputation and highlights Seward's deliberate selection of letters for publication, as she sought to construct a controlled image of herself as a respectable writer, avoiding more personal and potentially damaging revelations that might tarnish her reputation.

A letter sent to Price four years later reveals that the standoff continued, and Seward believed Temple could be malicious enough to circulate an unfavourable caricature of her. James Parkinson was a correspondent of Temple, and, as Seward writes, Temple 'wrote to him last Summer, & not knowing he was acquainted with me, sent him

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<sup>72</sup> *LAS*, vol. 4, 172-180. The poetry here is unidentified by Constable, and so is likely Seward's own couplet, or one she is paraphrasing.

<sup>73</sup> Seward to Price, 19 March 1796, BL/Add MS 46400/293-294.

this Caricature'.<sup>74</sup> Though Parkinson did not know Temple was the original author, Seward claims it is 'indisputable, that she who cou'd have so rancorous & treacherous an heart /thus\ to circulate such a libel upon the reputation of One for whom she had possessed the most enthusiastic veneration', and Seward states her intention 'to unveil her completely' to him.<sup>75</sup> Of course, the letters to Price detailing Seward's commentary on the correspondence with Temple could not be published alongside those to Temple that were included in *Letters* because those to Price threaten to undercut the sincerity of those to Temple. While the letters to Price unveil a more authentic reaction from Seward, Seward's self-presentation in the letters to Temple is more favourable. Seward uses her correspondence with Temple to her own ends in *Letters*: her carefully constructed responses to Temple's complaints dressed-up as infatuated compliments show her not only publicly defending herself to quash any potential posthumous rumours but are befitting of the proper, polite conduct of a rational and modest female author. The one manuscript letter to Price that was included in *Letters*, was heavily edited to maintain propriety. The printed version of the September 1796 letter retains details that narrate Seward's journey to Harrogate via Buxton and provides a record of her sociability on that tour. However, details from the original manuscript are omitted, including a teasing comment in which Seward states she hopes to 'pass a little time with my old Lover, M<sup>r</sup>. Adey, & his Wife'.<sup>76</sup> It is hard to judge whether Seward is being serious, or if her tone is one of mocking sentimentality here, and so was necessary to omit, since its inclusion in the print edition could be easily misconstrued, threatening the bounds of propriety.

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<sup>74</sup> Seward to Price, 2 June 1800, BL/Add MS 46400/301-302. James Parkinson, a scientist, who wrote *An Essay on the Shaking Palsy* (1817). It is likely that Parkinson and Seward became acquainted through their mutual connection, Erasmus Darwin. See C.U.M. Smith and Robert Arnott, *The Genius of Erasmus Darwin* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005).

<sup>75</sup> BL/Add MS 46400/301-302.

<sup>76</sup> Seward to Price, 1 September 1796, BL/Add MS 46400/295-296.

These letters to Price begin to reveal Seward's rationale for the materials to be selected for *Letters*. Seward thought of Price as a confidant, and the letters' private matter justifies their suppression from publication. These particular accounts of health and sociability fell outside the scope of the literary insights Seward aimed to impart in *Letters*. As such, these letters could not contribute to sustaining her identity, reputation, or posthumous legacy as a literary author. Seward's letters to John Nichols exemplify Seward's anxieties about maintaining that identity, reputation, and legacy, in print.

Nichols assumed the editorship of the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1782, which not only 'placed the Nichols printing house at the centre of a network of antiquarian, literary and biographical scholarship' but consolidated the publication's 'position as the leading periodical of its day'.<sup>77</sup> The *Gentleman's Magazine* was 'Seward's favourite literary journal'. This is evident, partly, because 'there is no evidence that Seward read the abundant conduct material, moral guides or women's journals, such as Charlotte Lennox's *Ladies Museum* (1760-61)', but also because Seward 'sent her later essays, poems, critical reviews, strictures and articles directly to the *Gentleman's Magazine* or the *Critical Review*'.<sup>78</sup> Julian Pooley states that the *Gentleman's Magazine* was Seward's preferred publication because 'she felt that Sylvanus Urban gave provincial writers like herself a fairer hearing than the critics in other periodicals who looked down on the work of unfashionable authors from beyond London's cultural pale'.<sup>79</sup> Seward's letters also show she enjoyed a more personal, rather than strictly professional, acquaintance with Nichols. A letter of 24 January 1785 reveals that Nichols visited Seward in Lichfield, and she signs the letter to him 'your much oblig'd Friend'. In the letter, Seward also extends

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<sup>77</sup> Julian Pooley, 'A Laborious and Truly Useful Gentleman': Mapping the Networks of John Nichols (1745-1826), Printer, Antiquary and Biographer', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 38 (2015), 497-509.

<sup>78</sup> Barnard, 168, 11.

<sup>79</sup> Julian Pooley, 'And Now a Fig for Mr Nichols!': Samuel Johnson, John Nichols and Their Circle', *The New Rambler*, Serial E VII (2003), 30-45, 41-42.

her ‘best Comp<sup>ts</sup>. to M<sup>rs</sup>. Nichols, whom I shou’d be happy to receive, as my Guest’.<sup>80</sup>

Evidence of their continuing friendship is apparent in a 1788 letter in which Seward begins, ‘your kind letter, as well as kind visit, was thrice welcome to me. My esteem for your talents, for y<sup>r</sup>. virtues, has been always perfect; & the friendship of Minds like yours, too seldom alas! found, I reckon amongst my dearest blessings’.<sup>81</sup>

In her correspondence with Nichols, Seward displays her knowledge of literary criticism, editorial practices, and the publishing industry and literary marketplace. The Constable edition is replete with instances of Seward’s literary criticism, but there is little demonstration of her knowledge of editing or publishing, those more workaday functions of book production. The letters to Nichols were likely suppressed from publication for one of two reasons. As Barnard has suggested, when reflecting upon his father’s treatment of Seward’s letters, Thomas Constable ‘agreed with the censorship because of Seward’s forthright criticism of the publishing industry that his family was so much a part of’.<sup>82</sup> This criticism, as we will see, is certainly evident in those letters to Nichols. However, it is also plausible that Seward omitted them herself to control the construction of her authorial identity in the posthumous *Letters*. Publicising correspondence pertaining to the business of writing and editing could present Seward as a commercially motivated *writer* rather than the suitably literary-minded *author* she aspired to present.

For Seward, the benefit of being more intimately acquainted with Nichols was not only that the *Gentleman’s Magazine* provided opportunities for publication, but that criticism of her writings, especially poetry, could be contained. This control over her literary reputation was crucial for maintaining the authorial identity she constructed that was distanced from one as a commercially motivated writer. In 1786, for instance, Seward

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<sup>80</sup> Anna Seward to John Nichols, 24 January 1785, SJB/2001.77.1.

<sup>81</sup> Seward to Nichols, 28 September 1788, SJB/2001.77.4.

<sup>82</sup> Barnard, 15.

expressed her gratitude to Nichols, writing ‘am I to be so long in your debt for the print of that little tract in defense of my Louisa. Whenever you tell me what that debt is, the money shall be transmitted’.<sup>83</sup> Seward is referring to an entry published in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1785, ‘Hyper-Criticism on Miss Seward’s Louisa’, which was published anonymously in 1785 in response to criticism of *Louisa* in *The Monthly Review*. Adam Rounce contends, however, that ‘there can be little doubt that its author was Seward herself, given its approach and materials’.<sup>84</sup> The entry in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* commends the writer of the *Hyper-Criticism* for justifying the merit of *Louisa* in its comparison to ‘the practice of the best poets, by similar metaphorical expressions adduced from Shakespeare, Milton, and Otway, not to mention Pope in his *Eloisa*’.<sup>85</sup> If contemporary readers were able to guess that the author of the *Hyper-Criticism* was Seward, since ‘a pamphlet response to a bad review’ was ‘not unprecedented’, then the anonymous review in Nichols’s *Gentleman’s Magazine* provided a further, seemingly objective, buttress to this defence.<sup>86</sup> This orchestration of public perception underscores Seward’s efforts to balance her desire for literary success with her desire to project a more disinterested authorial persona. Seward self-fashioning here follows the creation of a persona of the female author that was already well-established. Sarah Prescott states that women poets earlier in the century, including Eliza Haywood, Mary Davys, and Penelope Aubin strategically suggested that ‘they were uninterested in literary fame and that their poetry was merely a leisured accomplishment’, because it was a ‘marketable’ and ‘influential model of female authorship’.<sup>87</sup> Two years later, Seward again thanked Nichols

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<sup>83</sup> Seward to Nichols, 9 October 1786, SJBW/2001.77.3.

<sup>84</sup> Adam Rounce, *Fame and Failure 1720-1800: The Unfulfilled Literary Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 130.

<sup>85</sup> ‘Hyper-Criticism on Miss Seward’s Louisa, including Observations on the Nature and Privileges of Poetic Language’, *Gentleman’s Magazine*, ed. Sylvanus Urban [John Nichols], vol. 55 (1785), 300-301.

<sup>86</sup> Rounce, 130.

<sup>87</sup> Sarah Prescott, *Women, Authorship and Literary Culture, 1690-1740* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 11.

for suppressing the, she believed, overly critical reviews of that same poem. Lamenting that reviewers have been ‘too grossly abusive’ in their censure of ‘my best work Louisa’, she prefaces her complaint with, in parentheses, ‘except those of the Gentleman’s Magazine’. This is because, she admits, she ‘possessed the good will of its benevolent Editor’.<sup>88</sup> In an earlier letter to Nichols, Seward expands on her complaint with contemporary literary criticism: ‘the stupid Effrontery[?] of criticism is one of our National evils, in these fastidious Days, where Genius falls on evil times, & evil tongues’.<sup>89</sup> Yet, Seward declares to Nichols that the reviewers are ‘too absurd in their decisions upon my writings, for me either to expect or care for their justice’.<sup>90</sup>

Seward’s correspondence with Nichols reveals that, despite her claims to indifference, she was deeply concerned about her reputation as a nationally celebrated poet. In a letter of October 1788, for instance, Seward complains of Nichols’s recent selections of verse in his publications:

I now present you with a paraphrastic Ode almost as long as my late silence. Considering the muck that solicits admission into your Miscellany this Inundation, upon the Ice breaking up, may be an evil, while the frost was none, pleasanter poetic matter flowing thro’ those pages, where, but for that same frost, my streams from the Heliconian Puddle might perhaps have trickled (**Figure 3.2**).<sup>91</sup>

Here, Seward merges modesty with self-aggrandisement, which is typical of her. Seward is aware of her value to Nichols, and she resumed sending contributions to him after a period of abstinence due to an unfavourable review published in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*. A month before, Seward wrote to Nichols to inform him she was saddened by the *Magazine*’s treatment of her ‘Ode to General Elliott’, and explains that she was

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<sup>88</sup> SJB/2001.77.4.

<sup>89</sup> Seward to Nichols, 12 October 1785, SJB/2001.77.2.

<sup>90</sup> SJB/2001.77.4.

<sup>91</sup> Seward to Nichols, 9 October 1788, SJB/2001.77.5.

discouraged from submitting further contributions to him: ‘almost all my /literary\ friends said to me ““We hope you will send no more verses to a Magazine where you have been thus reviewed.”’.<sup>92</sup> Here, Seward hints at her connectedness and her suspicion that the boycott might gain traction. When she did resolve to submit her contribution to Nichols in October 1788, her letter contained a postscript from her cousin, Henry White, who adds ‘if this will not do for your worship you deserve to be drowned in your own Ink’ (**Figure 3.3**).<sup>93</sup> Nichols replied to Seward and ‘requests her forgiveness’, assuring her that ‘Mr Urban [...] on every occasion [...] shews himself the warmest admirer of your literary Talents’ and refers to her as ‘the Goddess of his Poetical Idolatry’.<sup>94</sup> Nichols goes on to tell Seward he prizes her ‘as a Jewell of the highest worth [...] which it will be the Pride of my future Life to endeavour to deserve’.<sup>95</sup> This exchange with Nichols demonstrates that Seward cared deeply about the reception of her poetry, and both of them understood the mutually beneficial partnership, which it required some delicacy to maintain. The publication of a negative review of her ‘Ode’ was, from Seward’s perspective, an act of betrayal. While such disloyalty could have potential consequences for their friendship, it threatened far greater implications for Seward’s reputation as a nationally celebrated poet, risking not only her credibility but her standing in the literary marketplace as a female poet.

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<sup>92</sup> SJB/2001.77.4

<sup>93</sup> SJB/2001.77.5.

<sup>94</sup> Julian Pooley, “And Now a Fig for Mr Nichols!”: Samuel Johnson, John Nichols and Their Circle’, 42. Pooley cites John Nichols to Anna Seward, 1 October 1788, BL/Add MS 29747/74.

<sup>95</sup> BL/Add MS 29747/74.



Oct 9/88  
Pray my dear Sir, if, amongst the infinitely  
numerous claims upon yr<sup>e</sup> attention, you think my  
rhymes worth this flattering struggle, take them back  
to yr<sup>e</sup> protection, & do with them even as you will.

I now present you with a paraphrastic Ode  
almost as long as my late silence. Considering the  
much that solicits admision into your Miscellany  
this Inundation, upon the Ice breaking up, may be  
an evil, while the frost was gone, pleasanter poetic  
matter flowing thro' those pages, where, but for that  
same frost, my streams from the Heliconian Puddle  
might perhaps have trickled.

Nothing was ever more gallant than yr<sup>e</sup> quotation  
of a certain Ode, as a remonstrance brought against  
my resolves — You understand, I perceive, extremely  
well how to flatter a Poetaster — But from whence  
have you taken the sweet lines that follow? Prise heavily  
Point out their source to me, for I must read the remainder.

Figure 3.2. Letter from Anna Seward to John Nichols, 9 October 1788, SJBM/2001.77.5.

Friday morn - Oct. 10<sup>th</sup> If this will not do for your worship you desire  
to be drown'd in your own lake; I am in expectation of a Packet  
from you & am wearing care for you - ~~Believe me, your sincere~~  
~~friend~~ believe me, Your sincere  
& affect: Friend H.W.

Mr Nichols  
Red Lion Square  
New Street  
London

a certain Patriot, after a long & at length lost  
successful opposition to an unpopular minister, had declared  
the cause of his country, was supporting the very measures  
against which he had so steadily, & for such a length  
of time contended: &c.

Figure 3.3. Letter from Anna Seward to John Nichols, containing a postscript from Henry White, 9 October 1788, SJB/M/2001.77.5.

Indeed, remarks that reveal her anxieties about literary reception were likely omitted from *Letters* to maintain the carefully constructed persona of a confident and esteemed author. Later in the correspondence, when Seward submits her poetry to Nichols for publication, she takes pains to remind him that careless reviews of her work are not welcome. In 1796, she reminds him of the review of her ‘Ode to General Elliot’ published eight years earlier. Seward tells Nichols she hopes that ‘your Reviewer in the poetic department’ will read her new submission ‘with more attention than he gave to my Ode on the Gibraltar Victory [...] – where he passes over unnoticed the dramatic discription of that glorious Sea-Fight, w<sup>ch</sup>. is the leading feature of the Poem’. As in her October 1788 letter, we see Seward combining modesty with self-aggrandisement as she goes on to qualify the merits of the poem by stating that that ‘all my literary Friends class that Ode with my best productions’.<sup>96</sup> Seward’s emphasis on her ‘literary’ friends not only gives traction to her defence of her poetry in both letters, but in figuring herself as one writing from a distinctly literary intellectual circle sets herself apart from amateur and hack writers – she is professional, yet artistic. Indeed, Seward implies that she is not desperate for Nichols to publish her submission, since she requests for her manuscript to be returned if he cannot guarantee to meet her request: ‘I had rather it was not used at all than mutilated’, she adds.<sup>97</sup>

Seward’s anxieties are not just about reviewers but about the publication of the work itself in the hands of the printing house, and the letters show she is intensely concerned about the precariousness of her literary reputation. In a letter of 9 May 1792, Seward complains to Nichols that

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<sup>96</sup> In some instances, Seward also uses her reputation to secure publication for her literary friends and correspondents. In 1788, for example, Seward recommends a Mr Weston’s poem for publication and advises Nichols to ‘court his contributions, my Friend, for they will light your ~~works~~ /Publication\ as with a Sun, if what he in future may send /to\ you shall in any degree breathe the spirit of this Sonnet’. See Seward to Nichols, 29 Oct 1788, SJB/2001.77.6.

<sup>97</sup> Seward to Nichols, 15 May 1796, SJB/2001.77.9.

in my Cat verses, printed in your last Magazine, there are two errors of the Press; one a most flagrant one w<sup>h</sup>. renders errant nonsense the line it disgraces. I beg you will have the goodness to see that they are thus corrected in a note ~~on~~ /under\ the first poetic page of your next Number.

Seward goes on to highlight the errors in detail and asks, 'is it not strange that the Press-corrector cou'd suppose me capable of ~~writing~~ /using\ such a senseless epithet'.<sup>98</sup> Another letter sent to Nichols listing corrections to be made reveals Seward's specific anxieties about errors of the press. Such errors, she writes, 'if it cou'd be supposed my blunder, wou'd expose me to just ridicule'.<sup>99</sup> Though Seward had secured a reputation as a national poet by the early nineteenth century when her poetry and letters were published, her anxieties about even the smallest errors being immortalised in print did not abate. In 1799, she writes:

the proper or improper position even of commas and semicolons, is momentous to perspicuity. We cannot hope from the demons of the press a sedulous attention to them, and revisers are very prone to conceive a meaning in passages foreign from the author's conception, and hence to alter the punctuation so as to favour their own mistaken idea.<sup>100</sup>

The Seward-Nichols letters, omitted from the Constable edition, demonstrate her careful, perhaps even fastidious, custodianship of her authorial reputation, revealing a tension between her desire to project a refined literary sensibility through impromptu poetic criticism and the risk of being seen as pedantic or minatory in her concern for minor errors. Including the letters threatened the image of Seward as a confident literary figure.

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<sup>98</sup> Seward to Nichols, 9 May 1792, SJBM/2001.77.8.

<sup>99</sup> Seward to Nichols, 10 March 1801, SJBM/2001.77.11.

<sup>100</sup> *LAS*, vol. 5, 207.

The correspondence also belies her disinterested persona. It reveals her concern for her public image and her self-appointed role in shaping the standards of the *Gentleman's Magazine* through editorial advice. The letters show Seward to be aesthetically discerning as she advises Nichols on what to include and thereby how to sustain his periodical's reputation. For instance, discussing Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785) in a letter of October 1785, Seward recommends Nichols include excerpts from it in the next edition of the *Gentleman's Magazine*. There is, for instance, one passage Seward is particularly keen for Nichols to print for its interest: she writes, 'infinitely interesting is the description of Doc<sup>r</sup> Johnson in the Isle of Skie, seated by /the side of\ Flora Macdonald! We all hope to see that part of the work extracted in your Magazine'.<sup>101</sup> MacDonald was known for her role in the Jacobite uprising, which aimed to restore a Stuart monarch to the throne. When Prince Charles, the exiled Stuart, sought refuge in 1746, MacDonald disguised him as a maid, 'Betty Burke', and travelled with him to Skye.<sup>102</sup> MacDonald was subsequently arrested for her part, though she gained significant sympathy and was later released. Periodicals have the capacity to promote an author's profile, but Seward is equally invested in maintaining the standards of the periodical itself; it is in her interest to uphold the standards of the periodical where she submits her work, since she recognises that the reputation of the publication directly influences her own reputation as an author.

Seward's letters to Nichols reveal her anxieties about how her work would be immortalised in print. Although she often sought validation, her self-aggrandisement regarding her own value to his publication, as well as that of her network, was tacit to remind Nichols to handle the publication and reception of her work with care. The

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<sup>101</sup> SJBM/2001.77.2.

<sup>102</sup> Daniel Szechi, *The Jacobites: Britain and Europe 1688-1788* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 102-103.

content of these letters threatens to portray Seward as a commercially motivated writer, which could undermine the expectations of feminine modesty and reputation that she carefully guarded. Having explored the contexts in which Seward cultivated her letter-writing identity and examined the surviving manuscript letters that illuminate the editorial practices behind her published collection, the final section of the chapter shifts its focus to the published *Letters* themselves to argue that the edition was intended as a work of life-writing that exhibits a deliberate construction of cohesive literary persona. Through epistles containing literary criticism, anecdotes of Johnson, and details of Lichfield sociability, Seward fashions a literary identity that is intellectual, professional, creative, and reflective, and carefully resists reductive definitions of that identity based on gender.

### Letters as Life-Writing: *Letters of Anna Seward*

Editions of authors' letters, or 'epistles', as Seward refers to them, are frequently found among her reading, which is recorded in her own correspondence. Seward's reading includes Thomas Gray's letters, and she claims not only to appreciate their humour but admires the 'style and polished ease of Gray's Letters; which, as letters, are very superior indeed to Johnson's, though he pronounces them a dull work'. Another edition Seward celebrates is Elizabeth Rowe's fictional *Letters on Various Occasions* (1729), which was one of the first editions of a female author's letters printed in the century. Seward recalls reading Rowe's letters in her youth: 'from twelve years old to twenty, not a year elapsed in which I did not rush to a reperusal of her letters, nor have they yet ceased to thrill my imagination, and to soothe my heart'.<sup>103</sup> Seward did not heap praise on all editions of letters and correspondence she read. Reading Swift's letters to Stella for the first time in 1801, for instance, Seward termed the publication 'journalizing rubbish' which she had to

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<sup>103</sup> *LAS*, vol. 2, 40, 229.

take ‘for thinly-scattered pearls’. Yet, Seward expresses her desire to ‘go on with them’ despite their ‘oddities’ since ‘they draw, at intervals, the curtains of the court-cabinet, at an interesting period; and since they often present the names of Prior, Congreve, Addison, and Steele, which act upon my imagination like a spell’.<sup>104</sup> The pearls Seward was searching for were ones of literary insights or judgements, not the itemisation of daily life and political history that Swift actually imparted. Seward’s records of her engagement with authorial letters throughout her own *Letters* show that each edition provided her with different points of interest: in Gray’s she found entertainment and artistic appreciation, in Rowe’s she discovered imaginative opportunities and emotional comfort, and in Swift’s she gained, even if only slight, insight into an earlier authorial and courtly sociability.

Seward’s own *Letters* diverge from the models she encountered in her reading in the extent of insight they offered into her life. The insights into the figures within the ‘court-cabinet’ Seward desires more of in Swift’s letters is also the object of her frustration with Marie-Jeanne Roland’s letters, which were published collectively with her memoirs in 1793. Roland wrote the memoirs, *Appel à l’impartiale postérité*, during her imprisonment and they were published posthumously, after her execution in Paris. The English translation appeared in 1795; as Seward remarks in her letter to Lady Eleanor Butler, the volumes are ‘of very recent publication, probably they may not have reached Llangollen Vale’.<sup>105</sup> The third and fourth volumes of *Letters*, which cover the period 1790-1797, show Seward privately engaging in commentaries concerning the political turmoil of the French Revolution and its aftermath. As Claudia Thomas Kairoff observes, though ‘Seward withdrew, during most of the 1790s, from her outspoken role of national muse’, her ‘private correspondents’ knew she was not ‘indifferent to the national

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<sup>104</sup> *LAS*, vol. 5, 409.

<sup>105</sup> *LAS*, vol. 4, 136.

emergency'.<sup>106</sup> In her letters, she is especially interested in the latest works arising from the conflict, including Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Roland's memoirs and letters are another such example of Seward's political reading. Though Roland is not a literary figure, and therefore somewhat atypical in Seward's reading of editions of letters, the memoirs of an important intellectual in revolutionary France at this time appealed to her. Indeed, Seward tells Butler that Roland 'was a most extraordinary woman; of a great comprehensive mind'. In her discussion of the work in her letter to Butler, Seward moves from reading this as a political text to interpreting it as an act of life-writing. Initially Seward reports that Roland's, and her husband's, the Girondist leader Jean-Marie Roland de la Platière, political activities cast them as 'really virtuous characters of the revolution'. Seward is particularly absorbed by the treatment of the pair during the Reign of Terror, remarking upon 'how severely they did both suffer from the chimerical plan of liberty they supported and propagated!' and of the 'new scenes of unprecedented barbarity' Roland discloses. By the third volume, though, Seward is dissatisfied, observing that the work not only 'wears an air of vanity, which lowers her a little' but, as she complains to Butler, 'those whom great characters interest, love to look at the dawn of so bright an intellectual day – but she keeps us out too long before breakfast'.<sup>107</sup> Insights into the intellectual lives of spaces and characters are carefully guarded, Seward finds, by both Swift and Roland. In an attempt to 'leave my name in life's visit', Seward's own *Letters* sought to unlock unprecedented insights into her own literary life and times.<sup>108</sup>

Writing to Anna Rogers Stokes in 1797, Seward explains why producing an edition of letters is preferable to writing an autobiography. In the letter, she describes her

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<sup>106</sup> Kairoff, 99.

<sup>107</sup> *LAS*, vol. 4, 136 - 137.

<sup>108</sup> *LAS*, vol. 2, 37.



‘long habit transcribing into a book every letter of my own which appears to me worth the attention of the public’. Producing a compilation of her letters, Seward tells Stokes, is ‘at least more interesting than a narrative of past occurrences could possibly prove’ and is preferential to writing an autobiography because, she claims, to ‘sit formally down to such a task of egotism, would extremely revolt my sensations’.<sup>109</sup> Earlier, in a letter to the Reverend Berwick in 1788, Seward defends Hester Piozzi’s *Letters to and from the Late Samuel Johnson* (1788) against an unnamed detractor. Piozzi had been accused of presenting ‘Johnson’s letters to the world that they might form a decent vehicle for the publication of her own’. Seward argues that ‘the natural desire of letting the world know how highly she was esteemed by a person so distinguished, — how constantly, during so many years, she engaged his revering attention, was the master-spring of that publication’ and concludes that ‘there is no greater vanity in publishing one’s letters, than one’s essays or poems’.<sup>110</sup> By aligning the writing of letters with other genres of writing, Seward argues for an acceptance of the literary value of personal correspondence.

In comparison to biography, authors’ letters could also more readily be classed as works of literature situated within an author’s or editor’s oeuvre. In his discussion of Piozzi’s *Letters*, William McCarthy states that ‘in the eighteenth century the interest value (and therefore the literary status) of personal letters was still uncertain’. McCarthy explains that ‘the personal letter is by definition individual, particular, and local; it is tied to a specific occasion in one person’s daily life’, whereas literature ‘consists of those texts which the community accepts as having a high degree of *general* interest’. When printed, ‘the private letter is being treated as literature; its matter or manner ought therefore to have literary value’. McCarthy argues that Piozzi’s edition of *Letters* is literature’

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<sup>109</sup> *LAS*, vol. 4, 362.

<sup>110</sup> *LAS*, vol. 2, 165.

because she includes the letters that have general interest and omits ‘unfavourable information or detail’. As a result of her editing, Piozzi, McCarthy observes, attains a coherence in her organisation of Johnson’s letters:

in suppressing Johnson’s first, violent response to her marriage announcement she acted not merely from self-interest and piety towards Johnson’s memory but also from motives that must be judged esthetic; that letter strikes too jarring a tone. Johnson’s second letter, number 354, breathes kindly resignation and makes a touchingly elegiac, and therefore far more artistically suitable, close to the correspondence.<sup>111</sup>

Seward noticed such suppressions in Piozzi’s *Letters*, commenting that ‘it is well that she has had the good nature to extract almost all the corrosive particles from the old growler’s letters’. Editorial interventions, then, play a crucial role in transforming personal correspondence into literature by shaping a narrative, ensuring they resonate with the reader, and reflecting an authorial identity.

Seward’s personal anxieties about her portrayal in Johnson’s letters evolve into a broader critique of biography, leading her to champion letters as a more authentic medium for self-representation. Seward appreciated Piozzi’s thorough editorship because it protected her from the potential criticisms Johnson may have levelled against her. She feared being identified among the

Lichfield people mentioned in these letters, whose visits [to Johnson] were not much more frequent than mine, and whose talents had no sort of claim to lettered attention, there can be no great vanity in believing that he would not pass me over in total silence. There is it that I thank you for your suppressions. I must have been

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<sup>111</sup> William McCarthy, *Hester Thrale Piozzi: Portrait of a Literary Woman* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 135-140.

pained by the consciousness of going down to posterity with the envenomed arrows of Johnson's malevolence sticking about me.<sup>112</sup>

Seward was, therefore, acutely aware of how posthumous reputation could be shaped or damaged by the publication of letters and biography. Yet, throughout her own *Letters*, Seward expresses her desire for the 'true' Johnson to be revealed to the world, claiming that 'in biography, nothing is more displeasing than a picture without shades'.<sup>113</sup>

Johnson's death occurs at the beginning of the first volume of Seward's *Letters*, and she complains that 'excess of unqualified praise, now poured upon his tomb', might have 'been deserved' if 'Johnson's *heart* had been as comprehensively benevolent as his *genius*'. Though she praises Boswell's *Journal*, stating that the reader can 'discern most distinctly the colloquial brightness of that luminary, and also its dark and turbid spots', the publication of the *Life* in 1791 reignited Seward's indignation at Johnson-worshippers, or, what she terms 'Boswellian idolatry' because she felt it glorified Johnson at the expense of a more nuanced portrayal.<sup>114</sup> After reading the first volume of the *Life*, Seward laments: 'what I foresaw has happened. That ingenious pencil, which so well fulfilled the biographic 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'.<sup>115</sup> For Seward, publishing letters, rather than (auto)biography, presented possibilities for effectively presenting an authentic life. Seward believed that an edition of her letters could capture a faithful reflection of the 'events of my life, rendered in some degree interesting, from being animated by the present-time sentiments and feelings of my heart'. By McCarthy's reckoning, letters become literature when they are printed and transform the particulars captured in ephemera into a narrative that captures a life, or at least a

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<sup>112</sup> *LAS*, vol. 2, 102, 44.

<sup>113</sup> *LAS*, vol. 6, 26.

<sup>114</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, 36, 128; vol. 4, 160.

<sup>115</sup> *LAS*, vol. 3, 85-86.

portion of one. Seward's letters become literature not through the implementation of narrative, but because they rise above the merely personal and toward a historical account mediated by a coherent and perspicuous individual. By eschewing seamlessness or completeness, her letters privilege literary insight and self-reflection over the coherence promised by biography.

Letters give an impression of being momentary, singular, and authentic. Collected in an edition, letters also represent the perspective and judgements of a single writer. The printed edition of Seward's letters resists seamlessness and appears fragmentary because it comprises moments of insight and reflection over a period of twenty-three years: not a singular correspondence that develops a bilateral relationship, or a number of such, but a smattering of letters taken from their immediate epistolary context and presented for their enduring literary-critical value. Earlier, this dissertation noted that women biographers leveraged various 'tokens' to assert their authority in eighteenth-century literary discourse. The singularity of the letter aligns with the expectation that readers sought and came to expect details of private experience. Biographers capitalised on this demand by imparting insight into their subjects' lives. As personal documents, Seward's *Letters* similarly exploit this expectation. Furthermore, by emphasising her domestic perspective, Seward takes advantage of the authority the female biographer could gain by aligning their life-writing with an emergent cultural shift that favoured private, emotional, and moral insights over public achievements. Indeed, Seward's correspondence include detail of daily life in Lichfield interspersed with literary anecdotes and commentaries. While *Letters* is autobiographical in its subjectivity and inconclusiveness, it cannot be classified as an autobiography because it lacks a coherent narrative. However, collectively, the letters reflect the judgments of a singular identity, and thus offer coherence, not of narrative, but in their presentation of critical judgements.

Seward foremost fashions herself as a literary author, evident in her accounts of literary criticism and commentaries on Johnson's character, against whom she positions herself. This understanding of letters as reflections of a singular identity relates to another 'token': female biographers employed modes of life-writing to craft their reputations as professional authors. By leveraging their reputation as professional authors in other genres, they substantiate their status as literary biographers and elevate themselves as arbiters of literary knowledge. Seward's correspondence with other literary and intellectual figures, included in the edition, foregrounds her literary acumen. They reveal how she wished to be remembered: as an intellectual force rooted in both private reflection and public literary engagement, whose insights on literature, politics, and society were as valuable as those of her male counterparts, especially Johnson. The final section of this chapter explores how Seward's *Letters* reflect her self-fashioning as an author through her presentations of criticism and commentary, distinguishing herself from Johnson, before going on to examine how Seward positions her literary life at a particular interval in literary history, documenting her involvement in the intellectual and literary sociability of Lichfield to gain cultural capital in the world of eighteenth-century letters.

The letters Seward selected for the 1811 edition demonstrate the range of her interests and reflect her desire to convey a carefully curated portrait of her life, which she would depict as decidedly literary. Their detail ranges from political reflections on the French Revolution, discussions of books, reading, and literary criticism, to Seward's sociable engagements in Lichfield and beyond. *Letters* shows Seward placing herself in an intellectual milieu but also historically situates herself through this act of life-writing as a writer during a period of change. Seward divulges, for instance, details of the first time she met the abolitionist William Wilberforce, a figure who was having a national and global impact, in Buxton in 1796. She wrote that Wilberforce 'disappoints no expectation

his imputed eloquence had excited'. Seward also presents herself as a notable, and respected figure, in this letter. During the same visit to Buxton, she notes that 'my acquaintance here seem to set a far higher value on my talents and conversation, such as they are, than the Lichfieldians', although she modestly claims that 'novelty is the cause of this so much more appreciating attention'.<sup>116</sup> Many of the letters relay more minute details of daily life in Lichfield, which includes, for instance, a series of letters to the Dean and Chapter of Lichfield Cathedral on its 'design to impoverish still farther the useful and lovely shades of the Dean's Walk'. Taking away every other tree, Seward argues, 'will be like drawing every other tooth in the front of a well-furnished mouth'.<sup>117</sup> While these letters of domestic detail might seem to undercut the significance of her meetings with prominent figures such as Wilberforce, they serve to highlight Seward's influence within the community in Lichfield. There are a total of 507 letters across the six volumes. In the edition, 206 letters are sent to women, 300 to men.<sup>118</sup> Only 15 correspondents receive 10 or more letters, while 93 receive just one or two letters. Through these correspondences, she seeks to present herself, not defined by any single relationship, but as an engaged participant in the literary, social, and political discourse of her time. Her letters capture her reflections on reading, literary and local sociability, emphasising her role as a commentator on eighteenth-century life and literature rather than merely as a correspondent.

In *Letters*, Seward continues to establish a coherent persona as a particular type of literary critic seen in her *Memoirs of Darwin* – one who is emotional, sensitive, and appreciative – and affirms these as markers of taste and judgment. Seward's critique of the 1803 edition of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Works*, which is essentially an edition

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<sup>116</sup> *LAS*, vol. 4, 362, 241, 240.

<sup>117</sup> *LAS*, vol. 5, 389, 390.

<sup>118</sup> The recipient of 'Letter LXIII' in volume six is unidentified, though the final paragraph indicates that the recipient is likely male, 244.

of her letters and is one of very few examples comparable to Seward's in its extent, reveals her standards for literary style and substance in editions of letters. On the publication of Montagu's letters, Seward had this to say:

what a disgusting publication these five volumes of Lady M. W. Montagu's Letters! – Though generally shrewd and sometimes witty, they have no grace of style, no enchantment of fancy. Sarcastic slander is their forte. [...] Libertine in principle, as licentious, by all accounts, she was in her conduct, Lady Mary W. M. seems to have been dead, as an Egyptian mummy, to all the various genius and learning which sprung up and bloomed in England during the period of her existence.<sup>119</sup>

Other editions of Montagu's letters had been published prior to the comprehensive edition published by Richard Phillips in 1803. Montagu's letters written during her travels through the Ottoman Empire between 1716 and 1718 were first published in 1763, and came to represent a watershed in women's letter-writing and editions of letters in the literary marketplace. Montagu's letters are selected, organised chronologically, and while they only present one side of the correspondence, follow on from one another coherently. Though inspired by Madame de Sévigné, 'the writer who set the standards for epistolary excellence in the minds of many eighteenth-century readers', Montagu, as Cynthia Lowenthal argues, understood there to be 'a tradition of female epistolary excellence to be cultivated' in Britain, and that Montagu intended to 'play a central role in it'. Lowenthal shows that, as part of that desire for innovation, Montagu 'does not join in the celebration of de Sevigné's artistry'.<sup>120</sup> Montagu's main issue with de Sevigné's epistolary style is that her 'well turn'd periods' and 'smooth lines' equate to 'false

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<sup>119</sup> *LAS*, vol. 6, 129.

<sup>120</sup> Cynthia Lowenthal, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter* (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 1-2.

Eloquence' and so instead 'sets up, within the female letter-writing tradition, a new rivalry based on the importance of substance over style'.<sup>121</sup> The 1803 *Works* received favourable reviews in periodicals, and perhaps most favourably from Robert Southey, who claimed, 'on the whole it may be safely affirmed, that Lady Mary's present letters confirm the pretensions of her sex to peculiar excellence in the epistolary style; and that however France may estimate her Sevigné, England may claim a loftier station for her Montagu'.<sup>122</sup> However, like Seward, readers also privately confessed their disenchantment with the 'substance' of Montagu's letters. Discussing *The Turkish Embassy Letters* in 1763, Elizabeth Montagu enjoys the letters when reading them aloud in company but writes to William Pulteney, Lord Bath, that 'I am now reading Lady Marys letters after your Lordship, and they do not give me half the delight they did when I read them before you'.<sup>123</sup> Writing to Lady Beaumont in 1805, Dorothy Wordsworth states that 'in reading Lady Mary W Montagu's letters, whi[ch] we have had lately, I continually felt a *want* – I had not the lea[st affec]tion for her'.<sup>124</sup>

For Seward, not only do Montagu's letters 'have no grace of style', but they are lacking in literary critical substance. The letters Montagu wrote between 1747 to 1760 to her daughter Mary Stuart, Countess of Bute, whom she relied on to send her books while she was living in France, offer a record of her reading, and impart her preference for novels. In her letter of 16 February 1752, Montagu reports that she has read the recently published Tobias Smollett's *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751), *The History of Charlotte Summers, the Fortunate Parish Girl* (1750; attributed to Sarah Fielding) and

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<sup>121</sup> Lowenthal, 2. Lowenthal cites Montagu's letter of 20 July 1754. See *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, ed. Robert Halsband, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-1967), vol. 3, 62.

<sup>122</sup> 'Art. XII. The Works of the Right Honourable Lady Mary Wortley Montagu [...]', ed. Arthur Aikin, *Annual Review*, vol. 2 (London: T. N. Longman and O. Rees, 1803), 502-507, 507.

<sup>123</sup> Elizabeth Montagu to Lord Bath, June 1763, *Mrs. Montagu "Queen of the Blues": Her Letters and Friendships from 1762-1800*, ed. Reginald Blunt, 2 vols (London: Constable and Company, 1923), vol. 1, 45.

<sup>124</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth, cited in Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading, 1770-1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 150.



Francis Coventry's *The History of Pompey the Little, or the Adventures of a Lapdog* (1751).<sup>125</sup> Though she briefly comments on the faults of *Parish Girl*, Montagu does not elaborate on her thoughts about her reading beyond her self-identification with their characters; she comments, for instance, that 'I also saw myself (as I now am) in the character of Mrs. Qualmsick' from *Pompey the Little*.<sup>126</sup> For Seward, this failure to elaborate on one's reading is a major shortcoming in letters about literature. Elsewhere, Seward comments that 'I demand the why and the wherefore, or objection; and, in obtaining them, gratefully kiss the correcting hand' of her literary correspondents.<sup>127</sup>

Montagu's letters do, however, reveal her position on contemporary literary debates, and her more extensive commentary on the eighteenth-century novel is on the Richardson/Fielding debate, in which she, in her criticism of Richardson's *Pamela* (1740-1741), firmly places herself in favour of her cousin Fielding. Of Richardson's prolixity, Montagu complains,

I know not under what constellation that foolish stuff was wrote, but it had been translated into more languages than any modern performance I ever heard of. No proof of its influence was ever stronger than this present story, which, in Richardson's hands, would serve very well to furnish out seven or eight volumes.

In her discussion of *Clarissa*, Montagu makes a more pointed attack on Richardson, blaming apparent shortcomings in his ability to depict realistic scenes of eighteenth-century sociability on his own social position. Montagu asserts that 'Richardson never had probably money enough to purchase any, or even a ticket to a masquerade, which gives him such an aversion to them', and goes on to state that 'he has no ideas of the manners of high life: his old lord M. talks in the style of a country justice, and his

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<sup>125</sup> Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to Countess of Bute, 16 February 1752, in *The Works of the Right Honourable Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 5 vols (London: Richard Phillips, 1803), vol. 4, 124.

<sup>126</sup> *Works*, vol. 4, 128.

<sup>127</sup> *LAS*, vol. 2, 156.

virtuous young ladies romp like the wenches round a may-pole'. Meanwhile, Montagu praises Fielding's 'genius' and his 'fund of true humour'.<sup>128</sup> This attack on Richardson, of course, infuriates Seward. 'Lady Mary a lover of literature!', Seward protests, '— she! — who is a contemner of history and of travels! a blasphemmer of the intuitive glories of Richardson's mind!'.<sup>129</sup> By being provocative here, Montagu subverts the polite eloquence of Sevigné's French epistolary rhetoric, but also the 'substance' of English models. This is clear in Montagu's remark on Lord Bolingbroke's *Letters* (1754), in which she states that they 'are designed to shew his reading, which, indeed, appears to have been very extensive; but I cannot perceive that such a minute account of it can be of any use to the pupil he pretends to instruct'.<sup>130</sup> Montagu's approach to documenting her reading in correspondence diverges from Seward's belief that authors' letters should offer substantive insights into literary culture and intellectual debates. For Seward, letters were a vehicle for meaningful engagement with literature, rather than a space for documenting polemic or sensational critique, hence why Montagu's letters strike her as lacking the depth and purpose she valued in epistles.

Montagu was not the only literary figure Seward criticised on writing about literature in their letters. Seward makes a similar comment about William Cowper's letters, which were published by William Hayley between 1803 and 1804. Seward remarks that Cowper was evidently so self-absorbed, that he was 'ignobly inattentive to all the works of poetic genius which have adorned his country from Milton's time to the present'.<sup>131</sup> Considering her strictures on Montagu and Cowper, Seward expects, then, the published letters of literary persons not only to promote literature, but to do so responsibly; for Seward, critical 'substance' in letters is closely bound to authorial duty.

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<sup>128</sup> *Works*, vol. 4, 107, 177, 178, 261, 260.

<sup>129</sup> *LAS*, vol. 6, 146.

<sup>130</sup> *Works*, vol. 4, 301-302.

<sup>131</sup> *LAS*, vol. 6, 61.

Seward believes Montagu should, rather than making what she feels are pedantic comments about his prolixity and realism, be using her own literary status to share insights into the ‘glories of Richardson’s mind’ or to contextualise her criticism by evaluating the wider significance of his literary achievements. Seward’s own *Letters* is a rejoinder to publications of letters such as Montagu’s. *Letters* is not a narrow record of reading, but an expansive assemblage of insights guided by Seward’s sense of her duty as the sometime National Muse. Seward asserts her authority as a writer committed to elevating literary discourse, illustrating that her literary identity is marked by a depth of engagement and responsibility. By presenting such commentaries on literature and literary debate within *Letters*, Seward underscores her own literary identity. *Letters* is therefore not merely a record of her reading but positions herself as an arbiter of taste through reflections on that reading. Through such letters, Seward presents herself as a discerning commentator, demonstrating that her life, as she intends to portray it, is fundamentally a literary one.

Building on the presentation of her literary critical identity in her *Memoirs of Darwin*, *Letters* demonstrates Seward’s refinement of her self-presentation as a model literary critic, evident in her reconciliation between displays of her knowledge of sources and application of technical vocabulary with moments of affective reaction to her reading. The critical persona Seward presents, though, is purposely differentiated from an authoritative, patriarchal one. In the *Letters*, Seward casts herself as a critical dissenter. Recalling literary debates with her father, Thomas, on James Thomson’s *The Seasons* (1726-1730) in her youth, Seward notes that he ‘had read the Seasons in their early copies only, and probably his criticism was just; while to me, who had only perused them in their improved state, it seemed injurious, and pained me from a judgement which had been the pole-star of my dawning enthusiasm’. Seward continues, ‘young as I was, I had the

temerity to dissent, to wonder, to vindicate; nor would concede at all on any point'.<sup>132</sup> Seward's early bent toward temerity remained a hallmark of the literary criticism she produced in adulthood. *Letters* sees her consistently challenging or adding nuance to the reception of various works, and she rarely agrees unreservedly with her correspondents without offering additional critical insight. The letters to George Hardinge, the second most frequent correspondent in *Letters*, evince Seward's most energetic literary criticism and self-assurance in her literary knowledge.<sup>133</sup> To Hardinge's suggestion that she ought to read Shakespeare and Milton, she flatly responds, 'I am familiar with their writings'.<sup>134</sup> On another occasion, Seward briefly considers Hardinge's suggestions for improving her poem 'The Future Existence of Brutes', but rejects them, stating, 'yet I shall not, because I like the first reading much better'.<sup>135</sup> Seward's sureness of judgement allows her to challenge prevalent literary opinion, usually upheld by the formally educated male critics she is reading or corresponding with. By publishing these letters, Seward publicly declares herself as a critical dissenter, disavowing any influence from authoritative, patriarchal, critical discourses. Though Seward claims to be writing 'an infinite deal of nothing' in her letters, the six volumes contain some of her most well-articulated literary criticism.<sup>136</sup> Emphasising her responsibility as the National Muse, *Letters* is a platform on which Seward attempts to challenge the prevailing standards of literary criticism. In doing so, she not only asserts her intellectual independence but the integration of literary criticism into an overall account of her literary life results in a cohesive expression of her authority in the literary culture of her time.

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<sup>132</sup> *LAS*, vol. 5, 82.

<sup>133</sup> 28 letters are addressed to 'Rev. T. S. Whalley' and 25 are addressed to 'George Hardinge'.

<sup>134</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, 216.

<sup>135</sup> *LAS*, vol. 2, 12.

<sup>136</sup> *LAS*, vol. 5, 185-186. Seward quotes from William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 1, Scene 1. While Seward's quotation is correct, it is Bassanio, not Antonio, who speaks that line.

Seward lays out her vision for a principled literary criticism that emphasises substance and imagination over superficial concerns with form, and which aligns with her broader effort to position herself as an authoritative literary figure. In the first volume of *Letters*, Seward outlines the tenets of an ideal literary criticism:

criticism must proceed upon a large scale, or her efforts will but deceive herself, and mislead others. She may, it is true, without losing dignity, slightly notice slight things, but the only requisites on which she should strongly insist are general consistence of metaphor, and happiness of allusion, appropriation as to character, vigour of idea, perspicuity of expression, accuracy and general grace of style, and picturesque power in the epithets. Where these are, how greatly is it below the dignity of her office to indulge unmeaning aversions to this or that order of verse; or, yet with more puerile petulance, to quarrel with words for their mere sound, and even to wage idle war with individual letters of the alphabet.<sup>137</sup>

In essence, Seward encourages a more meaningful approach to literary criticism, which, personified as a woman, privileges attention to those ‘requisites’ of expression and imagination, rather than superficial preoccupation with form and sound. This is distinct from reading such a Montagu’s (which is personal and preferential) because Seward applies a more systematic and evaluative framework that requires her to adhere to particular standards. In *Memoirs*, Seward expressed her preference for the same ideals ‘as to perspicuity, elegance, and interest; the grace of picture, and the harmony of numbers’.<sup>138</sup> The actual illumination of these ideals in *Memoirs*, however, is limited to the study of Darwin’s verse. Though *Memoirs*, to some extent, is concerned with the presentation of Seward’s own literary identity, the aim of that text is to establish Darwin’s

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<sup>137</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, 244.

<sup>138</sup> *MED*, 127.

place in the English literary canon. Seward's motivation for displaying her critical insights has shifted between these publications: *Letters* centres on Seward's own engagement, as a reader and writer, with English literature and, recorded over a period of almost twenty-five years, and so it represents a vaster project in its application of her critical ideals to a number of texts and genres. Furthermore, the form of a collection of letters also provides Seward with new opportunities to display the developments and extensions of her literary criticism, since the fragmentary nature of the collection liberates Seward from the narrative constraints of the memoir form. In *Memoirs*, Seward, chronologically works through an analysis of Darwin's major works. While *Letters* is also organised chronologically, the nature of the letters collected affords digression, and so *Letters* shows Seward elaborating upon or maintaining ideas, themes, and discussion, and also approaching texts from different critical positions over the course of several months, or even years. Thus, Seward abandons the reflexive Johnsonian approach to criticism, opting instead for perspectives that are adaptable, dialogic, and nuanced. *Letters* not only maps Seward's development as a literary critic but also reflects her self-fashioning as an author, emerging from the then recent success of her poetry, to assert her authority in English literary criticism over an extended period.<sup>139</sup>

Seward's evolving critical engagement, and her opinions representing her dissenting critical voice, is evident in a series of letters to the Reverend Thomas Sedgwick Whalley, the most frequent recipient in *Letters*. The production of Whalley's tragedy, *The Castle of Montval*, in 1799 prompts Seward to display her critical acumen regarding dramatic texts, and their reception, production, and performance, in a series of

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<sup>139</sup> Seward gained national reputation in the 1780s with the critical approval of *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780), *Monody on Major Andre* (1781), and *Louisa, a Poetical Novel* (1784).

letters to him.<sup>140</sup> In her first letter to Whalley on the theme, Seward outlines a design for her own tragedy, which, with her predilection for sensibility and Shakespearean ‘characteristics’, she claims she ‘would avoid long declamation, my style should be impassioned, and consequently metaphoric, for metaphor is the natural language of a raised imagination and agitated heart’. However, Seward’s consciousness of ‘modern taste and periodical public criticism [...] repressed in my mind every idea of writing a tragedy’.<sup>141</sup> Seward criticises the challenges the ‘Egyptian taskmaster[s]’ impose upon tragic playwrights, suggesting that the demand for ‘Shakespearean viands’ is incompatible with modern conceptions of taste. This is, Seward argues, potentially detrimental to the production of new tragedies, such as *The Castle of Montval*. In an admittedly esoteric analogy to Madame Sévigné’s son, Charles, as ‘completely an orange gourd soured in snow’, Seward illustrates the point: contemporary tragedies outwardly display emotional depth but, in reality, because of the constraints imposed by modern criticism, they lack genuine passion, and so their underlying nature ‘is watery and cold’. As a result, eighteenth-century tragedies are, Seward argues, ‘productions of their own ice-house’ and she laments that ‘it is no wonder that the tragic muse has sunk — she is not permitted to soar: but, at every hazard and amidst every opposition, she should imp her eagle wings’. Presumably, Seward’s final hopeful image of tragic muse repairing her wings here is an endorsement of Whalley’s *Castle of Montval*. However, Seward’s own sentimental description of the plight of the ‘tragic muse’ is not simply a sympathetic

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<sup>140</sup> For a summary of the political inspiration for Whalley’s play, see David Worrall, ‘The Political Culture of Gothic Drama’ in *A New Companion to The Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 148-160, 152.

While the critics, Seward believes, may have censured Shakespearean tragedy, as Frans De Bruyn’s ‘Reference Guide to Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century’ shows, tragedies were popular among audiences, and they dominated the eighteenth-century stage: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Richard III* were the three most-performed of Shakespeare’s plays in the period, and all were being performed regularly in London, even at the end of the century. See Frans De Bruyn, ‘Reference Guide to Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century’ in *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Fiona Ritchie and Peter Sabor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 349-436.

<sup>141</sup> *LAS*, vol. 5, 205, 204.

response but a manifestation of her own critical sensibilities. By writing her own response with a ‘raised imagination and agitated heart’, Seward casts herself as the antithesis to the ‘Egyptian taskmaster[s]’ of modern literary criticism.

Seward’s next letter to Whalley, written just over a month later, on the day his tragedy was due to be performed in London for the first time, takes a different approach to reprehending modern day critics. In it, Seward not only extends her argument to demonstrate a theoretical engagement in a discussion of Aristotelian and Shakespearean dramatic principles, but the imaginative eloquence of the preceding letter is set aside in favour of a more logical rhetoric. In this second letter, lament has turned to argument. Seward responds to William Hodson’s argument, which adheres to Aristotle’s principle of temporal unity: ‘as to time’ a play’s action ‘ought not to exceed twenty-four hours’. Hodson ‘had studied Shakespeare so little as to observe that, finely as he has written, “his plays would have possessed still greater superiority that he had observed the rules of Aristotle”’.<sup>142</sup> Seward contends that Shakespeare’s disregard for Aristotle’s principles was essential for creating new portrayals of life, passions, and manners in ways that surpassed other dramatists. Using *Macbeth* to exemplify her defence, Seward questions whether Shakespeare could have ‘acquired his confessed transcendence’ had the play adhered to the ‘restraints of the unities’. If so, she continues,

observe what it must have lost; — the heath-scene; the banquet-scene; the cave-scene; the castle-scene, and its siege, — with all their animating changes, all the characteristic varieties, all the poetic sublimities resulting from situations of inspiriting difference! — all lopt and lost; while, for the business of one evening, and even for an elapse of twenty-four hours, what superfluous speeches, what

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<sup>142</sup> *LAS*, vol. 5, 203-206, 214.



spun-out declamation, must have been made to have dragged the murder of Duncan through five acts.

Through the display of her critical judgement of Shakespeare's tragedies, Seward develops a logical argument about temporality, and in this rejoinder to Hodson, Seward resists that tendency towards bloviation in the previous letter to Whalley, in which especially in the analogy to de Sévigné, the reader must grapple with its sense. In her response to Hodson, Seward reveals her capacity to engage deeply with theoretical debates. Her argument is grounded not in sentimental attachment to Shakespeare, but in a well-reasoned critique of dramatic principles, positioning her as both a thoughtful reader and an intellectual capable of asserting her authority within critical discussions. This intellectual engagement, particularly in relation to canonical texts, is one of the 'tokens' Seward uses to gain authority in the male-dominated literary culture of the period. By embedding herself in these theoretical debates, Seward reinforces her position as an informed critic whose opinions carry weight, thus contributing to the construction of her identity as a serious literary figure.

In the final letter to Whalley on tragedy, she congratulates him on the success of *The Castle of Montval*, and praises Sarah Siddons, who portrayed the Countess of Montval in the production at Drury Lane, opposite her brother, John Kemble. Unable to see the play herself, Whalley directs Seward to 'read Mrs Siddons's part', a part which she observes was 'written for her [Siddons's] manner of speaking, and for her's alone'. Though clearly flattered by Whalley's direction, what follows is not merely an attempt at performing modesty, but a display of her knowledge of, and appreciation for, tragic performance in spite of her provincial location. Seward declares that Siddons's excellence lies in her distinctiveness as an actress. Siddons is, Seward states, 'no mannerist'; her singularity is not carved from contrived mannerisms in her acting, but from her modesty

and authenticity in performance.<sup>143</sup> Much like in her ranking of British poets in *Memoirs*, Seward further elevates Siddons as a paragon of excellence by comparing her to other actresses who were guilty of either overemphasis or were limited in their expressiveness. While Siddons maintains a balance between genuine emotion and theatrical representation, Mary Ann Yates, Seward claims, continually ‘overstepped’ the bounds of natural expression. While Susannah Maria Cibber was ‘pathetic’ she was, Seward notes, limited by a ‘plaintive monotone’. Siddons is thus placed alongside Hannah Pritchard and David Garrick, who achieve, according to Seward, more success in their singularity. This letter reveals the value Seward places on authenticity in artistic expression; she values this in drama when emotion and sentiment are retained from the page to the stage.

The epistolary form of *Letters*, in its privileging of her literary insights, allows Seward to develop her critical discourse over a number of letters and draw them into a cohesive reflection on the emotional intricacies of tragedy. The most significant aspect of this letter, which concludes her writing on tragedy, however, is that it culminates in a reconciliation between an affective reaction displayed in the first letter and the authoritative, logical rhetoric seen in the second. Though the structure of *Letters* is fragmentary, those fragments are not incongruous, and this is demonstrated in the letters to Whalley. Though Seward modifies her critical rhetoric and theoretical approach, her main concern is always sentiment and the realistic representation of it on the stage. Seward’s ultimate expression of knowledge in an affective discourse enables her to formulate a critical mode distinct from the more authoritative style of Johnsonian criticism, which she believed it was her duty to challenge. Seward’s letters to Whalley exemplify how the epistolary form allows her to refine and develop her critical thought over time, merging sentiment and logic in a way that reflects her broader ambition to

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<sup>143</sup> *LAS*, vol. 5, 215, 240.

contribute to literary evolution. Seward saw herself as occupying a key position at a site of literary change, where the balance between emotional depth and intellectual rigour in critical writing would shape future literary-critical standards. Therefore, this blending of feeling and critique not only marks her as an insightful critic but situates her at the forefront of a shift in how literature and its emotional impact were understood and discussed.

Producing a corrective to a Johnsonian style that predominated in literary criticism was, Seward admitted, an impossible task. In a letter to Mr Weston in 1789, Seward argues that this is because ‘Dr Johnson’s opinions of poetry are so absurd and inconsistent with each other, that, though almost any of his dogmas may be clearly and easily confuted yet the attempt is but combating an hydra-headed monster’.<sup>144</sup> Seward predicts the perils of combatting Johnson’s literary criticism with her own in a letter to the poet Anna Rogers Stokes, who encouraged Seward to produce an anti-*Lives of the Poets*, in 1794:

were I to flatter myself with the possibility of success in such combat, it would indeed be presumption. To what derision should 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.<sup>145</sup>

Though Seward acknowledges her hopelessness in overturning this critical mode, her letter to Stokes is wry, and its inclusion in the collection implicitly suggests that she aims to work against it. Furthermore, her promise to ‘never cease to protest’ is connected to the

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<sup>144</sup> *LAS*, vol. 2, 210. Mr Weston, the ‘organist at Solihull, in Warwickshire’, who wrote a sonnet for Seward, published in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1788. See Ashmun, *The Singing Swan*, 158.

<sup>145</sup> *LAS*, vol. 3, 352.

responsibility she places on her role as the National Muse. *Letters* is not merely an attempt to combat the ‘mighty Johnson’ or counteract the ‘irreparable mischiefs’ he wrought upon literature, but rather to expose the flaws in Johnson’s criticism and its legacy. Rather than tackling the ‘hydra-headed’ inconsistencies in Johnson’s criticism, *Letters* represents that ‘protest against his envious injustice’.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Johnson’s envy, for Seward, is especially apparent in the *Lives of the Poets*. In one letter, in which Seward compares John Urry’s ‘The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer’, which prefaced *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1721), to Johnson’s *Lives*, she argues that it is possible for a biographer to write without envy of his subject. Seward argues that

while Chaucer’s historian thus, in three sentences, resembles Johnson’s style and manner, he writes of his author with a very different spirit from that which dipt in aquafortis the biographic pen which chronicled our poets. Mr Urry very beautifully descants on the genius and writings of the father of English verse.<sup>146</sup>

Seward here shows that Johnson was responsible for influencing a mode of criticism that departed from his predecessor. As a result, Seward states, ‘critics are also started up, producing books abounding with the spawn of Johnsonian envy’ and resultantly, ‘the art and the artists are now fallen on evil days’.<sup>147</sup> Johnson, then, is responsible for establishing a tradition of critical negativity, which Seward sees as damaging to both the reputation of poets and the practice of criticism. This highlights Seward’s awareness about how personality could permeate criticism. In *Letters*, she deliberately seeks to project a different set of traits that reflected her own sensibilities, characterised by generosity and a more constructive approach to criticism. Seward thus delineates her

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<sup>146</sup> *LAS*, vol. 5, 119.

<sup>147</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, 123; vol. 3, 319.

identity as a fair but discerning critic and demonstrates how the letter could be used as a mode in which to convey those personal values relating to literary discourse.

In *Letters*, Seward discloses anecdotes from her discussions with Johnson himself on his critical treatment of poets. An anecdote on their disagreement on the genius of Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770) is shared in a letter to Park in 1800 and displays Johnson's prejudice. Discussing Chatterton's 'Elegy, to the Memory of Mr. Thomas Phillips, of Fairford' (published in 1778), Seward admits to Park her 'unconscious plagiarism' of Chatterton's personification of Winter in her own sonnet, which 'came forward, from the large deposit of English poetry in my brain'.<sup>148</sup> Seward writes that Chatterton was an inspiration to her in her youth, long before he was eulogised by Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a Romantic genius, and she notes that she was particularly fascinated with the 'obscurity of his birth, and his entire deprivation of literary instruction'.<sup>149</sup> Seward learned these details of Chatterton's life, she tells Park, from short prefaces to his poetry printed in magazines. Seward is aggrieved that Chatterton was not awarded a full biography in Johnson's *Lives*, complaining that 'though Chatterton had long been dead when Johnson began his *Lives of the English Poets*; though this stupendous miscellany had then been some time before the world [...] yet would not Johnson allow Chatterton a place in those volume in which Pomfret and Yalden were admitted'. Seward recalls

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<sup>148</sup>*LAS*, vol. 5, 271. Chatterton personifies Winter thus:

Pale rugged Winter bending o'er his tread,  
His grizzled hair bedropt with joy dew;  
His eyes, a dusky light, congeal'd and dead;  
His robe, a tinge of bright ethereal blue.

Seward's personification of Winter in 'Sonnet XXVII' strongly resembles Chatterton's:

See wither'd Winter, bending low his head;  
His ragged locks still with the hoary dew;  
His eyes, like frozen lakes, of livid hue;  
His train, a sable cloud, with murky red.

See Thomas Chatterton, *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* (London: Fielding and Walker, 1788), 66-7, and Seward, *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects* (London: G. Sael, 1799), 29.

<sup>149</sup>*LAS*, vol. 5, 271. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Monody on the Death of Chatterton' (1790).

sharing with Johnson ‘the warmest tribute of my admiration’ for Chatterton. Johnson, however,

did not hear me on the subject, exclaiming, — “Pho, child! don’t talk to me of the powers of a vulgar uneducated stripling. He may be another Stephen Duck. It may be extraordinary to do such things as he did, with means so slender; — but what did Stephen Duck do, what could Chatterton do, which, abstracted from the recollection of his situation, can be worth the attention of learning and taste? Neither of them had opportunities of enlarging their stock of ideas. No man can coin guineas, but in proportion as he has gold”.<sup>150</sup>

Johnson’s prejudice lies in Chatterton’s humble origins; his numismatic metaphor implies that one requires a certain level of literary knowledge to produce literary work. While Seward claims to value Chatterton for his obscurity, Johnson does not. As Laurie Langbauer points out, however, it was the publishers that chose the subjects for the *Lives*, not Johnson himself. Boswell was disappointed to find

the edition of the English Poets [...] was not an undertaking directed by him: but that he was to furnish a Preface and Life to any poet the booksellers pleased. I asked him if he would do this to any dunce’s works, if they should ask him.

Johnson. “Yes, Sir, and say he was a dunce”.<sup>151</sup>

Indeed, on the composition of the *Lives*, Roger Lonsdale notes that ‘Johnson himself always insisted that he had little or no responsibility for the contents [...]. By his own account, he recommended only the inclusion of Pomfret, Yalden, and Watts’.<sup>152</sup> In fact, Langbauer shows that Johnson was interested in Chatterton enough ‘to visit Bristol and

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<sup>150</sup> *LAS*, vol. 5, 272-273. The first edition of Chatterton’s posthumous *Poems, supposed to have been written at Bristol, by Thomas Rowley, and others*, was published in 1777, seven years after his death, allegedly by suicide.

<sup>151</sup> *BLJ*, 596.

<sup>152</sup> *LEP*, vol.1, 9.

puff his way up to the muniment room in St Mary Redcliffe to view the wooden chest which the boy claimed gave up poem after poem’, and Boswell ‘records Johnson’s concluding view of him: ‘this is the most extraordinary young man that has encountered my knowledge. It is wonderful how the whelp has written such things’.<sup>153</sup> The disparity in Johnson’s appreciation of Chatterton presented in Boswell’s and Seward’s accounts is striking. In Boswell’s, Chatterton emerges as an ‘extraordinary young man’ capable of remarkable literary composition while, in Seward’s reportage of Johnson, Chatterton is ‘a vulgar uneducated stripling’ whose poetry was not ‘worth the attention of learning and taste’.

My analysis here is not concerned with the veracity of Seward’s anecdote but instead with the orchestration of the anecdote and how she positions herself in relation to Johnson and her self-fashioning as the antithesis to Johnsonian criticism. Seward seeks to influence through her own reflections in her letters over the following twenty years a transition in the literary landscape, and positions herself as a critical voice occupying the void left by Johnson, offering a more personal perspective on literary culture, which is enabled by the intimacy of the epistolary form. The significance of the anecdote in the letter to Park is not strictly about Johnson’s treatment of Chatterton but about his treatment of Seward. It is one of a number of anecdotes in *Letters* which depict Johnson’s acerbic judgement of Seward’s literary taste and her refusal to be intimidated by him. In a letter to the novelist Frances Brooke, Seward writes that ‘there is no parodying a passage in Milton, without speaking of the late literary treasure, Mr T. Warton’s edition of Milton’s juvenile poems. Its critical notes have all the eloquence and strength of Johnson, without his envy’. Seward tells Brooke that

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<sup>153</sup> Laurie Langbauer, *The Juvenile Tradition: Young Writers and Prolepsis, 1750-1835* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 73.

Johnson told me once, “he would hang a dog that read the *Lycidas* twice.” “What, then,” replied I, “must become of me, who can say it by heart; and who often repeat it to myself, with a delight ‘which grows by what it feeds upon?’” “Die,” returned the growler, “in a surfeit of bad taste.”<sup>154</sup>

Johnson went against mainstream critical discourses on *Lycidas*, claiming that ‘the diction is harsh, the rhymes uncertain, and the numbers unpleasing’.<sup>155</sup> In relating Johnson’s dismissive remark in response to Seward’s appreciation of a work that she has committed to memory, in addition to the interaction in which Johnson infantilises Seward for her admiration of Chatterton, she demonstrates her protest against Johnson’s ‘envious injustice’. Of course, Seward places herself firmly in line with the orthodox reception, in the Romantic era, of Milton and Chatterton and so homes in on areas of Johnson’s criticism that had aged badly.<sup>156</sup> Nevertheless, if Seward is the upholder of a critical mode that prizes appreciation and engagement, by dismissing Seward, Johnson dismisses those moral literary-critical qualities that she aims to represent.

Seward also undercuts Johnson as the authoritative source on sociability in Lichfield seen in Piozzi’s *Letters* and takes on the mantle as the chronicler of her times, which are bookended by Johnson and herself. Seward recognised the letter form as an effective medium for documenting Lichfield’s intellectual life, allowing her to blend personal insight with historical record. Rosemary Sweet has shown that while writers of urban history in the eighteenth century ‘gradually transformed’ such works ‘into a more sophisticated product’ that contained, for instance, more descriptive narratives, ‘longheld

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<sup>154</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, 66.

<sup>155</sup> *LEP*, vol. 1, 278. For an account of criticism of *Lycidas*, and the backlash against Johnson’s controversial treatment of it, see *LEP*, vol. 1, 410.

<sup>156</sup> Daniel Cook observes that ‘in the 1770s and 1780s in particular, Chatterton featured prominently in debates surrounding the emergent national canon, either as a counterweight or as a celebrated addition to the very highest echelons of British worthies alongside Shakespeare and Milton’ (3-4). By the end of the eighteenth century, Chatterton ‘had become the figurehead of ‘neglected genius’’ (14) and publishers sought to continue producing editions of his poetry (73). See *Thomas Chatterton and Neglected Genius, 1760-1830* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).



traditions of urban record keeping' were still central to its production.<sup>157</sup> Seward's *Letters* engage with this tradition of local historiography, but also transform it. Unlike the urban histories that Sweet identifies, which were more objective, the letter enables Seward to present a more personal account of Lichfield because her first-hand observations and anecdotes presented in epistles, as well as accounts of her memories, give an impression of immediacy and intimacy. Yet, while Seward diverges from more formal urban histories, she also draws upon some of their structural elements. Like records of urban life, Seward's compilation of letters is intended as a series of historical documents that captures and preserves intellectual sociability in Lichfield. The epistolary form, in this sense, is both personal and archival.

*Letters* is a selective chronicle that seeks to capture the essence of Lichfield's literary culture and the lives of its people without the ambition of comprehensive historical documentation. Discussing her correspondence with her friend Anne Mompesson, Seward states that, in spite of their letters' infrequency, by 'conversing together, we recal the past, and all that made it dear'. Specifically, their conversations resurrect her sister, Sarah, who 'again lives, and speaks and moves before us, in the soft light of her serene graces', her mother, Elizabeth, and 'my beauteous Honora, as in the golden days of her prime'.<sup>158</sup> For Seward, her epistolary 'conversations lift the veils of time', and so she recognises that, beyond their capacity for personal sentiment, letters offer a broader historical function; they offer a repository for documenting historical events of personal, local, and national significance.<sup>159</sup> By eschewing the appearance of seamlessness in favour of a fragmentary structure that privileges moments of insight, *Letters* functions not only as an account of the development of Seward's literary and

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<sup>157</sup> Rosemary Sweet, *The Writing of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 98.

<sup>158</sup> Honora Sneyd (1751-1780), raised by the Seward family after her mother's death.

<sup>159</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, 258.

critical ability but as a recent, episodic, history of Lichfield literary culture, and the town's wider significance as a space of intellectual sociability.

In *Memoirs*, Seward had emphasised Johnson's detachment from intellectual networks in Lichfield, and in the midlands. While Johnson lived in London from 1737 until his death, he spent (evidenced by his correspondence, which Piozzi had published) significant portions of his time in Lichfield. The Lichfield society that Seward associated with, according to Walter Scott in his 'Biographical Preface' to *Poetical Works*, included 'Dr Darwin, Mr Day [...], Mr Edgeworth, Sir Brooke Boothby'. Though, according to Scott, 'Dr Johnson was an occasional visiter of their circles', he 'seems, in some respects, to have shared the fate of a prophet in his own country. Neither Dr Darwin nor Miss Seward were partial to the great moralist'.<sup>160</sup> Yet, Scott notes that Seward 'possessed many anecdotes of his conversation, which had escaped his most vigilant recorders'. Seward, in comparison to both Boswell and Piozzi, possessed an unparalleled access to Johnson's past. In one of her juvenile letters, Seward tells 'Emma' that 'it is true I dwell on classic ground. Within the walls which my father's family inhabits, in this very-dining room, the munificent Mr Walmsley, with the taste, the learning, and the liberality of Mæcenas' where 'the school-boys, David Garrick and Samuel Johnson' were also 'summoned'.<sup>161</sup>

The presentation of Johnson's sociability in *Letters*, however, is focussed on his acquaintances and relationships with local women, rather than the masculine, intellectual circle that once gathered at the Bishop's Palace. In a letter to Mrs Taylor, Seward claims that in his youth, 'Johnson was always fancying himself in love with some princess or other'. Molly Aston was one of Johnson's princesses. It was 'during those school-days'

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<sup>160</sup> Biblical allusion to Luke 4.24. Scott suggests that Johnson may not have been well-regarded by some of his fellow Lichfieldians, despite his stature elsewhere, emphasising an ambivalence toward his reputation within Lichfield.

<sup>161</sup> *PWS*, vol. 1, x-xi, lxix.

that Johnson's 'flame' for Molly Aston 'commenced'. Like Johnson, Aston was a frequent visitor to Bishop's Palace. It was there that Aston 'amused herself with the adorations of the learned, though dirty stripling, whose mean appearance was overlooked, because of the genius and knowledge that blazed through him'. Aston became, no less, 'the Laura of our Petrarch'. The anecdotes on Johnson's apparent flirtation with Aston are prompted by Seward's correspondent's, Mrs Taylor, enquiries: 'you ask who the Molly Aston was whom those letters [Piozzi's *Letters*] mention with such passionate tenderness?'. Seward, however, presents Johnson's treatment of Lichfield women as far from exemplary. Johnson did not pursue Aston because he 'married, at twenty-three, the mother of his Lucy'.<sup>162</sup> Upon the death of Lucy Porter (Johnson's step-daughter) in 1786, Seward wrote a short account of Porter's life in Lichfield, and her relationship with Johnson, in a letter to Court Dewes. Porter, whom Seward describes as having a 'fair, clean complexion, bloom, and rustic prettiness', was, according to Seward, 'the earliest object of Dr Johnson's love. This was many years before he married her mother'. 'Affluence', Seward remarks, 'was not hers' and so Porter resided with Johnson's mother, Sarah, working with her in 'that little bookseller's shop, by which her husband had supplied the scanty means of existence'. Later, Porter took Sarah's place in the bookshop, 'standing behind the counter, nor thought it a disgrace to thank a poor person who purchased from her a penny battledore'.<sup>163</sup> In her sympathetic treatment of these women, Seward offers an alternative account of Johnson's interactions with women; his rakish abandonment of Lichfield women contrasts with the refined Bluestocking sociability captured in his own letters. Moreover, Seward establishes her *Letters* as an intervention in shaping Johnson's legacy from a domestic and provincial perspective that she felt metropolitan accounts often

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<sup>162</sup> *LAS*, vol. 2, 347-348.

<sup>163</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, 116, 117.

overlooked. The epistolary mode enables Seward to position her own account as authoritative – she is simultaneously a chronicler, witness, and critic – using her local knowledge to fashion herself as an arbiter of historical and biographical knowledge.

Just as her *Memoirs* of Darwin assert that individual lives cannot be understood in isolation but must be positioned within a larger historical frame, Seward's *Letters* are an example of life-writing that situates personal history into the broader historical moment of Lichfield literary culture. Seward's juvenile letters, prefixed to her *Poetical Works*, which were edited and published by Walter Scott in 1810, show Seward experimenting with letters as a form with which to record historical events. Until now, Seward's juvenilia have been treated as autobiographical documents that were heavily influenced by her novel reading. As Barnard shows, the juvenile letters have a particular fictional quality, not only evident in their address to the imaginary correspondent 'Emma', but in the 'unmistakable' inspiration they take from Seward's reading of Richardson's and Rousseau's epistolary novels. Seward drew on the form for its appropriateness as a vehicle of 'self-expression' and 'articulation for young women'. Barnard also observes that the 'juvenile letters can be read as a comparatively intact journal' and embedded into it is 'meticulous autobiographical detail'. Therefore, the letters 'reconstruct Seward's early life' even 'if much of what she wrote in them presented dubious personal truths'.<sup>164</sup> However, the juvenile letters also demonstrate Seward's attempt to harness the letter form not only as a means of self-expression but also as a vehicle for constructing a historical narrative. By blending her personal insight with a broader historical narrative, she offers an intimate exploration of the impacts of the plague on her native village of Eyam in 1666 and its resurgence in 1757 and positions herself as an authority on that history.

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<sup>164</sup> Barnard, 12-16.

In a letter dated 13 February 1765, Seward describes to ‘Emma’ the landscape of her ‘native rocks and hills in Derbyshire’. Once she has pictured ‘a distant view of Chatsworth, and a nearer one of Stoke’, Seward goes on to describe Eyam, which was, according to Seward, ‘one of the last, if it were not the very last place in England to be visited by that dire contagion in 1666’. According to Seward, the plague in Eyam was ‘brought thither in patterns of cloth sent from London to a tailor in our village’, subsequently killing ‘four-fifths of the inhabitants’. The remainder of Seward’s account of the 1666 pandemic focuses on telling the story of one inhabitant who survived, William Mompesson, the Rector. His wife, Catherine, on ‘the commencement of the contagion [...] threw herself, with her babes, at the feet of her husband, to supplicate his flight from that devoted place, but not even the tears and entreaties of a beloved wife could induce him to desert his flock in these hours of danger and dismay’. Though William sent away his children, Catherine ‘soon after sickened of the plague, and expired in her husband’s arms, in the 27<sup>th</sup> year of her age’. William is, in Seward’s account, an ‘exemplary man’; in addition to visiting the sick, he acquired provisions for the village, and set in motion a proposal to quarantine Eyam so that ‘the rest of the county of Derby escaped the plague’.<sup>165</sup> Seward’s commentary shows her to be practising a presentation of historical events that draws on Johnson’s advocating of personal narratives in historical writing. Johnson emphasises the value of personal stories in illuminating broader moral and historical truths when he argued that ‘there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful’. Seward aligns herself with this sentiment by using William’s experience as a study of individual virtue amid collective suffering. Her portrayal of William’s commitment to his community reflects Johnson’s belief in the instructive power of personal narratives, suggesting that even within a local context, the

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<sup>165</sup> *PWS*, vol. 1, cliii – clxiv.

lessons of one man's life can resonate with larger themes of sacrifice, duty, and moral integrity. Indeed, for readers enquiring 'after natural or moral knowledge', William's sacrifice, which has significant local and national ramifications, is a display of exemplary morality.<sup>166</sup> Seward transforms the letters into a work of life-writing that transcends mere documentation, inviting readers to reflect on human experience, much in the way Johnson advocated.

Seward's self-fashioning as an authoritative editor is demonstrated in her incorporation of William's letters into her correspondence with 'Emma', allowing her to bridge personal narrative with historical documentation. As such, the letter form enables Seward to fashion herself as both chronicler – she organises the Mompesson letters while also offering her own reflective commentary, shaping the reader's interpretation of these historical manuscripts. By embedding William's letters within her own correspondence, Seward constructs a layered narrative, where the historical document is mediated by her own voice, reinforcing her editorial authority. In the next letter to 'Emma', on 25 February, Seward encloses 'the requested copies of Mr Mompesson's letters'. Her father, she tells 'Emma', 'is in possession of authentic copies of three letters from Mr Mompesson, taken, as appears by the dates, at the time the originals were written'.<sup>167</sup> William's three letters are respectively addressed to his children, George and Elizabeth, his patron, George Saville (later Lord Halifax), and his uncle, John Beilby of York, and detail his experience of the pandemic in 1666. Similarly to how Seward reflects that her correspondence with Anne Mompesson 'lifts the veils of time', the insertion of William's letters here resurrects Eyam in 1666 adds an authenticity that Seward's narrative account could not achieve alone. Mark Salber Phillips argues that in the early modern period,

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<sup>166</sup> Samuel Johnson, 'No. 60. Saturday, 13 October 1750', in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Volume III, The Rambler*, ed. W. J. Bate, and Albrecht B. Strauss, (eds.), (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), 318-323, 320, 321.

<sup>167</sup> *PWS*, vol. 1, clx.

historical accounts were reliant on letters in lieu of narrative. Phillips uses the example of Thomas Carte (1686-1754), ‘a prominent and well-supported royalist historian’ who ‘initiated a campaign that resulted in the publication of the lives and papers of a number of prominent Cavalier families’.<sup>168</sup> As Phillips notes, Carte’s *Letters and Papers* carry implications beyond his politics. In his editorial note, Carte states that because the letters were written ‘in the scene and at the time of actions and negotiations’, they are

generally more enlivening than narrations purely historical on the same subject, representing things (which Poets choose to do to render them more agreeable as well as moving) in the very action, bringing us back as it were either back to those times, or exposing them so naturally to our view, that we are in a manner present at them; so that they are often entertaining as any poetical descriptions.<sup>169</sup>

Seward’s inclusion of William’s letters certainly enlivens her narrative, but it is Seward herself, in her role as editor, who imbues these letters with vitality. By formally situating William’s ephemeral letters within the narrative of her journal, and later *Poetical Works*, she ensures that these local historical documents are preserved for posterity. Seward’s editorial intervention not only authenticates her historical narrative but also allows her to assert authority over how that history is interpreted, blending self-expression with the presentation of historical fact.

Seward’s early experiments with epistolary form is a precursor to *Letters*, in which she refines the balance between personal self-expression and historical documentation. In *Letters*, Seward utilises the letter to frame an account of her own life as part of a wider narrative on Lichfield literary culture, presenting herself as both a participant and observer of the cultural moment in which she exists. Seward builds upon

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<sup>168</sup> Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 100.

<sup>169</sup> Thomas Carte, *A Collection of Original Letters and Papers, Concerning the Affairs of England, from the year 1641 to 1660*, 2 vols (London, 1739), vol. 1, iii.

her earlier epistolary practice by positioning herself as both a witness to, and commentator on, historical change. Just as she positioned the manuscripts relating to the plague in Eyam within her own correspondence, in *Letters* she positions herself within the intellectual and literary transformations of her time. The letter form enables Seward to recount these shifts not as a detached historian but as one embedded in the literary culture of the past and present, capturing a broader historical narrative through the lens of personal memory. Reflecting on the decline of intellectual sociability in Lichfield, Seward notes the passing of an era that she once inhabited; she laments that Lichfield ‘has lost many of those inhabitants whose society used to gild the gloom of the approaching season’.<sup>170</sup> While *Letters* provides a reflective account of such cultural shifts, the epistolary mode gives the impression of immediacy, and so each letter appears anchored to the moment in which it was written. This immediacy complicates Seward’s broader historical narrative, because the letters are not written with the retrospect of a historian but with the imminence of the letter-writer. The epistolary mode of *Letters* allows Seward to simultaneously inhabit two perspectives: that of a writer living within a cultural context and that of an author aware of a future readership beyond the intended recipient. As such, *Letters* continues to bridge self-expression with historical commentary, and Seward not simply presents an account of a literary culture in a specific period but memorialises a lived experience of it.

*Letters* also serve as a testament to shifts in literary taste, as Seward critiques contemporary trends and situates herself as a voice from a past literary tradition. Her self-fashioning as a literary critic in correspondence, examined earlier in this chapter, reflects her awareness of reading and writing during a, what she saw as distinct, period of change in literary history. Seward positions herself as a participant in a changing literary

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<sup>170</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, 90.



landscape, even if she is dismayed in the direction that it is moving toward. She observes that ‘poetry is not the fashionable study of the present age. We have plenty of fine writers, but there is a dearth of readers’.<sup>171</sup> Furthermore, in her description of herself as ‘handmaid’ to the ‘bards’, Seward casts herself as a relic of an earlier literary era, who reveres the poetic traditions that she feels are being eclipsed by modern tastes.<sup>172</sup> Yet, even as she expresses her doubts about contemporary taste, Seward upholds her duty to chronicle and commentate on literary change. She reads and critiques the new generation of poets, but also seeks to promote the works of those preceding the ‘present age’, preserving their legacy amidst shifting tastes. Seward’s reading of emerging poets such as Wordsworth exemplifies this duality. On reading his poems for the first time, Seward comments: ‘I was extremely surprised, for it was a name I had not heard of, though I find his poems had been published some time. This superiority which Coleridge assigns to them, is just’. Yet, while Seward concedes that though ‘Wordsworth has genius’, readers have overlooked, in their praise, that ‘his poetry is harsh, turgid, and obscure’ by comparison to that of his precursors (who Seward singles out as Ossian and herself).<sup>173</sup> This letter is one example in which Seward emphasises her identity as both an authority on literary culture and as a guardian of past tradition. Her criticism of Wordsworth reflects her broader concern about the decline of poetic standards she sought to maintain. Seward positions herself as both commentator and participant in literary history, occupying a position between reader of present literature and a custodian of that in the past. *Letters*, then, serves as a text through which she asserts her critical self-expression and identity as a chronicler of a literary culture in transition.

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<sup>171</sup> *LAS*, vol. 2, 35.

<sup>172</sup> *LAS*, vol. 1, 242-243.

<sup>173</sup> *LAS*, vol. 5, 61.

Seward's self-fashioning as an author, chronicler, and commentator is a deliberate and evolving process that began in her juvenile letters to 'Emma' and culminates in the mature *Letters*. In her earlier writings, Seward shapes an identity as a young writer engaging with significant historical events, even if those engagements were mediated by fiction or youthful embellishment. By the time of *Letters*, Seward established herself as an authoritative voice through her published works and through her role as a commentator on the cultural changes she witnessed. *Letters* reflects a greater awareness of her place in literary history—not just as a participant but as an author responsible for documenting it. Her reflections on the decline of poetry's popularity, or her commentary on the works of her contemporaries, show her self-awareness of living through this period of literary change. In the letters that give insight into those moments that are focussed on documenting that change, Seward casts herself not only as a participant but as an authoritative chronicler, whose insights offer a bridge between the past and present. This awareness of the self as part of history is central to her self-fashioning. Seward is not merely recounting facts or emotions; she consciously shapes, over the course of *Letters*, an assemblage of insights that positions her as a key figure in the intellectual history of her time. Her letters, then, are both personal artifacts and historical documents. Seward's recognition of this convergence of functions allows her to present herself as both a product of her historical moment and an interpreter of it.

This chapter has demonstrated the ways in which Seward utilised the letter to construct and present her identity as a literary author and critic. Similarly to *Memoirs*, *Letters* served not merely as a record of personal correspondence but represent an act of life-writing through which she could fashion herself as an authoritative voice on literary culture. Throughout her correspondence, Seward positions herself as a critic advancing a more appreciative and inclusive form of literary criticism. This approach extends her

efforts in *Memoirs* and her marginalia in her books, aligning with a Romantic aesthetic that seeks to capture moments of privileged insight, presenting personal reflection as part of a larger intellectual project. This reflects a continuation of the modes of biographical writing that both Piozzi and Seward adopted in their biographies of Johnson and Darwin, in which they blended personal insight with literary knowledge to establish a more nuanced and legitimate understanding of their subjects. Seward's *Letters*, then, serve not only as expressions of personal, literary identity, but also as historical documents that capture the intellectual and social life of eighteenth-century Lichfield. They provide insights into the lives of literary figures and the cultural milieu to which she belonged, effectively blending personal sentiment with historical narrative. By contributing to a redefinition of literary life-writing during this period, *Letters* illustrates how intellectual authority can be established through intimate modes of life-writing. Seward's epistolary approach to autobiography not only combines personal reflection with intellectual rigor but also reinforces key themes explored in the first half of this dissertation: that women writers could engage meaningfully with literary discourse through intimate biographical forms, challenging the more formal, public narratives of their male counterparts. *Letters* allows Seward to assert her critical identity, legitimising women's life-writing as a source of literary-biographical insight and demonstrating that women writers could gain influence in literary culture not only through fiction and poetry but through personal, autobiographical, and reflective modes of life-writing.

The final chapter addresses the evolving understanding of the biographical subject as situated within a specific historical moment in the late Georgian period. This theme has emerged throughout the previous discussions, particularly in Piozzi's marginalia, which reflects her engagement with the literary and cultural landscape of her time. Similarly, in *Memoirs*, Seward situates Darwin within his social milieu, highlighting the interplay

between personal identity and broader societal influences. Additionally, Seward's *Letters* illustrate her self-conception amid a period of literary transition, underscoring her awareness of the shifting cultural tides in Lichfield and beyond. Building upon these insights, the final chapter examines *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth* (1820). Exploring Richard Lovell's and Maria Edgeworth's biographical narratives, the chapter will examine how the interplay between individual lives and historical context shapes conceptualisations and understandings of the biographical subject.

## Chapter 4

### The Individual and History: the *Edgeworth Memoirs*

Richard Lovell Edgeworth drafted his *Memoirs* between 1808 and 1809 at ‘the urgent request of one of his sons’.<sup>1</sup> However, Lovell Edgeworth ceased writing after he became ill; it is noted in *Memoirs* that the illness ‘seemed to be a mixture of bilious and nervous fever’. Though Lovell Edgeworth lived for another eight years, he never returned to the *Memoirs*, for ‘his attention was afterward engrossed by objects, which he thought more useful and important’. Lovell Edgeworth instead enlisted his daughter, the novelist Maria Edgeworth, to complete the *Memoirs* upon his death. In the preface addressed to the reader in the second volume, Maria notes that when her father was ‘urged’ by his family to continue writing his memoirs, ‘he used to say, that “he would leave the rest to be finished by his daughter Maria.”’<sup>2</sup> Edgeworth was, however, reluctant to take on the mantle of completing her father’s *Memoirs*. Marilyn Butler relates that

the day before Edgeworth died he dictated to Maria a letter to his publisher in which he stated that he had written 480 pages of autobiography, and that Maria was to add 200 more. He added that he required her to perform this task within a month of his death, but in the margin of the letter we see the addition which Maria must have added silently: ‘I never promised’.<sup>3</sup>

Edgeworth protests that she felt ‘unprepared and unequal’ to fulfil her father’s request. Nonetheless, she resolved to complete the *Memoirs* by December 1818 and determined ‘that nothing should be written by me hastily’.<sup>4</sup> Though Edgeworth had no intention of

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Edgeworth, *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Esq. Begun by Himself and Concluded by His Daughter, Maria Edgeworth* (London: R. Hunter, and Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1820), vol. 2, i. The first volume is henceforth abbreviated to *MLE*. The second is abbreviated *MME*.

<sup>2</sup> *MME*, 313, ii, ii. For distinction, Richard Lovell Edgeworth will be referred to as ‘Lovell Edgeworth’ and Maria Edgeworth as ‘Edgeworth’.

<sup>3</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 403. Lovell Edgeworth died on 13 June 1817.

<sup>4</sup> *MME*, iii.

completing the ‘task within a month’, she did exceed her father’s request for 200 pages of material. Picking up from where her father abandoned his narrative in 1782, Edgeworth supplied 450 pages of memoir, anecdote, and letters. In 1820, *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Esq. begun by himself and concluded by his daughter, Maria Edgeworth* was published in two volumes, the first comprising the memoirs Richard composed himself, the second authored by Maria. While Edgeworth’s volume was excused by literary critics, her father’s volume was met with censure. The reviewer for the *London Magazine* wrote:

we persist in thinking Mr Edgeworth’s life a tiresome, vain, inglorious book ...  
and his own account of his own jokes, and his own account of himself, who can bear it? — His own daughter may be pardoned her affectionate praise of him: — but the public is not his daughter. He eulogises himself deplorably; and really, if we may judge from his own account, upon very slender grounds.<sup>5</sup>

Edgeworth’s biography could not mitigate the apparent egotism of her father’s autobiography. The response also reflects a broader cultural aversion to autobiography and panegyric. The offense here, is double: not only does Lovell Edgeworth offer an extensive self-portrait but he also indulges in praising his own qualities.

Edgeworth was not the only woman writer to publish a biography of their father in the early nineteenth century. In fact, Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace claims that Edgeworth is but one example of a self-effacing literary daughter writing in ‘an era heavily populated with “daddies’ girls”’, including Frances Burney, Elizabeth Carter, and Hannah More.<sup>6</sup> Burney and Edgeworth both wrote biographies of their fathers, and Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, who wrote a biography of her father, Sir John Hawkins, might also be invited to join this list. Edgeworth’s *Memoirs* has, however, been overshadowed by Burney’s three-

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<sup>5</sup> ‘The Jewels of the Book’ in *The London Magazine*, ed. John Scott (London: Baldwin, Craddock, and Joy, 1820), vol. 2, 268-276, 269.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Their Fathers’ Daughters: Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, and Patriarchal Complicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 96.

volume biography of her father, the musicologist Dr. Charles Burney, published in 1832, despite receiving even more scathing criticism. While the *Quarterly Review* published a twenty-nine-page commentary, the notice in the *Examiner* neatly summarises the critics' complaints: the biography was too 'bulky' with its 'large words' and 'small anecdotes' from 'the pomposities of the Johnsonian epoch'. In this review, Charles Burney receives much the same treatment as Lovell Edgeworth; they are pompous relics of the preceding century. The 'character of old Dr. Burney, the musical Tourist, the amiable busy-body' is 'all vanity, loyalty, and nobility' and the reviewer mocks Burney for his 'absurd devotion' to 'the old Court' and for his 'trembling veneration for Dr. Johnson [...] and the literary club in general'. Unlike Maria Edgeworth, however, Frances Burney is not pardoned: 'Mad. D'Arblay herself, however, must not expect to escape ridicule for her illustrious obscure style, for her affected overvaluing of all persons that have praised her, and for perpetual egotism'.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, it is Burney's *Memoirs* that has endured in modern scholarship. This is because, Kowaleski-Wallace explains, since the 1980s, Burney and her work 'has been taken up into a new feminist canon'. While Burney 'continues to be "her father's daughter"', her dedication in writing her father's biography became less of an issue for feminist study. Though Burney had initially failed to 'meet early feminist expectation for consistent resistance to patriarchy', scholarship by Kristina Straub, Julia Epstein, and Margaret Anne Doody has revealed that 'contradiction was central to Burney's experience as an eighteenth-century woman writer and therefore to her art'.<sup>8</sup> The feminist

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<sup>7</sup> 'Memoirs of Dr. Burney', in *The Examiner*, Sunday 2 December 1832, 774. See also 'Art. V. — Memoirs of Dr. Burney' in *The Quarterly Review*, ed. John Gibson Lockhart (London: John Murray, 1833), vol. 49, 97-125. For a discussion of the reviews of Burney's *Memoirs*, see Marilyn Francus, 'Trying to Set the Record Straight: Alicia LeFanu, Frances Burney D'Arblay, and the Limits of Family Biography' in *Writing Lives in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Tanya M. Caldwell (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2020), 77-108.

<sup>8</sup> Kowaleski-Wallace, vii-viii.

recuperation of Burney has inspired Kowaleski-Wallace, and a few others, to attempt to achieve the same change of status for Edgeworth. Marilyn Butler's seminal critical biography, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (1972), accounts for Edgeworth's writing of the *Memoirs*, the early response she received on the manuscript of it that she circulated, and its reception upon publication. Kowaleski-Wallace dedicates half of her monograph, *Their Father's Daughters* (1991) to Edgeworth, examining the social, historical, and psychological factors that motivated her identification with the patriarchal tradition her father represents. Caroline Gonda, in *Reading Daughters' Fictions, 1709-1834* (1996), has however argued that Kowaleski-Wallace's reading 'defines Maria Edgeworth too narrowly as her father's daughter, and refuses to acknowledge the power and authority which she did choose to exercise as a writer'. Gonda argues that while 'Edgeworth's volume of her father's *Memoirs* tells one story', her novels, *Belinda* (1801), *Harrington* (1817), and *Helen* (1834) 'suggest another'. That is to say that while Edgeworth's *Memoirs* 'bear witness to her determination to present her father in the best possible light' as she attempts to balance 'strained duty and adoring belief', it is her novels, Gonda proposes, that demonstrate a willingness 'to go against' her father's authority. Gonda does acknowledge, however, echoing feminist scholarship on Burney's experience, that 'neither 'the daughter's position' nor the activity of 'women's writing' can be fixed or defined consistently even within one woman's career'.<sup>9</sup> While Edgeworth's *Memoirs* has received some feminist critical attention, it is comparatively neglected in or altogether absent from studies and anthologies of (women's) life-writing in the long eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Caroline Gonda, *Reading Daughters' Fictions, 1709-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 234, 238, 207, 233, 238.

<sup>10</sup> While I do not engage in a direct comparative reading of Burney's and Edgeworth's *Memoirs*, this chapter draws on scholarship concerning Burney's *Memoirs* because of its relevance and insight to their shared contexts—both novelists turned biographers, writing *Lives* of their fathers in the early nineteenth century.



The *Edgeworth Memoirs* is a fitting bookend to this dissertation. Chronologically, it marks the waning of the biographical tenets that belonged to the long eighteenth century. As the Victorian period approached, the make-up of literary biography shifted. Michael Benton describes this shift: ‘nineteenth-century biography generally favoured the Boswellian fullness [of biography] without emulating his frankness. It reflected the decorous proprieties of its age and [...] eschewed ‘coarseness’ and tended to sanitise its subject with the fresh bloom of respectability’.<sup>11</sup> There was also a shift in readers’ interest in eighteenth-century sociability. As the review of Burney’s *Memoirs* in the *Examiner* indicates, readers’ appetites for historical anecdote diminished over time; the review shows that nineteenth-century readers did not care for ‘the inanities and pomposities of the Johnsonian epoch’. As Marilyn Francus asserts, ‘it is not enough for Burney to provide biographical sketches of Charles Burney’s famous friends, or descriptions of his social engagements’ if readers felt either ‘sufficiently informed’ already or simply ‘did not care’ about late eighteenth-century sociability and celebrity.<sup>12</sup> The *Edgeworth Memoirs* reflect the early tensions and shifting interests of this period, particularly in how the two volumes navigate the balance between frankness and respectability, individualism and sociability, and anecdote and broader narrative.

It is this example of collaborative, family biography, rather than those by Burney, Pilkington, Alicia LeFanu, William Godwin, Montagu Pennington, or Henry Austen, that is particularly relevant to a dissertation interested in Lichfield literary culture because of Lovell Edgeworth’s participation in that network of intellectuals to which he was introduced by Erasmus Darwin. Lovell Edgeworth subsequently became acquainted with Thomas Day, with whom he shared a veneration for Rousseau’s educational theories, and

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Benton, *Literary Biography: An Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 5-6.

<sup>12</sup> Francus, 99.

the Lunar Society. While living in Lichfield, he also became acquainted with Anna Seward, and went on to marry Seward's adopted sister, Honora Sneyd. Lovell Edgeworth's volume of *Memoirs* captures the sociability of the literary-intellectual circles operating in Lichfield in the mid-eighteenth century. Edgeworth demonstrates in the second volume that her father's connection to that society was maintained after his return to Edgeworthstown, Ireland, by presenting his correspondences with Darwin and Day. More pressingly, the *Memoirs* are conceptually relevant to this dissertation beyond Lovell Edgeworth's ties to Lichfield. The two volumes of *Memoirs* are a fraught collaborative effort that wrestle with questions of literary authority, dynamics between biographer and subject, experimental biographical writing, and the presentation of literary sociability.

To understand Edgeworth's intervention with the second volume of *Memoirs*, in the first part of this chapter, I examine Lovell Edgeworth's autobiographical self-fashioning as a rational, Enlightenment philosopher, and how that particular self-fashioning, as well as his respectability, is jeopardised by his autobiographical mode of writing. I then turn to a discussion of Edgeworth's second volume. First, I examine how Edgeworth used her experience as a novelist to rehabilitate her father's reputation by presenting his life as one defined by utility and virtue. However, in doing so, I argue that Edgeworth encourages readers to view biography not simply as an evaluation of a subject's life, character, and work, but as a reflection of the relationship between individual and historical contexts. While this approach was demonstrated by Anna Seward, as explored in Chapter Three, Edgeworth's work marks a more definitive shift in life-writing toward an emphasis on the interplay between personal narrative and historical context. The final part of this chapter examines Edgeworth's own self-fashioning as authoritative biographer. I argue that the biography does not represent a straightforward

rejection of Lovell Edgeworth's influence but rather reflects a strategic balance between filial duty and professional authorship.

### Enlightenment Autobiography

Evaluating the potential merits of autobiographical writing, Samuel Johnson argued that 'he that speaks of himself has no motive to falsehood or partiality'. Though 'he that writes an apology for a single action, to confute accusation, or recommend himself to favour, is indeed always to be suspected of favouring his own cause', 'he that sits down calmly and voluntarily to review his life for the admonition of posterity, or to amuse himself, and leaves this account unpublished, may be commonly presumed to tell truth, since falsehood cannot appease his own mind, and fame will not be heard beneath the tomb'. Johnson is responding to an anxiety about bias in biography: he claimed that 'he that writes the life of another is either his friend or his enemy, and wishes either to exalt his praise or aggravate his infamy'. An autobiographical account is, to some degree, preferable to Johnson because there is no mediating voice: 'relations are therefore commonly of most value in which the writer tells his own story'.<sup>13</sup> However, Johnson's argument sits on the premise that authenticity and truth are maintained only if the account remains unpublished. Once published, it becomes subject to suspicions of vanity, egotism, and bias. As discussed in Chapter Three, the preference for the publication of once-manuscript letters over an autobiographical memoir, was closely bound to anxieties about appropriate modesty.

Autobiography had not, when Johnson wrote his *Idler* essay in 1759, been fully realised as a biographical genre in its modern conception. Of course, there were works

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<sup>13</sup> Samuel Johnson, 'No. 84. Saturday, 24 November 1759' in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Volume II, The Idler and The Adventurer*, ed. W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, and L. F. Powell (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), 261-264.

written and published well before 1800 that are described as autobiographical. Adam Smyth contends that autobiography ‘is not an exclusively modern, post-Romantic phenomenon, but a way of writing and reading that has a much richer, longer history’.<sup>14</sup> By the end of the long eighteenth century, however, the genre had moved closer to its present signification, which Philippe Lejeune famously defines as ‘a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on individual life, in particular the story of his personality’.<sup>15</sup> By this time, writers ‘began to produce retrospective, chronological, richly interior life narratives’.<sup>16</sup> Romantic-period writers were especially engaged in the possibilities of the autobiographical project, since, as Julian North shows, ‘Romantic values of originality and authorial autonomy have appeared to apply to autobiography in a way that they have not to biography’. The move toward autobiographical writing was in part a response to the anxieties about biography highlighted by Johnson. North contends that the ‘intervention, in biography, of a third party who takes control of someone else’s story, has been a vital factor in modern critical resistance to the genre. It is a distrust that [...] was forcibly expressed by the Romantic poets themselves’.<sup>17</sup>

However, Lovell Edgeworth is not a Romantic writer. *Memoirs* embodies his Enlightenment values and, to use M. H. Abrams’s model of aesthetic change, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), constitutes a ‘mirror’, held up to reflect reality without subjective distortion.<sup>18</sup> *Memoirs* is an account of Lovell Edgeworth’s progress toward ‘enlightenment’ through the accumulation of knowledge, itself acquired through reason,

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<sup>14</sup> Adam Smyth (ed.), *A History of English Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 2. Early chapters in this collection show ‘how writers in England between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries made vibrant records of their lives’, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Smyth, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Julian North, *The Domestication of Genius: Biography and the Romantic Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>18</sup> M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).

empirical enquiry, and rational thought. This is evident in his intention for the *Memoirs* to be an educational, but also practical and instructional, work. However, though Lovell Edgeworth intends to 'instruct', he also promises a 'slight narrative of my own feelings and actions'.<sup>19</sup> The job was to downplay, if not entirely to suppress, the subjective perspective. However, *Memoirs* begins to displace the 'mirror' with the 'lamp' (which, in Abrams' model, symbolises Romantic literature's capacity to illuminate an individualised, emotive, and imaginative experience of reality) not simply by being an autobiography, but by emphasising personal reflection and subjective experience, thus drawing closer to the Romantic mode of Shelley or Keats (lamp) than the Enlightenment rationalism of Johnson or Pope (mirror). *Memoirs* 'begun by himself' certainly responds to the emerging value of 'authorial autonomy' that North describes, but ultimately, *Memoirs* occupies an ambivalent position in relation to the aesthetic shift into Romanticism. Combining a rationalist, instructive mode with an individualised narrative driven by an epiphanic and anecdotal narrative, *Memoirs* maintains allegiances toward both rationalist Enlightenment and Romantic ideologies, and between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century preferences for biographical writing. As such, *Memoirs* is best described as an 'Enlightenment autobiography'.

*Memoirs* uses anecdotes from Lovell Edgeworth's childhood to support his advocacy of a rationalist pedagogical system. In supplying examples from lived experience, which Lovell Edgeworth reflects on from his perspective as the mature author of *Memoirs*, the autobiography works as a counterpart to *Practical Education* (1798), a treatise he co-authored with Maria. The Edgeworths argued that to 'make any progress in the art of education, it must be patiently reduced to an experimental science'. This approach is indebted to John Locke's educational theories, which emphasised reason,

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<sup>19</sup> *MLE*, 2.

experience, and the formation of good habits in children. By the late eighteenth century, Locke remained an influential theorist, but the Edgeworths sought to refine and expand upon his ideas.<sup>20</sup> The ‘progress’ they aspired to achieve was to set forth instructions ‘to suggest the easiest means of inducing useful and agreeable habits, well regulated sympathy and benevolent affections’.<sup>21</sup> Like *Practical Education*, *Memoirs* is instructional and didactic. For instance, Lovell Edgeworth relays a childhood anecdote in which he fought his sister, Margaret, over a ‘grenadier’s cap’ until it became ‘beaten to pieces’ and recalls that his mother ‘brought us to reason and peace, by mildly pointing out the folly of our quarrel’. Lovell Edgeworth heralds his mother, Jane, as an exemplary Lockean practitioner, arguing that ‘it is by the impartial and judicious conduct of parents, on such seemingly trivial occasions, that [children] may begin to form the temper to habits of self-command’.<sup>22</sup>

Though Lovell Edgeworth’s father is represented as less influential in his son’s education than his mother in *Memoirs*, he too is commended for his, albeit incidental, Lockean approach. In *Some Thoughts on Education* (1693), Locke ‘develops a double argument for treating the child both more and less like an adult: the child’s growing reasoning powers should be respected [...] while its tendencies toward “Folly, Playing, and Childish Actions” should be indulged’.<sup>23</sup> Reprimanded for climbing a garden wall with no apparent motive since the fruit above was unripe, the young Richard told his father that while he ‘had no motive for climbing’, ‘if the garden were full of ripe peaches, it would be a much greater temptation; and that unless [his father] should be certain that

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<sup>20</sup> For further reading on Locke’s theories of education, see Ruth W. Grant and Benjamin R. Herzberg, ‘Locke on Education’, in *A Companion to Locke*, ed. Matthew Stuart (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 448-465.

<sup>21</sup> Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Practical Education* (London: J. Johnson, 1798), v, vii.  
<sup>22</sup> *MLE*, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 48. Richardson cites, *The Educational Writings of John Locke: A Critical Edition with Introduction and Notes*, ed. James L. Axtell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 156.

nobody *would* climb over the wall, he ought not to have peaches in the garden'. Richard Junior absolved himself of wrongdoing by reasoning with his father that 'the temptation of peaches will necessarily induce me to climb over the garden wall; and that if I do, it is more than probable that I shall break my neck, I shall not be guilty of any crime, but my father will be the cause of breaking my neck'. Richard Senior, unprepared to give an answer, 'declined the contest' and as a result, he is praised for his silence: when parents who 'hear from [their children] puzzling questions and observations; I wish to point out, that on such occasions children should not be discouraged; [...] parents should fairly and truly confess their ignorance'.<sup>24</sup> While this interaction highlights a Lockean respect for the child's reasoning, it also acknowledges a Romantic sentiment that values the child's capacity for self-expression. This is not dissimilar to William Wordsworth's 'We Are Seven', which recognises that children carry profound logic. In response to the speaker pointing out that 'if two are in the church-yard laid, / then ye are only five', the child maintains that "'seven boys and girls are we; / two of us in the church-yard lie"'.<sup>25</sup> Such moments when the adult defers to the child's reasoning, exemplified by Wordsworth and Lovell Edgeworth, underscore an evolving understanding of childhood as place for both innocence and insight.<sup>26</sup>

Though in the *Memoirs* Lovell Edgeworth emphasises the necessity of a rationalist approach to education, *Practical Education* was more ambivalent in its theoretical position. In the Romantic period, the educational theories of Locke and Rousseau favoured by Lovell Edgeworth were criticised. Alan Richardson explains that

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<sup>24</sup> *MLE*, 34, 35.

<sup>25</sup> William Wordsworth, 'We Are Seven', in *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 49-51, 50.

<sup>26</sup> For further reading on this cultural development, see Ann Wierda Rowland, *Romanticism and Childhood: The Infantilization of British Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Rowland notes that understandings of childhood in the Romantic period are the 'origins of modern childhood' because it became 'characterized by innocence, imagination, nature and primitivism', 9.

‘the education systems of both Locke and Rousseau harbor a pervasive “authoritarianism” at odds with the progressive tenor of many of their calls to reform’. It is their emphasis on relentless “direction and control” that most often inspires the critiques of “rational” education among the first-generation Romantics’. However, Richardson argues that the Edgeworths’ *Practical Education* ‘can be taken as exemplary of the progressive educational thought of its day’ since ‘it assimilates many of the suggestions not only of Locke and Rousseau, but of the liberal-radical group of educational writers inspired by them as well — Day [...], Godwin, Joseph Priestly, and Catherine Macaulay, among others’. The Edgeworths, Richardson shows, exemplify ‘how the writers in the rationalist tradition and their Romantic critics are joined in a new consensus on education’ that prioritises ‘intellectual preparedness and the ability to quickly assimilate new information and learn new tasks, more responsive [...] to increasing social mobility and generational change’.

Though Richardson does not evaluate Lovell Edgeworth’s *Memoirs*, his recognition of *Practical Education* as an ambivalent text provides a way for thinking about *Memoirs* as a work that is rationalist in its instructional treatment of education *and* as one that naturally imbibes aspects of the Romantic project because it is an autobiography which privileges a subjective viewpoint as not merely filtering reality but shaping it through perception and narration, and in turn being moulded by experience. Richardson states that ‘the *literary* portrayal of an individualized, developing, psychologized self, supported by revealing anecdotes or epiphanic moments, became a key aspect of the Romantic project’.<sup>27</sup> This development is what Clifford Siskin describes as ‘the Romantic redefinition of the self as a mind that grows’.<sup>28</sup> The first volume of

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<sup>27</sup> Richardson, 51, 52, 60, 62.

<sup>28</sup> Clifford Siskin, *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3.



*Memoirs* is punctuated by epiphanic moments, whereby prophetic wisdom is imparted to Lovell Edgeworth by a close-to-death figure. Jane Lovell's final words as she lay on her deathbed, according to Lovell Edgeworth, provide the first epiphanic moment: "'Your inventive faculty,'" said she, "will lead you eagerly into new plans; and you may be dazzled by some new scheme, before you have finished, or fairly tried what you had begun. — Resolve to finish, never procrastinate.'" Lovell Edgeworth reflects that this advice 'made a due and lasting impression on my mind: after a long life, I cannot now look back upon any part of my conduct, in which I neglected this salutary monition'.<sup>29</sup> In this moment of retrospection, *Memoirs* aligns with the Romantic preoccupation with self-examination and growth, offering a narrative shaped by Lovell Edgeworth's self-evaluation as he reflects on his adherence to his mother's wisdom throughout his life.

The death of Sir Francis Delaval, however, is presented as the most significant epiphanic moment in Lovell Edgeworth's life. In the first chapters of the *Memoirs*, Lovell Edgeworth admits to shortcomings relating to his conduct. In particular, he desires to 'pass over my residence at Dublin College', which he attended before the age of seventeen, for it was 'the only time in my life that I ever spent in such a disgraceful manner'. The cornerstone moment in Lovell Edgeworth's *Memoirs* comes following his acquaintance with Delaval, a politician and sometime actor, who also had a short military career, and his reputation is overshadowed by the foibles of his extravagant lifestyle. As a result of his acquaintance with Delaval, Lovell Edgeworth claims he 'saw more of what is called the world, than I should probably have seen elsewhere', and the connection introduced him to an influential network of 'men of eminence'. The significant moment for Lovell Edgeworth is his final meeting with Delaval, after learning 'he had not long to live'. According to Lovell Edgeworth, Delaval shared his regrets in pursuing 'amusement,

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<sup>29</sup> *MLE*, 104.

or rather frolic, instead of turning my ingenuity and talents to useful purposes' and provided a warning: 'let my example [...] warn you of a fatal error, into which I have fallen, and into which you might probably fall, if you did not counteract the propensities, which might lead you into it'. Delaval encourages Lovell Edgeworth to 'pursue what is USEFUL to mankind' in order to 'satisfy them' and to 'satisfy yourself'. Lovell Edgeworth assures his reader that Delaval's 'parting advice was not thrown away upon me', since 'I had heard and seen sufficient to convince me that a life of pleasure is not a life of happiness'.<sup>30</sup>

Enlightenment and Romantic ideologies are both, *Practical Education* shows, interested in the progress of the individual. While the first volume of *Memoirs* is not a complete text (Lovell Edgeworth abandoned it), in its present state, the text attempts to reconcile the progress of the Enlightened individual with its reliance on the autobiographical form to record the growth of the mind of the individual. However, the reconciliation is not without complication. The 'grand' narrative, which maps a trajectory of progress toward exemplarity spurred on by epiphany, is interrupted by the digressions of the domestic anecdote, which often countervail that exemplarity. Lovell Edgeworth's negotiation between individuality and the influence of his intellectual networks is another site of contention, which is further extended to his Anglo-Irish national identity. The tensions between the Enlightenment narrative of rational progress and the Romantic focus on personal, emotive expression in *Memoirs* threaten Lovell Edgeworth's self-representation as the Enlightened subject improved through rational education because those conflicts are not fully resolved in the text. The epiphanic moments, which Lovell Edgeworth claims have significantly altered his life, are unconvincing – at least to

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<sup>30</sup> *MLE*, 75, 121, 123, 155, 155, 156, 157.

reviewers, such as that of the *London Magazine*.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, this jeopardises the authority of his *Memoirs* as didactic autobiography: why should readers practise his theories if the *Memoirs* cannot effectively demonstrate their efficacy? The rest of this section explores this point of contention, while the following sections turn to the second volume, written by Maria Edgeworth, to examine how her contribution addresses and attempts to resolve these tensions.

The narrative persona Lovell Edgeworth adopts in *Memoirs* is characterised by a candid honesty, devised to give weight to a non-distorted reality (as described by Abrams) and thereby authenticity. Though Lovell Edgeworth does not initially conceive of himself as an exemplary man as the result of his upbringing (and so the *Memoirs* are designed to show how the reader might apply the lessons Lovell Edgeworth has learned in his life), he claims that those epiphanic moments made impression enough to implement the advice in his own life. However, in the representation of that life in *Memoirs*, Lovell Edgeworth's almost Boswellian frankness consistently threatens to undercut the exemplarity he aspires to model. As was explained in Chapter One of this dissertation, Boswell's commitment to an unabridged 'warts and all' portrait of Johnson was so striking that he was advised to curb his candour regarding Johnson's 'excesses in eating and drinking, his profanity and bawdy, his sexual lapses' to name but a few aspects.<sup>32</sup> For Lovell Edgeworth, some pleasures were apparently easier to relinquish than others. His 'want of taste for the joys of intoxication', for instance, prevented him 'from continuing the habit'.<sup>33</sup> The company of women, however, was not so easily relinquished. While there are no descriptions of any 'amorous propensities', Lovell Edgeworth is candid in his voyeuristic descriptions of

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<sup>31</sup> *The London Magazine*, 269.

<sup>32</sup> James Boswell, *The Correspondence and Other Papers of James Boswell, Relating to the Making of the Life of Johnson*, ed. Marshall Waingrow (London: Heinemann, 1969), xxxvi.

<sup>33</sup> *MLE*, 75-76.

women in *Memoirs*.<sup>34</sup> Recalling first meeting Anna Seward at a dinner party at Erasmus Darwin's house, Lovell Edgeworth remembers her to be 'in the height of youth and beauty', and a discussion of Matthew Prior's *Henry and Emma* (1709) ends with him paying her 'some compliments on her own beautiful tresses'. Lovell Edgeworth admits to flirting enough so that 'the watchful Mrs. Darwin took this opportunity of drinking to *Mrs. Edgeworth's health*'. Seward did not know Lovell Edgeworth was married, and he remarks that her 'surprise was manifest'.

While Lovell Edgeworth admired Seward, it was Honora Sneyd who attracted his fuller attention. He describes Honora as 'a woman that equalled the picture of perfection', and Lovell Edgeworth confesses that 'my not being happy at home exposed me to the danger of being too happy elsewhere'. He attempts to justify his adulterous thoughts in a series of frank remarks toward his first wife, who is largely absent in *Memoirs*. Lovell Edgeworth married Anna Maria Elers in 1763 after he became 'entangled so completely' that he 'could not find any honorable means of extrication'. In *Memoirs*, Lovell Edgeworth tactically places emphasis on his honour, and then forbearance and duty. He admits that he regretted the marriage – 'I felt the inconvenience of an early and hasty marriage' – and that he resolved to 'bear with firmness and temper the evil, which I had brought upon myself'. It was only after her death that Lovell Edgeworth was free to pursue Honora, and they married in 1773. Honora's sister, Elizabeth, became his third wife in 1780, herself succeeded by a fourth, Frances Ann Beaufort in 1798.

Unsurprisingly, Lovell Edgeworth is equally candid in his response to Anna Maria's death as he is about his attraction to Honora. He recalls receiving the news of the birth of his daughter, Maria, and a 'few days afterwards I received a letter with an account of my wife's death, and I was obliged immediately to return to England'. Lovell Edgeworth's

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<sup>34</sup> HOU/2003J-JBL3, vol. 1, 108.

indifference is indicated by the succeeding sentence, in which he blithely states he ‘had finished an essay on the subject of mills’.<sup>35</sup> John Wilson Croker’s review of *Memoirs* in the *Quarterly Review* supports Benton’s notion that the nineteenth-century reader favoured the ‘Boswellian fullness’ but not Boswell’s ‘frankness’. Croker states that Lovell Edgeworth was ‘as disagreeable as loquacity, egotism, and a little tinge now and then of indelicacy could make him’.<sup>36</sup> Lovell Edgeworth’s employment of the tenets of late-eighteenth-century biography did not, then, map on well to a nineteenth-century memoir.

Like his candour, Lovell Edgeworth’s use of anecdote threatens to undercut the narrative of his progress toward exemplarity. In comparison to the use of anecdotes by Johnson, Boswell, and Piozzi discussed earlier in this dissertation, Lovell Edgeworth’s use of domestic episodes is relatively sparse. While his use of anecdotes might incidentally reveal insights about his character, and his life and times, they are intended, much like in *Practical Education*, to assist in presenting ‘before the public the result of our experiments’. In *Practical Education*, the Edgeworths state that ‘no anecdotes, however, have been admitted without due deliberation; nothing has been introduced to gratify the idle curiosity of others, or to indulge our own feelings of domestic partiality’.<sup>37</sup> As seen in Piozzi’s *Anecdotes*, anecdotes were valued for their vivid portrayal of individual personality and their ability to animate biographical subjects. However, in *Memoirs*, the focus shifts from using anecdotes as a vehicle for personal insights to deploying them as pedagogical tools, reflecting a move towards didacticism over personal revelation. As evidenced in those scenes from his childhood, Lovell Edgeworth uses anecdote to model the Lockean approach he favours. This utilisation is different from that seen in eighteenth-century biography; as explained in Chapter One, Johnson exploited

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<sup>35</sup> *MLE*, 165, 167, 167, 240, 241, 102, 110, 321, 321.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Art XI. — Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth’, *The Quarterly Review*, ed. William Gifford (London: John Murray, 1820), vol. 23, 510-549, 549.

<sup>37</sup> *Practical Education*, vi.

anecdote because of the device's capacity to enhance the interest of character sketches by realising an authentic biographical subject and because the imparting of these particulars could 'provide crucial insights into a man's character or else present a universally applicable lesson'.<sup>38</sup>

However, while *Memoirs* is reliant on anecdote to provide this evidence, the anecdotes' tendency toward digression impedes the advertised narrative of self-development. *Memoirs* is largely chronological. It begins with an account of Lovell Edgeworth's ancestry before broadly following a series of periods in his life: childhood, university education and marriage to Elers, becoming an inventor through association with the Lunar Society, a tour of France, and his eventual return to England, and then Ireland. However, by chapter ten, Lovell Edgeworth has relinquished indexing dates, being satisfied instead with estimation. He states, for instance, that 'Mr. Day and I quitted England, and we took with us my son, who was then about seven or eight years old'. The precise chronology that *Memoirs* began with ('my family came to Ireland in the reign of Queen Elizabeth' in 'the year 1583') gives way to a looser, thematic structure. Lovell Edgeworth argues that 'it is better to consider the course of one subject uniformly, and then to go back and take up another, than to interrupt the narrative by an ineffectual attempt to preserve strict chronology'.<sup>39</sup> A biography composed of digressive anecdotes worked for Piozzi because she is using the device to give insight into Johnson's 'private' life to elicit his domestic character. Lovell Edgeworth's deployment of the device, however, is deleterious to his project because chronology is necessary for a narrative that, as he intends, shows the progress of rational education 'from the cradle to the grave'.

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<sup>38</sup> Nicholas Seager, 'Biography', in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Jack Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 268.

<sup>39</sup> *MLE*, 257, 5, 177.

This tension is apparent in Lovell Edgeworth's depiction of his meeting with Rousseau when he was travelling in France with his son and Day, whereby an anecdote relevant to his educational philosophy is briefly recounted but not fully integrated into the narrative's development. Lovell Edgeworth was conscious that *Memoirs* should not become a travelogue, not stopping to 'examine what was curious or worthy of observation', especially since, while in France, he had read François de Tott's *Memoirs* (1784-1785) and noted that de Tott had 'condemned' accounts of travel writing as 'travellers' wonders'. Lovell Edgeworth does pause, however, for 'a remarkable circumstance, which ought to be recorded in justice to Rousseau's penetration in judging of children'. Lovell Edgeworth asked Rousseau whether there was 'anything that struck him' in his son's 'manners or conversation'. Taking his son 'with him on his usual morning's walk', Rousseau concluded that 'he thought him a boy of abilities, which had been well cultivated' and proof that 'history can be advantageously learned by children, if it be taught reasonably and not by rote'. Rousseau also noted that the child 'had a propensity to party prejudice, which will be a great blemish in his character', apparently manifested in the child's identification of material objects as 'English'.<sup>40</sup> Lovell Edgeworth admired Rousseau's progressive educational theories; indeed, Jenny Uglow notes that Lovell Edgeworth and Day were 'captivated' by 'Rousseau's ideas'.<sup>41</sup> However, while this anecdote is relevant (rather than digressive) to Edgeworth's narrative in *Memoirs*, the anecdote is only briefly reflected upon by Lovell Edgeworth, who confirms that 'the boy had the species of party spirit', and Rousseau's 'prophecy, as after events proved, shewed his sagacity'. Like his epiphanic moments, there is no indication of the value of this meeting to Lovell Edgeworth beyond that moment, suggesting a

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<sup>40</sup> *MLE*, 1, 2, 260, 263, 258, 258-259.

<sup>41</sup> Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men: The Friends Who Made the Future, 1730-1810* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 182.

failure to maximise the biographical potential of the anecdote. In fact, he almost expresses his regret for educating his son ‘according to the system of Rousseau’ for ‘he shewed an invincible dislike to control’.<sup>42</sup> Edgeworth’s attempt to reconcile rationalist and progressive educational theories into a personal narrative is perhaps an innovation in life-writing itself. However, the disjointed treatment of anecdotes and reluctance to explore their implications reveal the difficulty of synthesising Enlightenment ideology with an emergent Romantic form of biographical writing. As literary culture shifted toward a preference to a more cohesive and reflective portrayal of character, *Memoirs* struggled to balance these competing ideologies. Maria Edgeworth’s second volume sought to address these tensions and align the work more closely with evolving expectations of biography in the early nineteenth century.

### Biography in 1820

Though Edgeworth’s second volume of *Memoirs* continues with the broad chronology established by her father by beginning where the first volume ended, she reshapes the narrative into one in which notions of progress and self-improvement are fully realised in both public and private arenas. This section of the chapter contends that Edgeworth utilised her experience as a novelist to write *Memoirs*. It will show that Edgeworth constructed a narrative trajectory of moral and economic improvement adopted from *Ennui; or, Memoirs of the Earl of Glenthorn* (1809) and *Ormond* (1817) to align domestic and political portraits of her father and attempt to resolve the tensions between individuality and sociability, and his English and Irish identities, that Lovell Edgeworth presented in the first volume.

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<sup>42</sup> *MLE*, 259, 177, 179.



At the end of *Memoirs*, Edgeworth vouches for the synchronicity of the two depictions of Lovell Edgeworth – one autobiographical, one biographical – in the two volumes. She claims

how few can look back through such a length of time and feel, that, though the boy and the man an individual make, their past and present selves make one and the same consistent person! Such consistency is the more remarkable in one, whose extraordinary vivacity might have led us to expect changeability in conduct.<sup>43</sup>

Though Edgeworth intends to show her father's progress by placing him on a narrative trajectory of improvement that he initiated but did not complete in Volume One, she places greater emphasis on the unification of his character than the other biographies this dissertation examines, which are more concerned with revealing the complexities and shades of their subject's personality. Edgeworth's *Memoirs* are distanced from the Age of Johnson, both in terms of her father's situation in that society and her disavowal of conventions and values of eighteenth-century biography, which she felt was archaic. Biography in 1820 represents a shift toward a greater awareness of historicity: an understanding that individuals' lives are intertwined with the historical moment in which they live. Edgeworth invites readers to reconsider biography not merely as an assessment of a subject's life, character, and work, but as a reflection of the interplay between the individual and history. This section of the chapter will show that Edgeworth's narrative treatment of her father as biographical subject is closely bound to Irish political history, specifically the 1800 Act of Union. This intersection of biography and history also reveals the continuation of the educational reform set forth in *Practical Education*. If Lovell Edgeworth's autobiography was a continuation of *Practical Education*, Edgeworth's

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<sup>43</sup> *MME*, 418.

biography is a real-life exemplification of her didactic domestic fiction, which promoted a rationalist approach to education that could reform Irish society. Butler observes that ‘Maria’s fiction between *Belinda* (1801) and *Helen* (1834) was conceived within a single plan which linked it with Edgeworth’s formal work, and this was meant by her ‘to disseminate, in a familiar form, some of the ideas that are unfolded’ in the ‘more didactic works on education’.<sup>44</sup> *Memoirs* not only chronicles Lovell Edgeworth’s life but uses that life to continue promoting the educational reforms she advocated.

Edgeworth’s fiction was informed by her father’s life and times. Discussing Lovell Edgeworth’s involvement with her writing, Edgeworth notes that his anecdotes gave her ‘many hints for invention, furnished by the incidents and characters he had met with in his youth, and which he related to me’. Edgeworth invites the reader to ‘discover these for himself in the preceding memoirs’.<sup>45</sup> In their respective studies, Marilyn Butler, Caroline Gonda, and Mitzi Myers show that Edgeworth’s fiction was informed by real-life characters and events. Butler demonstrates that ‘Sir Francis Delaval, the rake that died repentant, must have suggested the character and career of Lady Delacour’ in *Belinda* (1801). Butler also notes that Lovell Edgeworth’s ‘visit to France in 1772 is utilized forty-five years after it happened for the background of two chapters of *Ormond*’.<sup>46</sup> Gonda and Myers respectively note the ‘Clarence-Virginia subplot of *Belinda*’, which ‘is based on Thomas Day’s appropriation of a foundling to train according to the fantasies of femininity he had imbibed from Rousseau’.<sup>47</sup> The

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<sup>44</sup> Butler, 287. Butler cites Maria Edgeworth, *Tales of Fashionable Life* (London: J. Johnson 1809), vi.

<sup>45</sup> *MME*, 348.

<sup>46</sup> Butler, 243-244.

<sup>47</sup> Gonda, 212. Mitzi Myers, ‘My Art Belongs to Daddy? Thomas Day, Maria Edgeworth, and the Pre-Texts of *Belinda*: Women Writers and Patriarchal Authority’, in *Revising Women: Eighteenth-Century Women’s Fiction and Social Engagement*, ed. Paula R. Backscheider (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 104-146, 113. In *Belinda*, Clarence Hervey educates Rachel Hartley (who he re-names ‘Virginia St. Pierre’) to be his wife but realises that ‘a wife without capacity, or without literature, could never be a companion suited to him, let her beauty or sensibility be ever so exquisite and captivating’. See

verisimilitude of the Clarence-Virginia subplot is confirmed in *Memoirs* (accounts of Day's project are included in both volumes), and Edgeworth 'made a special journey' to show the manuscript to Sabrina, 'who might well feel embarrassed at having her early history published in full'.<sup>48</sup> Butler, Gonda, and Myers highlight the points where the Edgeworths' lives are refracted through the novel. J. Paul Hunter reflects on the relationship between life-writing and the novel in this period, arguing that 'the novel reaps from autobiography a capacity for introspection, self-awareness, and subjectivity'.<sup>49</sup> *Memoirs* was composed after the publication of the Irish domestic novels that this chapter considers, and Edgeworth's narrative treatment of Lovell Edgeworth in *Memoirs* indicate that this refraction is reversed. What, then, can life-writing learn from the novel? Patricia Meyer Spacks's observation, that 'memoir and fiction, however different the kinds of expectation they create, raise a common problem about the nature of identity they assert', moves toward answering this question. Spacks subsequently asks: 'what constitutes character? Why does one believe in the continuity of personality?'<sup>50</sup> In *Memoirs*, I contend, Edgeworth draws on the devices she refined in her novels to create a biographical subject not merely shaped by personal anecdote but by the broader currents of historical and cultural context. This part of the chapter first examines Edgeworth's attitude toward biography; it then examines how Edgeworth domesticates her father to reform his character; following that, it considers how Edgeworth dealt with the intellectual development of her fictional protagonists and the effect their development had

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Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda*, ed. Kathryn J. Kirkpatrick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 342. In real-life, Day adopted two foundling girls, with the intention of making one (he chose Sabrina Sidney) 'his future wife'. However, since Sabrina 'betrayed an averseness to the study of books', Day 'renounced all hope of moulding Sabrina into the being his imagination had formed' (Seward, *MED*, 69-71).

<sup>48</sup> Butler, 405.

<sup>49</sup> J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: Norton 1990), 329.

<sup>50</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 2.

on Irish societal reform in the novels. The section concludes by demonstrating how *Memoirs* extends beyond the novels to fulfil the Edgeworth project of guiding Irish national reform.

Edgeworth's biographical principles in *Memoirs* are Johnsonian. Edgeworth states that 'biography of private individuals has a more humble, but not less useful object — to improve mankind in the social and domestic virtues, by shewing how much these tend to human felicity. In this point of view, these memoirs will it is hoped be useful to the public'.<sup>51</sup> Edgeworth expressed a similar sentiment in the preface to *Castle Rackrent* (1800):

we are surely justified in this eager desire to collect the more minute facts relative to domestic lives, not only of the great and good, but even of the worthless and insignificant, since it is only by a comparison of their actual happiness or misery in the privacy of domestic life, that we can form a just estimate of the real reward of their virtue.<sup>52</sup>

As Kit Kincade asserts, Edgeworth's position here 'is more than a defense of the validity of a biographical narrative from one who, at best, is dim-witted and stubborn; it is a defense of the validity of the narratives of "real" people'.<sup>53</sup> This aligns with Johnson's approach to biography, which values the detailing of authors' lives to elicit wider moral

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<sup>51</sup> *MME*, 432. Edgeworth's idea to 'improve mankind' through literature here echoes Percy Bysshe Shelley's essay 'A Defence of Poetry', in which he argues that 'the great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause'. See Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 674-701, 682.

<sup>52</sup> Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, ed. George Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>53</sup> Kit Kincade, 'A Whillaluh for Ireland: *Castle Rackrent* and Edgeworth's Influence on Sir Walter Scott', in *An Uncomfortable Authority: Maria Edgeworth and Her Contexts*, ed. Heidi Kaufman and Chris Fauske (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 250-269, 250.

lessons.<sup>54</sup> However, Edgeworth felt that literary biography was inadequate to capture her father's life because of its preoccupation with

the history of the books which [authors] have written, the dates of their publication, their different editions and variations, with an account of quarrels and controversies, that may have occurred with brother authors, and a display of the encomiums of friends, or a repetition of complaints of the injustice of authors.

As such, Edgeworth claims she has spared the reader from 'such tiresome topics'.<sup>55</sup>

Rather than focussing on Lovell Edgeworth's literary accomplishments, Edgeworth continues a broader narrative of his life that promotes their shared philosophy of education and improvement. This approach underscores a wider, more political, impact opposed to an introspective portrait of an author's position within what she saw as the insular literary sociability Edgeworth hints at, and therefore seeks to redefine biography to reflect historical circumstance.

In the second volume of *Memoirs*, Edgeworth sanitises her father's self-portrait in Volume One by emphasising him as one that lived in domestic felicity with his family upon his return to Edgeworthstown in 1782. In Lovell Edgeworth's *Memoirs*, he recalls that despite not finding 'home delightful' because of his 'lamenting' wife, he 'lived more at home than is usual with most men of my age'.<sup>56</sup> However, one of Edgeworth's earliest encounters with her father was not until she was aged five, when he returned from France upon receiving news of Anna Maria's death:

suddenly she heard a voice which she says she has a distinct recollection of thinking quite different and superior to any she had heard before — and the doors

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<sup>54</sup> Johnson also complained about the "tedious and troublesome" task of researching "the minute events of literary history" because "in this minute kind of History the succession of facts is not easily discovered", *LEP*, vol. 2, 306.

<sup>55</sup> *MME*, 333.

<sup>56</sup> *MLE*, 184.

being opened she saw a gentleman in black and her imagination was instantly struck with the idea of his being sublimely superior to all she ever saw before.<sup>57</sup>

The account confirms that Edgeworth did not recognise her father. However, in Edgeworth's *Memoirs*, Lovell Edgeworth's commitment to his family – and especially to his children's education – is continually reiterated at intervals within the narrative. From the outset, Edgeworth notes her father's integration with his family. She observes that 'some men live with their family, without letting them know their affairs'. This was not, she claims, her father's 'way of thinking', since 'whatever business he had to do was done in the midst of his family, usually in the common sitting-room: so that we were intimately acquainted'. *Memoirs* thus emphasises Lovell Edgeworth's domestic virtues and devotion to his family in comparison to Volume One, thus situating him within a narrative of moral improvement.

Furthermore, Edgeworth points out that her father, despite his many occupations, was 'never prevented [...] from attending to his great object — the education of his children'.<sup>58</sup> Though Volume One describes Lovell Edgeworth's practising a more authoritative Rousseauvian regime upon his eldest son, Volume Two indicates a departure from it. Edgeworth portrays her father as attentive in his teaching methods. She comments that 'his patience in teaching was particularly meritorious', for 'he would sit quietly while a child was thinking of the answer to a question, without interrupting', waiting 'till the steps of reasoning and invention were gone through'. Like the sharing of affairs in 'the common sitting-room', education (especially reading) was a sociable activity undertaken in their family home. Edgeworth recalls that her father selected literature to 'amuse and interest young people; and he read so well [...] as to delight his

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<sup>57</sup> See Butler, 46. Butler cites 'Harriet Butler to Michael Pakenham Edgeworth, 3 January 1838' (private collection).

<sup>58</sup> *MME*, 15, 180. This is re-iterated later in *Memoirs*: 'he always found time to attend to the education of his children', 300.

young audience, and to increase the effect upon their minds of the interest of any story, or the genius of any poet'. Lovell Edgeworth chose works by 'Shakespeare, Milton, Homer, and the Greek tragedians', which became 'associated in the minds of his children with the delight of hearing passages from them first read by their father'.<sup>59</sup> Edgeworth shows her father has become more liberal in his approach to his children's literary education, choosing works not only for their literary value but also for entertainment. As Abigail Williams notes, reading aloud in the home 'was doubly beneficial because it kept one from idleness, and provided an improving and entertaining soundtrack'.<sup>60</sup> Though Lovell Edgeworth's selections of verse and drama are auspicious, in *Memoirs*, Edgeworth depicts their family home as, foremost, an educational environment, in which her father is placed at the centre.

Improvement through education is central to the *Memoirs*' narrative. The scenes of the Edgeworth children's education are revisited throughout *Memoirs* and are intended to demonstrate how Lovell Edgeworth himself has improved. The second volume works to resolve the outcome of those epiphanic moments left in the first through pauses of reflection. In addition to poetry and drama, Lovell Edgeworth also told his children stories from his own life. Edgeworth states that 'of these occurrences, which he always made entertaining to us in the narration, I recollect and will mention one; for though it is trivial, it is characteristic'. Edgeworth proceeds to relate an anecdote in which her father is praised for his skill in dancing by 'the celebrated dancer Mr. Slingsby'. Edgeworth notes, however, that her father did not tell the anecdote to his children 'to boast of a frivolous excellence' but to 'express his satisfaction, at having, after the first effervescence of boyish spirits had subsided, cultivated his understanding, turned his

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<sup>59</sup> *MME*, 181-182, 125-126.

<sup>60</sup> Williams, *Social Life of Books*, 43.

inventive powers to useful objects, and chosen as the companions of his maturer years men of the first order of intellect'.<sup>61</sup> If the issue with Lovell Edgeworth's *Memoirs* was that the key epiphanic moments driving the narrative trajectory of improvement were not fully realised, Edgeworth's *Memoirs* underscore that her father did heed Delaval's warning to 'pursue what is USEFUL to mankind'. Edgeworth is also conscious of demonstrating that her father acted upon his mother's advice to 'resolve to finish, never procrastinate'.<sup>62</sup> Edgeworth claims that 'through life he pursued steadily the same objects of research, with a perseverance' and 'continued to pursue the same subject; and at five-and-thirty, and at seventy, we find him prosecuting these inquiries, and still later in life we shall see him persevering in the same course'. The fact that these anecdotes are related in scenes with his children is significant because it shows that Lovell Edgeworth has become an exemplar of improvement, now passing down this knowledge to his children; Edgeworth later confirms that her father's 'large family were continually guided by his experience'.<sup>63</sup>

The result of a life spent pursuing research and learning in *Memoirs*, is felicity. This is a significant development in life-writing because *Memoirs* actively opposes narrative trajectories of many of Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. Johnson wrote in the *Life of Collins* that 'man is not born for happiness'.<sup>64</sup> Brian Michael Norton shows that this *Life*'s narrative, which records 'a life of misspent time and energies, squandered talent, and mental affliction terrible enough to require confinement', is intended to reveal 'a larger truth about human life': 'we can dream of happiness all we want, imagining it to be just around the corner, but we will never find it'.<sup>65</sup> However, Edgeworth remarks that

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<sup>61</sup> *MME*, 149, 150.

<sup>62</sup> *MLE*, 156, 104.

<sup>63</sup> *MME*, 328-329, 409.

<sup>64</sup> *LEP*, vol. 4, 120-123, 121.

<sup>65</sup> Brian Michael Norton, 'Happiness', in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Jack Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 617-630, 617.



Johnson's writing is 'darkened too deeply by constitutional melancholy'.<sup>66</sup> In particular, Edgeworth takes issue with Johnson's treatment of the ageing subject. *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749) reflects upon the inevitability of ageing and the following passage maintains that as life progresses, vitality is sapped and one becomes less content:

Year chases year, decay pursues decay,  
Still drops some joy from with'ring life away;  
New forms arise, and diff'rent views engage,  
Superfluous lags the veteran on the stage  
Till pitying nature signs the last release,  
And bids afflicted worth depart in peace.<sup>67</sup>

Johnson's disenchantment with life as one ages is evident in many of the *Lives of the Poets*.<sup>68</sup> Johnson's description of Pope's bodily decrepitude is one such example, which this dissertation described in Chapter One. The biography of Jonathan Swift aligns with Johnson's image of the 'superfluous veteran' in *Human Wishes*; Johnson reports that as Swift's 'mental powers declined' and he 'sunk into lethargick stupidity', he 'lost distinction'.<sup>69</sup> Edgeworth, however, disputes Johnson's observations on ageing, stating that her father 'often assured me, that he thought the last thirty years of his life had been the happiest'. Edgeworth rejects 'the ordinary limits', in which the subject is 'condemned to remain stationary, or to become retrograde'. Though Lovell Edgeworth's body inevitably begins to deteriorate (he died aged 73), 'his heart, instead of contracting or sinking, seemed in age, to expand and overflow with kind feelings towards his fellow-

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<sup>66</sup> *MME*, 408.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, 'The Vanity of Human Wishes', in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson Volume VI*, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr. & George Milne (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 106, ll. 305-310.

<sup>68</sup> Recent scholarship has sought to complicate identification of Romanticism with 'youth' by examining the diverse treatment of ageing and the ageing subject by Romantic-period writers. See David Fallon and Jonathon Shears, 'Romanticism and Ageing: An Introduction', *Romanticism*, 25:3 (2019), 217-224, and Devoney Looser, *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain, 1750-1850* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

<sup>69</sup> *LEP*, vol. 3, 189-214, 208-209.

creatures, and with gratitude to his creator'. Furthermore, unlike Swift, Lovell Edgeworth did not lose 'distinction' but rather, in his old-age, became more relevant as he guided his family 'by his experience'.<sup>70</sup> *Memoirs* authorises a narrative of a life that refutes an established one of regression and decline by replacing it with one of burgeoning progress toward not only knowledge, but happiness.

So far, this chapter has shown that Edgeworth's emphasis on her father's domestic felicity is intended to sanitise the somewhat dubious character he depicts in his autobiography. However, Edgeworth's attention to Lovell Edgeworth's domesticity, and importantly the learning and education that occurs in the familial home, has wider political implications pertaining to social reform in Ireland. Edgeworth saw *Memoirs* as an opportunity not only reconcile tensions in her father's character in order to show 'one and the same consistent person', but also to show how education could ameliorate the political tensions leading up to the 1800 Act of Union. Heidi Kaufman and Chris Fauske state that, initially, 'Edgeworth, like her father, had opposed the Act of Union'.<sup>71</sup> Lovell Edgeworth's position was, as Frances R. Botkin shows, ambivalent since he

devoted his life to social and political reform, focusing especially on estate management and education. His commitment to the native Irish and to Catholic emancipation earned him enemies among other Anglo-Irish, but as a member of the ascendancy class he was equally suspect in the eyes of the Irish nationalists.

Botkin also notes that Lovell Edgeworth 'confused issues still more by voting against the Union for political reasons even though he supported it on economic grounds'.<sup>72</sup> While Edgeworth, in her fiction, made efforts 'to redeem and valorize Irish culture', she also

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<sup>70</sup> *MME*, 410, 414, 411, 409.

<sup>71</sup> Heidi Kaufman & Chris Fauske (eds.), *An Uncomfortable Authority: Maria Edgeworth and Her Contexts* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 11-32, 13.

<sup>72</sup> Frances R. Botkin, 'The Keener's Cry in *Castle Rackrent*: The Death of Irish Culture?', in *An Uncomfortable Authority*, 84-101, 95-96.

advocated for its reform, especially with respect to education.<sup>73</sup> According to Butler, Edgeworth's 'goal is to gain for her Irish characters [...] the rights enjoyed by their English counterparts. And so her strategy is not to prove that the Irish are unique, and therefore worthy of nationhood, but to show them in essence the same, and therefore worthy of equality'.<sup>74</sup> Edgeworth's depiction of her father's commitment to the education of the working classes promotes a vision of reform that sees education, and by extension enlightenment and individual autonomy, bridging cultural divisions.

Prior to the publication of *Memoirs*, Edgeworth's fiction explored the possibilities of reforming the Irish national character through education. Kathleen Costello-Sullivan maintains that in Edgeworth's novels 'education functions not as a catalyst for identification or repression but through the transmutation of Irishness into Anglo-Irishness', and so the novels propose 'assimilation without colonial revolution or conflict'.<sup>75</sup> The narrative trajectory of progress in *Memoirs*, made evident through the reconciliations Edgeworth makes – particularly of her father's sociability and Anglo-Irish identity – mirror the trajectories of improvement in her novels. The remainder of this section will first outline the theoretical perspectives on the historicisation of the individual and its depiction in the early nineteenth-century novel, before demonstrating how Edgeworth works towards this in *Ennui*, *Ormond* and *Memoirs*, showing that Edgeworth's approach to biography is mounted on narrative structures from her fiction, which articulate her vision of societal reform.

*Memoirs* reflects the Romantic era's self-conscious approach to historicity in its situation of Lovell Edgeworth within the broader cultural and historical context of Ireland in the early nineteenth century. James Chandler, however, proposes that it is more

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<sup>73</sup> Kaufman & Fauske, 15.

<sup>74</sup> Butler, 391.

<sup>75</sup> Kathleen Costello-Sullivan, 'National Character and Foreclosed Irishness: A Reconsideration of *Ennui*', in *An Uncomfortable Authority*, 146-161, 147.

specifically ‘English writing in 1819’ that is ‘aware of its place in and as history’. The literature produced in 1819 was particularly ‘self-conscious about historicity’ because writers sought to make ‘legible the historical peculiarity of their place and time’. 1819 was, Chandler remarks, a year of socio-political ‘crises’, which included the passing into legislation of ‘the repressive Six Acts’, awareness of ‘England’s post-Waterloo economic condition’, ‘the renewed movement for reform after the close of the Napoleonic Wars’, and the Peterloo Massacre. Resultantly, literature was ‘concerned with its place in England in 1819 – concerned, that is, with a national operation of self-dating, or -redating, that is meant to count as a national self-making, or -remaking’. Chandler continues that writing in 1819 not only sought to ‘state the case of the national’ but did so ‘to alter its case’ by shifting ‘the case of the nation from the nominative (the case of the name) to the accusative (the case of the cause): they take on the national cause’.<sup>76</sup> That is to say, literary works were not simply recording history but were actively involved in shaping the nation’s identity by distilling the spirit of the age. Moreover, those works intended not simply to identify the state of the nation but to effect national change and advocate for it. Chandler’s account of literature’s heightened historical consciousness and agency, I argue, is applicable to *Memoirs*, published in 1820. Focusing on Lovell Edgeworth’s educational reforms, *Memoirs*, in its documenting of personal history, participates in a larger socio-political discourse of Irish national improvement and reform, which echoes the self-conscious historicity that Chandler identifies in the literature of 1819.

In tandem with the developments Chandler describes, the historical novel emerged in this period as an ideal form for exploring national identity and historical consciousness.

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<sup>76</sup> James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5, 33, 78, 15, 5, 6.

Ian Duncan argues that it was Walter Scott who ‘set the novelist at the centre of national life [...] because his writing renovated the form of the novel, charging it with fresh cultural potency’. Scott’s specific intervention in the genre was to make the novel ‘national, and he made it national by making it historical’.<sup>77</sup> In his ‘Advertisement’ in *The Antiquary* (1816), Scott explains that the novel ‘completes a series of fictitious narratives, intended to illustrate the manners of Scotland at three different periods. *Waverley* embraced the age of our fathers, *Guy Mannering* that of our own youth, and the *Antiquary* refers to the last ten years of the century’.<sup>78</sup> Duncan notes that Scott intended to ‘encourage readers to align the novels along the developmental or progressive plot of modern national history, from the final conflict between new and old regimes in 1745 to the global crisis (the war with revolutionary France) that gave birth to the present’. It is the novelist, rather than the historian, then, (as Chandler implies in his examination of literary works) that could aptly capture the spirit of the age. The novelist is especially equipped to do so, Duncan suggests, because the novel realises the ‘dialectical relation between history and character’.<sup>79</sup> This is to say that Scott sets forth an Enlightenment philosophy which argues that social and economic forces shape historical events; in turn, historical events shape individuals (or ‘characters’), while individuals’ experiences illuminate historical trends. This contrasts to earlier conceptualisations of character by, for instance, Henry Fielding, who argued that human nature remains constant regardless of specific historical context. In *Joseph Andrews* (1742), Fielding’s narrator states: ‘I describe not Men, but Manners; not an Individual, but a Species’.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ian Duncan, ‘Walter Scott and the Historical Novel’, in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: English and British Fiction, 1750-1820*, ed. Peter Garside and Karen O’Brien (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 312-331, 314.

<sup>78</sup> Walter Scott, *The Antiquary*, ed. Nicola Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>79</sup> Duncan, 317.

<sup>80</sup> Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, ed. Douglas Brooks-Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 164.

Indeed, his characters are typically archetypal, and their virtues and vices transcend their environment.

Like Scott, recognising that ‘history [...] possesses less sure representational power than fiction’, Edgeworth believed in the power of narrative to depict and shape national identity.<sup>81</sup> In the ‘Preface’ to *Castle Rackrent*, Edgeworth’s persona, ‘The Editor’, laments that ‘of the numbers who study, or at least who read history, how few derive any advantage from their labors!’. The Editor contends that history is not a fruitful course of study because ‘there is much uncertainty even in the best authenticated antient or modern histories; and that love of truth, which in some minds is innate and immutable, necessarily leads to a love of secret memoirs and private anecdotes’. ‘Real characters’, are to be discovered through ‘their careless conversations’ and ‘half finished sentences’.<sup>82</sup> Edgeworth suggests that to seek historical ‘truth’, one must look beyond historical accounts and toward sources of individuals’ unofficial, anecdotal, forgotten, fleeting, or unrecorded, history. This approach aligns with the treatment of the individual as a historical subject. The promotion of personal and anecdotal historical sources are intended to provide a more meaningful connection between the novel’s characters and Ireland’s cultural past, and an understanding of national identity through ‘the ethnographic data of daily life’ that exists alongside ‘the chronicle of public events’.<sup>83</sup> As such, Edgeworth’s narratives are intended not only to preserve historical specificity but also to shape national consciousness, and move toward a reframing of Ireland’s cultural past that, only after an enlightened progress, ‘looks back with a smile of good-humoured complacency on the Sir Kits and Sir Condys of her former existence’.<sup>84</sup> However, it was Edgeworth, not Scott, who was the first to ‘produce national character as a major crux in

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<sup>81</sup> Peter Cosgrove, ‘History and Utopia in *Ormond*’, *An Uncomfortable Authority*, 62-83, 68.

<sup>82</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, 1.

<sup>83</sup> Duncan, 315.

<sup>84</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, 4-5.

British literature'. She did so, Duncan explains, by combining a "Scottish" philosophical plot of economic improvement [...] with a private plot of moral improvement, refined in the "Burney school" of English domestic fiction'.<sup>85</sup> Edgeworth's novels, *Ennui* and *Ormond*, both take inspiration from Lovell Edgeworth's life, which is evident in their respective protagonists' departure from and return to Ireland, their statuses as estate-owners and landlords, and experiences of Irish intellectual sociability. In turn, the trajectories of moral and economic improvement of both novels provide the structural model for *Memoirs*.

In *Ennui*, set during the years surrounding the 1798 Irish Rebellion, the Irish-born Earl of Glenthorn, who spent his youth in England, returns to his estate in Ireland. Learning that he is not the legitimate heir, Glenthorn relinquishes the estate and, assisted by Lord Y, embraces a professional working life as a lawyer. Glenthorn eventually reclaims the estate, which has been mismanaged by the blacksmith Christy O'Donoghoe, through his marriage to Cecilia Delamere. His second return to the estate is significant because, as Deborah Weiss asserts, Edgeworth only facilitates it 'after he has become a self-made professional man, and only after he has learned to manage his affairs according to the values of the professional middle class'.<sup>86</sup> As Butler posits, 'Glenthorn is too ignorant to be effective in Irish society, even with benevolent intentions. This is why he can make no lasting progress while he remains an earl'. It is only when he loses his title and becomes a lawyer, that he can demonstrate 'his ability to advance by his own efforts'.<sup>87</sup> The transformation of Glenthorn through education induced by the change in his social class is important for Edgeworth because her aim is to 'imagine a new national

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<sup>85</sup> Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 72.

<sup>86</sup> Deborah Weiss, 'The Formation of Social Class and the Reformation of Ireland: Maria Edgeworth's *Ennui*', *Studies in the Novel*, 45: 1 (2013), 1-19, 4.

<sup>87</sup> Butler, 373.

identity based on the spread of middle-class professionalism': class structure is revised 'so that people are no longer acculturated into aristocracy and peasantry, but rather carefully trained as participants in a new economic and ideological middle ground'.<sup>88</sup> Glenthorn's transformation underscores Edgeworth's advocating for a meritocratic social order, where personal progress and national reform are linked to values of education rather than inherited privilege. By repositioning Glenthorn in an emerging middle-class framework, Edgeworth envisions a new model for Irish identity.

*Ormond* also links the educational development toward social utility of its protagonist to the reform of the Irish society in which he lives. Harry Ormond is an orphan bought up by a friend of his father, the Anglo-Irish Sir Ulick O'Shane. After Ormond almost fatally wounds Moriarty Carroll, he is sent to live with Ulick's Catholic cousin, King Corny, on the Black Islands. Ulick and Corny represent two archetypes of Irish character, both operating to suppress Ormond's intellectual development. Though 'little Harry Ormond became his darling [...] Ulick's fondness, however, had not extended to any care of his education'. While Ulick might be considered admirable because of his preoccupation with 'keeping up a neighbourhood, maintaining his interest in the county, as the first duties of man', in his 'good fellowship' and determination that Castle Hermitage should be a 'continued scene of festivity', 'there was an eye to his own interest, and a keen view to the improvement of his fortune and the advancement of his family'.<sup>89</sup> With Corny, Ormond's development is further impeded, despite his showing a keen interest in literature. Corny, however, had 'never been regularly what is called a *reading man*' and demands 'Harry Bookworm' to 'lay down whatever you have in your hand' to go shooting instead. Prizing hunting and any other social activity over reading,

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<sup>88</sup> Weiss, 3.

<sup>89</sup> Maria Edgeworth, *Ormond*, ed. Claire Connolly (London: Penguin, 2000), 10.



Corny tells Ormond that *Sir Charles Grandison* is ‘not worth troubling your eyes with’. Though Corny is reported occasionally to be ‘touched’ by fiction, his disregard for the sentimental novel is further evident in his comment on Ormond’s reading *Clarissa*: ‘at the very death of Clarissa, king Corny would have Harry out to see a Solan goose’.<sup>90</sup> It is in Ormond’s introduction to the English-educated Annaly family that Edgeworth presents Anglo-Irishness as the ideal, which exposes the limitations of Ulick’s and Corny’s outlooks. The Annalys are admirable because they are ‘rational, modern-minded’, have ‘the will or the ability to improve the lot of the Irish as a whole’, and demonstrate how domestic relationships are ‘stable, formal, and mutually respectful’. As in *Ennui*, the new identity of the Anglo-Irish middle ground is where Ormond ultimately belongs. However, more focussed on individual character than social class, Ormond’s national identity is hybrid, since Edgeworth combines an ‘Irish warmth of heart, the common characteristic even of Ulick and Corny, with the cooler qualities he has adopted from the Annalys’. Ormond’s development reflects Edgeworth’s belief that national reform is dependent on individuals’ ability to balance Irish sentiment with rational English values. Through Ormond, she envisions a future where personal development and societal progress are shaped by both Irish and Anglo-Irish virtues.

Both novels take inspiration from Lovell Edgeworth’s life in Ireland. *Ennui* in particular uses Lovell Edgeworth’s experience as a landlord (Butler shows that ‘Glenthorn’s whole experience as a landlord is in fact based on Edgeworthstown in the 1780s and 1790s’<sup>91</sup>) and reimagines scenes from the 1798 Rebellion. Glenthorn is suspected as a sympathiser of the Irish Rebellion, as was Lovell Edgeworth. Glenthorn’s neighbours ‘persisted in their suspicions; and my reputation was now still more injured,

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<sup>90</sup> *Ormond*, 70, 69, 70.

<sup>91</sup> Butler, 384, 386, 386.

by the alternate charge of being a trimmer or a traitor', and he later receives a letter warning him that 'your life and character [...] is in danger [...] Leave the castle the morrow [...] or you'll repent when it's all over with you'.<sup>92</sup> This reflects Lovell Edgeworth's experience: his Anglo-Irish identity put him out of favour with both Catholic rebels and Protestants. In *Memoirs*, Edgeworth describes having to leave Edgeworthstown and her father taking the family to Longford (a Protestant town) for refuge, but he was almost lynched by a Protestant mob when they suspected him of communicating with the French army.

The narrative trajectories of Glenthorn and Ormond, as their characters are reformed from an inward-looking ignorance to ones of social utility through re-education and the transmutation of their national identities to Anglo-Irish, provide a narrative structure that Edgeworth adopted *mutatis mutandis* for *Memoirs*. However, while Glenthorn and Ormond undergo their transformations within the narrative, the second volume of *Memoirs* begins with Lovell Edgeworth already having undergone what James Buzard calls the 'metallurgical metaphor according to which national culture and identity must pass through the cauldron of alienation in order to become their better selves'.<sup>93</sup> Buzard suggests that one's identity must undergo a process of detachment from one's original culture to become improved. In Edgeworth's novels, this means Glenthorn and Ormond undergo this process of reformation through their change in class and national status, and resultantly become socially useful figures after their respective re-educations. Lovell Edgeworth has already completed this transformation, since he emerges as a figure of social utility when Edgeworth commences her narrative. *Memoirs*, therefore, extends beyond the narratives of *Ennui* and *Ormond* to explore the social utility of the Anglo-Irish

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<sup>92</sup> Maria Edgeworth, *Ennui*, ed. Marilyn Butler (London: Penguin, 1992), 247, 256.

<sup>93</sup> James Buzard, *Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century British Novels* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 161.

identity and emphasise its significance to national reform, offering a more detailed account from Lovell Edgeworth's lived experience, historicising his role as an advocate for national change.

*Memoirs* records Lovell Edgeworth's involvement in the reformation through education of both the local peasantry and Irish aristocracy through his integration into Irish society. *Memoirs* illustrates Lovell Edgeworth's part in 'improving education, and the consequent progress of the diffusion of knowledge'.<sup>94</sup> This mirrors the trajectories of improvement in *Ennui*. Butler describes the narrative structure of *Ennui* as one of 'moral progress from selfish private man to social man'.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, though Glenthorn's intentions to support his tenants are essentially benevolent, his wish to 'make all my dependents happy' rests on the premise that it could be accomplished 'without much trouble'. Glenthorn explains that 'the method of doing good, which seemed to require the least exertion, and which I, therefore, willingly practised, was giving away money'. It is through his agent, M'Leod, as well as the professional career he is forced to turn to, that Glenthorn understands that his idleness is unsustainable in supporting his tenants. M'Leod doubts 'whether the best way of encouraging the industrious is to give premiums to the idle', and argues that 'the difficulty is, to relieve present misery, without creating more in the future'.<sup>96</sup> M'Leod, the rational, progressive figure of Enlightenment values is inspired by Lovell Edgeworth. *Memoirs* illustrates his efforts to become 'individually acquainted with his tenantry — saw, heard, talked to them, and obtained full knowledge of their characters' and when his tenants got into financial difficulty, he did 'what was both just and kind', rewarding those who had 'been industrious'.<sup>97</sup> The parallel between *Memoirs* and *Ennui* highlights the significance of moral reform through practical

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<sup>94</sup> *MME*, 13.

<sup>95</sup> Butler, 373.

<sup>96</sup> *Ennui*, 189.

<sup>97</sup> *MME*, 17.

engagement with society. In aligning Lovell Edgeworth's life with the fictional trajectories of those such as Glenthorn, *Memoirs* extends the scope of biography beyond personal narrative, using it as a mode for social commentary. This convergence of life-writing and fiction thus reshapes biography as a means of fostering national reform.

In *Ennui*, M'Leod serves as an advocate for the education of the Irish peasantry and stands as the antithesis to Hardcastle. Hardcastle argues that 'book-learning' cannot 'dig a poor man's potatoes for him, or plough his land, or cut his turf'. His argument extends beyond the necessity of practical skills, attesting to an anxiety about the destabilising effect of education on the class system, which he believes will result in anarchy; he warns M'Leod that by teaching 'them any thing, and directly you set them up: now it's our business to keep them down, unless, sir, you'd wish to have your throat cut'. A Scotsman, M'Leod instead promotes a more progressive view, which aligns with Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776). Drawing upon Scottish Enlightenment notions of progress, M'Leod supports education as a means for economic and social improvement, believing it can lead to a more equitable society. However, M'Leod is unable to convince Hardcastle otherwise and is silenced.<sup>98</sup> In *Memoirs*, Edgeworth shows this progressive philosophy of education in action. She recounts that her father

educated and forwarded in the world many excellent servants, workmen, and tradespeople; and in classes much above these, several young persons, sons of tenants, who looked up to him for protection and advice, and whose early habits and principles he happily influenced, have advanced in different professions, and have succeeded in situations beyond his or their most sanguine expectations.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> *Ennui*, 193, 194-5.

<sup>99</sup> *MME*, 371.

Edgeworth underscores the importance of education in fostering socio-economic development, not only for individuals, but for society. Furthermore, by historicising Lovell Edgeworth as the benevolent Anglo-Irish teacher who actively shapes a more enlightened and progressive Irish society, Edgeworth combines the plots of economic improvement and personal moral improvement that Duncan identifies.<sup>100</sup> By emphasising the personal rewards of social utility (which is domestic felicity), Edgeworth suggests that individual fulfilment is intertwined with the advancement of society. This social outlook is suited to the form of private history, which allows biography to promulgate both a record of individual experience and broader social reform. Through *Memoirs*, Edgeworth demonstrates how life-writing can promote a progressive vision of national development, positioning the private *Life* as a model for public virtue and civic responsibility.

The depiction of Lovell Edgeworth's integration with the Irish aristocracy is equally important in *Memoirs* for promoting Enlightenment philosophy, although Edgeworth highlights the challenges of doing so. Lovell Edgeworth aspired to 'mix more with society, and make himself more generally known in Ireland'. Edgeworth describes the initial difficulty her father found in finding intellectual company upon his return to Ireland. There were 'various connexions and friends' who 'formed a delightful domestic society' at Pakenham Hall, but it was 'twelve miles distant', divided from Edgeworthstown by a 'vast Serbonian bog'. The same problem prevented Lovell Edgeworth from joining the literary society that gathered at Castle-Forbes. The problem, however, also extended beyond the practicalities of traversing rural Ireland. Edgeworth notes that in Ireland, 'the fashion for literature had not yet commenced, and people rather shunned than courted the acquaintance of those, who were suspected to have literary taste

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<sup>100</sup> Duncan, *Scott's Shadow*, 72.

or talents'.<sup>101</sup> In *Ormond*, Corny represents the ignorance of those people who shun those with literary taste; he was 'no respecter of authorities in books; a great name went for nothing with him — it did not awe his understanding in the slightest degree'. In the novel, Edgeworth examines the impact that reading has on the development of character. In *Ormond*, reading inspires the protagonist to change: 'closing the book, Harry Ormond resolved to be what he admired — and if possible, to shine forth as an Irish Tom Jones'. Edgeworth mocks Ormond for his impressionability, for when he reads *Sir Charles Grandison*, he decides instead to model himself on Richardson's paragon rather than Fielding's scapegrace hero, as Grandison 'inspired him with virtuous emulation, and made him ambitious to be a gentleman in the best and highest sense of the word'.<sup>102</sup> However, it is solitary reading that is problematic for Ormond and he intellectually stagnates when he has no company to discuss literature with. Lovell Edgeworth's private reading in his daughter's portion of *Memoirs* also inspires intellectual improvement. Edgeworth records her father reading 'the lives of Robertson the historian, and Reid'. Interested in a passage which suggested using 'the resources of reasoning and ingenuity to resist, as far as possible, or to render insupportable, the infirmities of age', Lovell Edgeworth marked 'the book with his pencil with strong and reiterated marks of approbation'.<sup>103</sup> It is only through their shared and sociable reading of Reid's biography, though, that Lovell Edgeworth is able to realise this. Edgeworth's promotion of sociable, rather than solitary, intellectual engagement underscores a shift between Volume One and Two, whereby sociability centres on intellectual development leading to social utility rather than pleasure. It shows Lovell Edgeworth attempting to foster a more literary, and thereby enlightened, Irish aristocracy (and therefore reflecting their philosophy of the

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<sup>101</sup> *MME*, 237, 11, 13.

<sup>102</sup> *Ormond*, 72, 62, 69.

<sup>103</sup> *MME*, 296.

interconnectedness between sociability, intellectual engagement, and societal progress), even if his efforts did not flourish within his lifetime.

As promised by Francis Delaval, the personal reward of social utility in *Ennui*, *Ormond*, and *Memoirs*, is domestic felicity. After paying Ulick's debts 'from a sense of justice to the poor people concerned' and choosing to assume Corny's estate on the Black Islands to continue with 'his old friend's improvements, and by farther civilizing the people of the Islands, all of whom were warmly attached to him', Ormond is left in 'perfect felicity' with Florence Annaly.<sup>104</sup> Meanwhile, Glenthorn concludes that 'the labours of my profession have made the pleasures of domestic life most delightful' and assures his 'readers, that after a full experience of most of what are called the pleasures of life, I would not accept all the Glenthorn and Sherwood estates, to pass another year of such misery as I endured whilst I was 'stretched on the rack of a too easy chair''.<sup>105</sup> Like *Ennui*, *Memoirs*, of course, concludes at the end of Lovell Edgeworth's life. Edgeworth confirms that until her father's death, his 'intellectual faculties' were 'exerted in doing good, and in fulfilling every duty, public and private'. His 'tenderness' of heart was evident in 'his parting words of counsel and consolation to each of his family', establishing a cycle of reformation and domestic felicity that will continue with his descendants.<sup>106</sup> Edgeworth's approach to biography in 1820 underscores the potential for private histories to serve a larger public function. By intersecting personal improvement with national reform, *Memoirs* aligns with an Enlightenment ideal of societal advancement through education. Edgeworth's presentation of her father's life exemplifies the transition from personal improvement to broader civic benefit and promotes the

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<sup>104</sup> *Ormond*, 291, 297, 298.

<sup>105</sup> *Ennui*, 321. Pope's ironic image from *The Dunciad*, implying that the comfort and idleness provided by the chair ultimately torments dunces.

<sup>106</sup> *MME*, 447.

interconnectedness of individual and collective progress through rationality, education, and moral responsibility.

### Family Biography and Authority

This dissertation has examined female biographers' innovations in genres of life-writing in relation to their respective disavowal of the influence of their patriarchal literary mentors and of precedents in life-writing genres. Though Edgeworth's *Memoirs* is not ostensibly an innovative example of life-writing (it makes no claims to be reinventing biographical forms as Piozzi and Seward did), it does signify a new approach to addressing literary authority in family biography. Unlike Burney, Edgeworth adopts a more modest position in *Memoirs*, and while she leverages her natural authority as Lovell Edgeworth's daughter, she makes a greater claim to biographical authority through her status as a novelist, subtly arguing that she is best situated, not only as a daughter but as a writer, to complete the narrative her father began. The final part of this chapter continues the work of Butler, Gonda, and Myers, advocating for a reappraisal of the myth that Edgeworth is fixed in 'perpetual daughterhood'.<sup>107</sup> However, the reading of *Memoirs* in this chapter reveals that the biography does not represent a straightforward disavowal of Lovell Edgeworth's influence, but instead demonstrates a strategic compromise between filial duty and professional authorship.

Edgeworth's *Memoirs* can be situated within a broader tradition of women's sequels and alternative endings in the period as a means to gain literary authority. Betty Schellenberg shows how sequels 'offered women writers [...] an effective means of enhancing their professional status'. In particular, sequels allowed women writers to

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<sup>107</sup> Gonda, 237. This is apart from a practical reality; Jane Spencer acknowledges that while 'a single woman was considered in law to have her own separate existence, [...] she was supposed to be under her father's authority'. See *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 12.



make a ‘claim to moral and narrative authority as the established instructor of those readers’. Schellenberg demonstrates that the sequels to novels by Sarah Fielding, Frances Sheridan, and Sarah Scott, in their claim to ‘moral and narrative authority’, represent a ‘safer’ text in comparison to their predecessors, because the author has a ‘heightened sense of responsibility’.<sup>108</sup> Edgeworth too felt the responsibility in her role as biographer, as we will see in the prefatory material in *Castle Rackrent*, *Ormond*, and *Memoirs*. Furthermore, examples of women writing these ‘safer’, alternative responses to male-authored texts are relevant to Edgeworth’s *Memoirs*. The most well-documented are perhaps the alternative endings to Richardson’s *Clarissa* by Lady Elizabeth Echlin and Lady Dorothy Bradshaigh. Peter Sabor summarises that Echlin’s rewriting concludes ‘with the death of both the heroine and Lovelace, but without any assault on the heroine’. In Bradshaigh’s version, *Clarissa* suffers the tragedies that Richardson intended but does not die. Instead, Bradshaigh’s ending sees *Clarissa* ‘remaining single’ and reconciled with her friends, including Lovelace. Though these are alternative endings rather than sequels, they follow the intention, which Schellenberg identifies, to create a ‘safer’ text that is virtuous. Sabor’s assessment shows that Echlin believed her new ending ‘was morally superior but aesthetically inferior’.<sup>109</sup> Edgeworth’s approach in *Memoirs* is comparable to these women writers’ creation of ‘safer’ texts because of the responsibility she felt in completing her father’s *Memoirs*. Edgeworth positions her father within a narrative toward Enlightenment, steadying the course of the first volume. Thomas Keymer argues that it is significant that the ‘triumph of virtue, by the end of Echlin’s manuscript is so luminous that all participants converge on a single coherent interpretation of the

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<sup>108</sup> Betty A. Schellenberg, ‘“To Renew Their Former Acquaintance”: Print, Gender, and Some Eighteenth-Century Sequels’, in *Part Two: Reflections on the Sequel*, ed. Paul Budra and Betty A. Schellenberg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 85-101, 87, 89.

<sup>109</sup> Peter Sabor, ‘Rewriting *Clarissa*: Alternative Endings by Lady Echlin, Lady Bradshaigh, and Samuel Richardson’, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 29:2 (2017), 131-150, 139, 145, 139.

history'.<sup>110</sup> The unity in Echlin's ending is created 'by making Clarissa's voice far more dominant than it is in Richardson's novel'.<sup>111</sup> Similarly in *Memoirs*, Edgeworth's voice as the biographer, and her identification of herself as the biographer caught in the act of writing her father's life consolidates her authority. Schellenberg states that it is the very act of writing a sequel that marks the women writer's 'accession to authority between the first and second work'.<sup>112</sup> In this way, Edgeworth's *Memoirs* not only affirms her role as the custodian of her father's legacy but also aligns her with a wider tradition of women writers asserting their moral and narrative authority through sequels and alternative endings. By framing herself as both the obligated daughter and the authoritative biographer, Edgeworth negotiates her narrative position. In doing so, she trades off her personal knowledge of her father and her status as a novelist to assert her narrative authority. While her identity as Lovell Edgeworth's daughter complicates her biographical authority, writing biography also offers her a unique opportunity for literary self-fashioning, allowing her to expand on the authority established through her fiction.

In the early nineteenth century, there was a proliferation of biographies and editions of letters authored or edited by a subject's relative. As noted in Chapter One, Johnson was seemingly anxious about who would write his biography for fear the author might not strike a balance between truth and a favourable portrayal. Biography written by a relative could ensure this balance, offering an authentic perspective while typically aiming for a respectful depiction. For instance, Elizabeth Carter's nephew, Montagu Pennington published editions of her correspondence with Catherine Talbot and Elizabeth Montagu, and a biography, *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Elizabeth Carter* in 1807. In the preface to *A Series of Letters between Mrs. Elizabeth Carter and Miss Catherine Talbot*

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<sup>110</sup> Thomas Keymer, *Richardson's Clarissa and the Eighteenth-Century Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 216.

<sup>111</sup> Sabor, 140.

<sup>112</sup> Schellenberg, 94.

(1808), Pennington admitted to thoroughly editing the letters, omitting a ‘good deal’ of ‘trifling chit-chat and confidential communications’ in an effort to present Carter as suitably intellectually minded.<sup>113</sup> However, Pennington revised his selectivity for the *Letters from Mrs. Elizabeth Carter to Mrs. Montagu* (1817), recognising that his earlier efforts to sanitise the letters had compromised their authenticity. He acknowledged that

in publishing letters, the epistolary form and manner must be preserved; that in a long and affectionate friendship, such notices of the health of the writer are expected of course; and that, if every thing were to be expunged from letters, but disquisitions upon moral and religious subjects, the politics of the day, and opinions upon books, they would lose their chief interest: because that interest principally arises from the incidental mention of such topics, as they happen to come into the writer’s mind, from the casual circumstances which had been before the subject of conversation, or from the varying chances of public or private events.<sup>114</sup>

That is to say, Pennington realised that minute details from letters were key to capturing a fuller, more genuine portrayal of Carter.<sup>115</sup> Relatives were also increasingly seen as capable of offering unique insight, particularly if they were accomplished writers themselves. Burney, for example, felt compelled to write the *Memoirs* of her father in response to pressure from publishers, who ‘kept hinting that if her own account of her father did not come out, some outsider less qualified than herself might want to publish

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<sup>113</sup> Elizabeth Carter and Catherine Talbot, *A Series of Letters between Mrs. Elizabeth Carter and Miss Catherine Talbot*, ed. Montagu Pennington, 2 vols (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1808), vol. 1, v.

<sup>114</sup> Elizabeth Carter, *Letters from Mrs. Elizabeth Carter to Mrs. Montagu, between the years 1755 and 1800. Chiefly upon literary and moral subjects*, ed. Montagu Pennington, 3 vols (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1817), vol. 1, xi-xii.

<sup>115</sup> Melanie Bigold defends Pennington’s editorship, arguing that his editions ‘helped to recreate and perpetuate’ Carter’s ‘status in the republic of letters’. See *Women of Letters, Manuscript Circulation, and Print Afterlives in the Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 15.

one'.<sup>116</sup> This trend reflects the public's sustained appetite for biographical accounts and the evolving belief that relatives, as biographers, could provide a nuanced, truthful portrayal that balanced personal connection with literary skill.

The perception of the biographer shapes the reception of family biographies. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the reviewer in the *Examiner* accused Burney of 'perpetual egotism' in her *Memoirs* of her father.<sup>117</sup> This criticism of Burney continues in modern scholarship; Roger Lonsdale argues that 'senile egotism' is a 'characteristic of her biography as a whole'.<sup>118</sup> In a more analytic approach, Francus shows that even at the outset of the *Memoirs*' paratexts, Burney signals 'the centrality' of herself 'in this project'. Locating her name in the centre of the title page, 'in a font size that is second only to that of the title', Burney clarifies that 'it is her arrangement of manuscripts and family papers, her personal recollections, and most importantly, through the epigraph from *Evelina*, her literary legacy that are featured here'.<sup>119</sup> Edgeworth's name on the title page of her *Memoirs* is also centered, and is equal in size to her father's name. However, no reference is made to her editorship of the text or her status as a novelist (which was by then well-established); it simply states that the *Memoirs* are 'concluded by His Daughter, Maria Edgeworth'. The problem for Burney's *Memoirs* is that while it could grant a privileged access into the Burneys' domestic life, readers wanted to learn about the subject's life, not that of the biographer.<sup>120</sup> In an evaluation of the criticism of Burney's *Memoirs*, Francus confirms that 'the status of the family biography shapes the reader's

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<sup>116</sup> Charles Burney, *Memoirs of Dr. Charles Burney, 1726-1769*, ed. Slava Klima, Gary Bowers, and Kerry S. Grant (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), xxix.

<sup>117</sup> *The Examiner*, 774.

<sup>118</sup> Roger Lonsdale, *Dr. Charles Burney: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 451. Burney was eighty when *Memoirs* was published and Charles had died eighteen years earlier, in 1814.

<sup>119</sup> Francus, 88.

<sup>120</sup> Cassandra Ulph contends that 'this promise of access to the privatized environment of the Burney household is disingenuous' because Burney actually presents 'a narrative that is [...] detached from the private reality of family life'. See 'Authoring the "Author of my Being" in *Memoirs of Doctor Burney*', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 42:2 (2018), 152-169, 152.

response'. While 'bias is anticipated' in family biography, it can only 'be forgiven' if 'the biographer is not projected into the biography'.<sup>121</sup>

The reception of Burney's tendency to project herself into the narrative of her father's life highlights a broader anxiety about the propriety of female autobiography in the period. Janice Farrar Thaddeus shows that Burney 'attempts to make her own literary life relevant to her father's' by selecting anecdotes intended 'to promote the author, as well as the ostensible subject'.<sup>122</sup> Ulph develops this argument, pointing out that several of Burney's accounts in *Memoirs* that begin 'with Charles's literary career' end 'in an account of his daughter's, suggesting both that Burney herself is the ultimate expression of the Burney 'genius,' and that her father's work can be read, retrospectively, as part of the story of her own'.<sup>123</sup> Burney's self-projection caused her *Memoirs* to verge on autobiography. Although autobiography was becoming more commonplace, championed by figures such as Wordsworth and DeQuincy, the genre still, toward the end of the Georgian period, carried anxieties about immodesty – an especially pertinent issue for the female author. In the early eighteenth century, women's autobiographical writing, Thaddeus explains, 'tended to fall into two categories': 'scandalous memoirs' and 'spiritual autobiographies'.<sup>124</sup> It was not until the Victorian period, as Linda Peterson demonstrates, that women's memoir 'was not recognized as an autobiographical form'. While women produced autobiographical writing before the nineteenth century, it was generally classified as either spiritual, scandalous, or domestic memoir, and was often unpublished. Victorian historians took an interest in these works preserved in family archives (such as that of Margaret Cunningham, Ann Fanshawe, Mary Rich, and Alice

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<sup>121</sup> Francus, 98.

<sup>122</sup> Janice Farrar Thaddeus, *Frances Burney: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000), 193, 191.

<sup>123</sup> Ulph, 165.

<sup>124</sup> Thaddeus, 190.

Thornton) and published them not only for their ‘historical interest’ but because they were interested in how those autobiographical narratives could be of ‘relevance to their own lives’. Peterson shows that the recovery of seventeenth-century autobiographical accounts spurred ‘the promotion of their nineteenth-century equivalents’. Nineteenth-century secular memoirists (Margaret Oliphant, Frances Kemble, and Harriet Martineau, for instance) utilised seventeenth-century autobiographical models for their own works. The domestic memoir was especially useful to model an appropriate modesty (‘even when their agenda was to avoid this tradition and reclaim another’) allowing the female autobiographer to become the ‘recorder of communal history’ by stressing ‘the writer’s place in an extended family unit’, making her work the ‘repository of its significant accomplishments, more likely those of a husband or father than her own’.<sup>125</sup>

However, late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century writers such as Burney and Edgeworth do not fit neatly into existing genre histories of autobiography. The subject matter of scandalous or spiritual memoirs were not suited to writing an account of one’s literary life (and arguably, they were too late to draw on those subgenres), and they were writing too early to exploit the authorisation of women’s domestic autobiography, although this is somewhat anticipated in their respective hagiographic treatment of their fathers. The only means the female author had to compose a narrative account of her own literary life was by inserting it into a biography of her literary father. Edgeworth’s self-projection is different to that of Burney. Though the second volume of *Memoirs* was not intended to be an autobiographical account, Edgeworth exercises literary authority as the author of the narrative that textualises her father’s life. Although the content is frequently hagiographic, Edgeworth subtly asserts

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<sup>125</sup> Linda H. Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women’s Autobiography: The Poetics and Politics of Life Writing* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 16, 18, 4, 19, 26, 16, 17.

her literary authority by assuming control of the text's narrative to continue her political ambition of reform (Butler calls this Edgeworth's 'sociological bent') that I have contended began in her novels.<sup>126</sup>

Her hagiographic portrait of her father in *Memoirs* has perpetuated perceptions of Edgeworth as a subservient daughter with little agency. Frank Swinnerton argues that literary daughters 'can be relied upon as the acme of loyalty'. Burney, Edgeworth, Seward and Mary Russell Mitford (the subjects of Swinnerton's study) all 'extol' their respective fathers' 'scholarship and his verse, his inventive genius, parental wisdom, social gifts, and lovable character'. They do this 'not from a strained sense of duty, but because she really believes that the man she saw first from her cradle has god-like qualities'.<sup>127</sup> Edgeworth's preface affirms this, as she notes that her father 'was, in truth, ever since I could think or feel, the first object and motive of my mind'.<sup>128</sup> Gonda, however, contends that Edgeworth's apparent 'uncritical, unconditional, unquestioning love for her father, her state of perpetual daughterhood, is a myth' and has been constructed as 'a way of denying her agency, power and responsibility'. Nevertheless, Gonda's challenge is predicated on a reading of Edgeworth's novels, not *Memoirs*. In fact, Gonda maintains that *Memoirs* highlights Edgeworth's 'determination to present her father in the best possible light', agreeing with Swinnerton that the biography is 'rooted in unqualified admiration, gratitude, and love'.<sup>129</sup> Edgeworth's recording of her perception of her father necessitates her presence in the *Memoirs*' narrative. Like Piozzi's and Seward's biographies, to avoid accusations of egotism, Edgeworth is careful to ensure her self-presentation is suitably modest. Edgeworth does this by framing her relationship with her father as a literary partnership; she refers to herself and her father throughout *Memoirs* as 'literary partners'

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<sup>126</sup> Butler, 212.

<sup>127</sup> Frank Swinnerton, *A Galaxy of Fathers* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 18.

<sup>128</sup> *MME*, iv.

<sup>129</sup> Gonda, 237, 207, 208.

and declares that this ‘literary partnership’ was ‘for so many years, the pride and joy of my life’. Lovell Edgeworth’s role in the partnership is to provide editorship and criticism of her writing. Taking care not to understate his role, however, Edgeworth records, for instance, her reliance on her father’s editorship of *Ormond* and *Harrington*.<sup>130</sup> This exemplifies Swinnerton’s claim that if the literary father is ‘less distinguished’ than the literary daughter, ‘she will exaggerate his distinction’.<sup>131</sup> Edgeworth knew, of course, that her father’s own literary career had not prospered as hers had. To maintain his ‘distinction’ as the subject of the biography and her ‘loyalty’ as biographer, she claims that he sacrificed his literary career to support hers; she informs the reader that her father’s ‘literary ambition then and ever was for me’. Though ‘compared with his powers of mind, my father wrote but little’, she shows ‘how much as a critic he did for me’.<sup>132</sup> Edgeworth denies in *Memoirs* that her father’s editorship ever ‘shackled her genius’.<sup>133</sup>

Johnson remarked that ‘if a man is to write *A Panegyrick*, he may keep vices out of sight; but if he professes to write *A Life*, he must represent it really as it was’.<sup>134</sup> Gonda observes that, in a similar vein, ‘it was Richard Lovell Edgeworth who insisted on truth before love, and Maria who ordered her life according to love rather than truth’.<sup>135</sup> Lovell Edgeworth’s brother-in-law, Francis Beaufort, ‘saw that in spite of her literary gifts’ Edgeworth ‘was not an ideal choice as her father’s biographer’ since her ‘judgement’ might impede her ‘selection’ of material for the *Memoirs*.<sup>136</sup> Edgeworth recognises that readers might object to the authenticity of her biography due to a perhaps inevitable partiality as the subject’s daughter; she acknowledges that ‘the reader will apprehend, that

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<sup>130</sup> *MME*, 353, 190, 443. Butler has identified passages that Lovell Edgeworth contributed to *Ormond*. See *A Literary Biography*, 281.

<sup>131</sup> Swinnerton, 18.

<sup>132</sup> *MME*, 336, 341.

<sup>133</sup> Swinnerton, 197.

<sup>134</sup> *BLJ*, 606.

<sup>135</sup> Gonda, 237.

<sup>136</sup> Butler, 406.



he shall have a panegyric instead of an impartial life and character'.<sup>137</sup> However, like Burney, Edgeworth claims that she has natural authority because she is Lovell Edgeworth's daughter. In her *Memoirs*, Burney notes that the biography was authorised by her father. At the outset, she states that 'the intentions, or, rather, the directions of Dr. Burney that his Memoirs should be published; and the expectation of his family and friends that they should pass through the hands of his present Editor and Memorialist'.<sup>138</sup> Therefore, as Francus points out, 'Burney's status as a family member biographer is underscored from the beginning'.<sup>139</sup> Edgeworth had earlier made a similar claim: 'after he was no more, I read those solemn and pathetic words, in which he bequeaths the care of his posthumous character "to his beloved daughter," and in which he calls upon me for the performance of a promise and a duty'. Though Edgeworth is more reluctant than Burney, she concedes that she 'could not relinquish the hope of doing justice to the memory of my father'. The family biographer has to reconcile the challenge of fulfilling familial duty while maintaining biographical truth, which highlights the inherent conflict between personal loyalty and objective representation.

However, Edgeworth's fulfilment of her duty to 'the father who educated me; to whom, under Providence, I owe all of good or happiness I have enjoyed in life', does not occlude her commitment to biographical truth.<sup>140</sup> Though Gonda concurs with Butler that Edgeworth prioritised love over truth, this stance understates Edgeworth's commitment to accuracy in *Memoirs*. This was something Edgeworth had previously explored in fiction. For instance, in *Castle Rackrent*, the 'Editor' claims that 'a plain, unvarnished tale is

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<sup>137</sup> *MME*, iv.

<sup>138</sup> Frances Burney D'Arblay, *Memoirs of Doctor Burney*, 2 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1832), vol. 1, v.

<sup>139</sup> Francus, 90.

<sup>140</sup> *MME*, iii-iv.

preferable to the most highly ornamented narrative'.<sup>141</sup> This argument is illustrated in the 'Editor's' criticism of Margaret Cavendish's biography of her husband, *The Life of William Cavendish* (1667): 'if her Grace the Duchess of Newcastle, instead of penning her lord's elaborate eulogium, had undertaken to write the life of Savage, we should not have been in any danger of mistaking an idle, ungrateful libertine, for a man of genius and virtue'.<sup>142</sup> Edgeworth argues that if the panegyric that Margaret Cavendish produced had been used for a morally dubious character, like Richard Savage in Johnson's treatment of that author, her partiality is deceptive and could adversely influence readers' moral judgements. In *Memoirs*, Edgeworth promises to 'endeavor to follow the example, that my father has set me, of simplicity, and of truth', positioning her father as the authority for a frank depiction of his life. In doing so, Edgeworth continues to advocate for the 'plain, unvarnished tale' admired in *Castle Rackrent*.<sup>143</sup>

This approach to writing biography is further expounded upon in *Ormond*, in which the narrator commits to recording the protagonist's life as it was, capturing both virtues and flaws. While Ormond's preference ultimately is for *Grandison*, the narrator's is for *Tom Jones*. This reflects the ongoing debate in the period between depicting paragons of virtue, as Richardson did, versus more nuanced, human characters, as Fielding did. The narrator-biographer in *Ormond* acknowledges this tension, asserting that

most heroes are born perfect — so at least their biographers, or rather their panegyrists, would have us believe. Our hero is far from this happy lot; the readers of his story are in no danger of being wearied, at first setting out, with the list of

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<sup>141</sup> This assertion is not without irony since Old Thady is an unreliable narrator. Although the ideal of truth-telling is presented, it is undermined by Thady, creating a tension between the values stated in the preface and their practice within the text.

<sup>142</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, 2, 3.

<sup>143</sup> *MME*, v.

his merits and accomplishments; nor will they be awed or discouraged by the exhibition of virtue above the common standard of humanity — beyond the hope of imitation.

This reflects a diversion from Richardson's idealised moral figures toward a more nuanced depiction of human nature in biography, where the biographer's duty is 'to extenuate nothing; but to trace, with an impartial hand, not only every improvement and advance, but every deviation of retrograde movement'.<sup>144</sup> In *Memoirs*, Edgeworth promises to show what became of Lovell Edgeworth 'in middle age, and in advance years; whether he be uniformly pursued, or whether he changed, the mode of life he had chosen'.<sup>145</sup> Here, Edgeworth is subtly euphemistic: uniform pursuit of a path in life is implicitly coded as virtuous, while changing track hints at moral wavering or failure. This narrative judgement reveals Edgeworth's careful guiding of readers' perceptions, balancing a honest portrayal with a delicacy of judgement. The more nuanced approach to depicting character – in fiction and biography – denotes a continuance of the desire for a more humanising treatment of biographical subject as set forth by Johnson, rather than undiscerning panegyric. Edgeworth's commitment to truth not only underscores her sense of duty but also emphasises her obligation to accuracy, even when it reflects less flattering realities, which was authorised by her father (and applied against him, however gently) and extended to her fiction, suggesting a new way of guiding moral judgement while maintaining a commitment to biographical integrity.

The scepticism towards the reliability of the literary daughters, Burney and Edgeworth, as biographers is exacerbated by their statuses as novelists. Thaddeus posits that the best way to understand Burney's *Memoirs* is to consider it both as life-writing

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<sup>144</sup> *Ormond*, 32.

<sup>145</sup> *MME*, vi.

‘and as a species of fiction’. This is because, Thaddeus observes, it uses the techniques of fiction in biography, following a trend in the eighteenth-century novel, where ‘authors claimed simply to be editors of found autobiographical manuscripts’. Everett Zimmerman examines the relationship between history and fiction, including the well-worn trope of the ‘found’ manuscript used by novelists, including Henry Mackenzie and Samuel Richardson. Zimmerman shows that writers of eighteenth-century fiction were reluctant ‘to have their fictions definitely separated from history’ because they believed the novel was ‘a needed supplement to history’ and ‘historical understanding’. Nonetheless, the assumption of editorial authority by the novelist encouraged readers to be cautious of potential manipulation of those ‘manuscripts’.<sup>146</sup> This is problematic for the novelist-turned-biographer, for readers might assume the author to be guilty of, to borrow Thaddeus’ phrase, ‘heightening the picture’.<sup>147</sup> Acknowledging, however, that ‘biography is not simply an arrangement of facts but a constructed narrative’, Jenny Coleman argues that biography requires ‘the skills of both the literary artist and the scientific researcher’ effectively to narrate a life history.<sup>148</sup> Dee Garrison articulates the intergeneric benefits, arguing that the novelist is well-placed to write biography:

the biographer must operate in accordance with strict rules of evidence — measuring the validity of documents, weighing contradictory findings, adding scrupulous footnoting. Yet the techniques of the novelist are also essential. One must shape and order the evidence, deal with flashbacks, develop believable characters, dramatize crucial moments, and analyze human relations.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Everett Zimmerman, *The Boundaries of Fiction: History and the Eighteenth-Century British Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 1-2.

<sup>147</sup> Thaddeus, 198.

<sup>148</sup> Jenny Coleman, ‘Vested Interests: The Con Artist, the Historian, and the Feminist Biographer’, *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 25:1 (2010), 18-31, 19.

<sup>149</sup> Dee Garrison, ‘Two Roads Taken: Writing the Biography of Mary Heaton Vorse’, in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women*, ed. Sara Alpern, et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 65-78, 67.

Burney assembled her narrative of her father's life from 'his own manuscripts, from family papers, and from personal recollections'.<sup>150</sup> Initially, she intended to publish an edition of her father's letters but was compelled to revert to biography because 'a law had been passed in 1813 by which letters belonged to their senders and could not be published by their recipients'. Thaddeus suggests that Burney managed the organisation of manuscript material not simply by exercising selectivity but rather by having 'slashed and burned' her father's papers. According to Thaddeus, the accounts Charles Burney left behind of his life among his papers were unfavourable in his descriptions of his relatives and 'when in the narrative he moved to London, instead of writing details about the famous people he met he simply listed them'.<sup>151</sup> As such, Burney felt obliged to reshape the evidence to create a more favourable portrait of her father. However, Burney's prioritising narrative coherence over scrupulous adherence to biographical evidence was not only intended to protect Charles's memory, but to safeguard her own reputation as a *literary* author. Ulph contends that Burney's selections of material for *Memoirs* shows that she 'devalues the "biographical", as opposed to the literary'.<sup>152</sup> This dissertation reflected on the deployment of biographical material in Chapter One and highlighted that Burney's complaint against the biographies of Johnson by Boswell and Piozzi was that the use of such materials could not produce original insight, systematic wisdom, or coherent personality. As such, Burney envisioned her *Memoirs* not only as a respectful presentation of her father but as a literary work that affirmed her own authorial identity by placing emphasis on a literary-artistic narrative.

Like Burney, Edgeworth was selective in her arrangement of manuscript material in *Memoirs* in order to emphasise that it was a literary biography written by a literary

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<sup>150</sup> Burney, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, frontmatter.

<sup>151</sup> Thaddeus, 188, 187.

<sup>152</sup> Ulph, 159.

author. However, in comparison to Burney, Edgeworth is more attentive to her forthcoming reputation as a biographer than to the one she had already established as a novelist. The second part of this chapter has highlighted the relationship between the personal narratives in Edgeworth's novels and her father's life, and showed how Edgeworth's fiction is refracted in *Memoirs*. Edgeworth's proclivity towards writing a biography consisting of a more literary narrative is evident in her economic use of manuscript sources. Edgeworth's use of her father's correspondence is especially tentative. Although she admits that 'next to biography written by the person himself, his private letters afford the best means of obtaining an insight into his character', Edgeworth is aware that readers 'of the most honorable minds, will recoil at the idea of publishing letters'. Lovell Edgeworth was, apparently, one such reader: 'no one could have a greater horror than my father felt at the publication of private letters'. Anxious about their afterlives, Lovell Edgeworth 'burned some thousands of letters, many of them most entertaining, and from persons of literary celebrity'. Some letters did survive, since her father 'permitted Mrs. Edgeworth to snatch some of the late Dr. Darwin's [letters] from the flames'. Thomas Day's and Elizabeth Sneyd's letters also survived. Edgeworth notes that those letters were 'entrusted' to her and that from these, she has 'selected a few' to publish in *Memoirs*.

However, like Piozzi and Seward before her, Edgeworth recognises that letters are valuable biographic evidence that can give authentic insight into a life; she later regrets that 'I have not been able to carry on my father's biography during these latter years by any of those private letters, which afford so full a view of the habits, occupations, and opinions of the writer'. The samples of correspondence that Edgeworth does include tend to illuminate her father's scientific and literary 'occupations'. For instance, a selection of letters to Darwin and Sneyd detail Lovell Edgeworth's proposal to 'employ [...]

moveable railways in public works in Ireland'.<sup>153</sup> These letters reveal not simply a moment of technical innovation, but Lovell Edgeworth's continued engagement with the practical engagement of scientific knowledge to benefit society, and thus he emerges as a figure whose intellectual pursuits are not abstract but founded in the promotion of the public good, reflecting the vaunted Enlightenment values of progress and improvement. Another correspondence with Darwin highlights Lovell Edgeworth's influence on the draft of *The Botanic Garden*, showing his participation in the kinds of sociable manuscript circulation among literary-intellectual circles that this dissertation described in Chapters One and Two. Edgeworth underscores her father's importance in this exclusive literary coterie: 'I am glad to have it recorded, under Dr. Darwin's own hand, that my father's approbation of the first lines he saw of the Botanic Garden encouraged the author to finish it'. The letters are chosen to illustrate the industriousness behind those public-facing, political, scientific, and literary contributions, emphasising his polymathic social utility. By emphasising his participation in scientific innovation and literary collaboration, Edgeworth positions her father as a model of Enlightenment values, wherein his private endeavours are linked to public benefits. The selections of correspondence, then, offer more than a glimpse into Lovell Edgeworth's 'opinions'; they reinforce the biographical narrative that his life was one of continuous engagement with the improvement of society through the acquisition of knowledge.

Edgeworth, for the most part, respects her father's aversion to 'the publication of private letters', and her editorial treatment of those letters demonstrates her deference to his wishes. Although she reproduces correspondences at length, Edgeworth confirms that they are excerpts and indicates where she has excised individual letters to protect the correspondent's privacy. When a letter from Day teasingly breaks off at 'like Montaigne,

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<sup>153</sup> *MME*, 68, 69, 352, 74.

I have almost written my essay without coming to the subject of it', Edgeworth notes that 'the subject, to which he alludes, related to private affairs, and therefore the conclusion of this letter is omitted'.<sup>154</sup> However, Edgeworth also presents lengthy epistolary exchanges with little intervening narrative. The seventeen pages of Lovell Edgeworth's correspondence with Darwin which conclude the fourth chapter of *Memoirs* exemplify this approach. Edgeworth's fidelity to the material reinforces her claim to honesty and simplicity, showing that she *presents* rather than *creates*, thereby enhancing her credibility as her father's biographer. Unlike Burney, who 'devalues the "biographical"', as opposed to the literary', Edgeworth aims to maintain a balance that upholds the integrity of biography to protect her father's legacy and her reputation as biographer.<sup>155</sup>

Edgeworth acknowledges the need to rely on documentary materials to capture her father's public and political life. Recognising that to adequately present her father's involvement in the Irish Parliament (a forum which excluded women), for instance, she must turn to external sources, such as public records and newspaper reports. Edgeworth describes a parliamentary session in which Lovell Edgeworth 'had the satisfaction of turning the attention of the house to a subject, which he had considered to be of greater and more permanent importance than the union, or than any merely political measure could prove to his country, *the education of the people*'. However, Edgeworth pauses, and states that she will 'not attempt [...] any alteration or correction' to her father's subsequent speech, because 'all who are used to writing, or to public speaking, will feel, that it would be easy to have dressed it up', and she prefers 'giving it in the unaltered newspaper report'.<sup>156</sup> This decision reveals Edgeworth's preference for authenticity over rhetorical refinement, signalling her desire to present unvarnished truth, even of her

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<sup>154</sup> *MME*, 134, 89.

<sup>155</sup> *Ulph*, 159.

<sup>156</sup> *MME*, 245-246.



father's public persona. By refraining from literary enhancement, she reinforces the historical reality of her father's contributions, rather than offering an idealised version. The inclusion of authoritative factual reports also underscores Edgeworth's commitment to situating her father with a broader historical context. Similarly to how Piozzi utilises anecdotes to offer insight into Johnson's character through his conversation, Edgeworth uses letters as conversational devices to illuminate Lovell Edgeworth's personality. However, Edgeworth's attentiveness to the public aspects of her father's life required verification through sources unavailable to her firsthand. By including public accounts, she prioritises biographical evidence that positions Lovell Edgeworth at a specific historical moment. This method contrasts with a solely literary or anecdotal account, highlighting Edgeworth's desire to ground biography in historical fact, ensuring that her father's life is presented as part of a larger narrative of Irish and Enlightenment history.

Edgeworth's reliance on manuscript material and other public accounts, however, risks licensing the notion that she sought to repress her authorial identity in her work. Butler observes that, in her fiction, 'Edgeworth's fondness for male narrators, and her tendency to divide herself among diverse characters, male and female, illustrates [a] penchant for invisibility'. Edgeworth, I am arguing, did so to navigate the bounds of propriety regarding women's textual presence, especially in novels thinly disguised as biographies. Indeed, Butler also notes that in 'work on autobiography it is often observed that women writers seem to have experienced difficulty in using the first person'. This 'difficulty' could be interpreted as a strategy to avoid a seemingly overt self-presentation. In the context of Jane Austen's writing, Susan Lanser argues that reticence about authorship was not about 'modesty or lack of literary ambition but [...] a self-protective shield for her desires for recognition and approval both from the public and from

friends'.<sup>157</sup> Similarly, Edgeworth's seeming reluctance to foreground her own voice in the *Memoirs* can be seen as a means of protecting her authorial identity within the bounds of social expectations, while constructing a more subtle form of authority. Tara Wallace notes, also in relation to Austen, that the 'double-voiced discourse' (Wallace shows that Austen both empowers women and critiques women's assumption of power) in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), is not a device to distance character from author but rather to encode a female author's difficulties about her own desire for authority'. This insight is constructive for understanding Edgeworth's negotiation of her authorial identity. Like Austen, who constructs an 'assertive narrative voice', Wallace argues, that is 'at the same time a refracted voice, subject to irony and criticism', Edgeworth crafts a biographical voice that balances personal engagement with objectivity.<sup>158</sup> In her fiction, characters (and this is usually an 'individualized' woman, 'often unusually articulate and energetic', such as Judy M'Quirk in *Castle Rackrent*) could be utilised, as a 'spokesperson' to articulate Edgeworth's own 'voice'.<sup>159</sup> By contrast, however, in *Memoirs*, Edgeworth emphasises her presence as the biographer. She is, unlike Burney, not a character in the narrative. For example, describing her father's attending 'to the education of his children' while working on 'establishing the telegraph', Edgeworth pauses the anecdote to reflect on the act of writing *Memoirs*: 'when I was writing this page, (July, 1818) this brother was with me; and [...] I stopped to make some inquiry from him as to his recollection of that period of his life'. Though this moment threatens to use the unnamed brother as the authority on the anecdote, Edgeworth's directing of the narrative toward the act of writing itself asserts her identity as the writer. She goes on to note that she was unable to give the public the evidence her brother supplied, instead preferring to present her own

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<sup>157</sup> Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 78-79.

<sup>158</sup> Tara Ghoshal Wallace, *Jane Austen and Narrative Authority* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 44, 1.

<sup>159</sup> Butler, 'Introduction' in *Ennui*, 53, 50, 53.

observation on her father's character 'while the conviction is full and strong on my mind', which she argues will be more 'useful to the public'.<sup>160</sup>

Edgeworth's *Memoirs* presents narrative authority as something to be negotiated. While *Memoirs* operates through a retrospective mode recounting Lovell Edgeworth's life, linearity is disrupted through personal digressions, the presentation of documentary material, and moments of self-reflection. These shifts in narrative mode reinforce Edgeworth's control over the narrative, especially in her conscious reflection on the act of writing *Memoirs*. For instance, when describing her father's attempt to write a *Life* of Thomas Day, Edgeworth recalls how 'it was his custom to throw out, in conversation, his first thoughts upon any subject on which he was intent'. She explains that she would write 'them down, either in my own words, or in his', emphasising the collaborative nature in writing of the biography of Day. Edgeworth presents this moment as both personal anecdote – she frames the scene of his dictating the biography to her while they were out riding together – and as formal, print document, indicating her fidelity in recording her father's own words. In asserting that 'the beginning of his life of Mr. Day was spoken to me one morning when we were out riding; and the moment I came in, I wrote down the following words', Edgeworth simultaneously underscores her own role in capturing and shaping the narrative while downplaying any claim to complete authorial ownership. The interplay between Lovell Edgeworth's words and her own complicates the negotiation of narrative authority. By shifting from 'private' anecdote to 'public' record, Edgeworth constructs a biographical voice that is both intimate and authoritative. Her willingness to allow digression within her overarching narrative and reflect on the process of writing biography here signals her desire to preserve authenticity while maintaining control over the presentation of her father's life. This strategy allows Edgeworth to navigate the

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<sup>160</sup> *MME*, 300, 301.

boundaries between personal engagement and biographical detachment, initially situating herself as both the devoted daughter and the impartial biographer. Edgeworth thus challenges conventional modes of biographical writing by asserting her authorial voice while also drawing attention to the collaborative nature of this particular narrative. Through the layering of personal and documentary voices, *Memoirs* makes clear that narrative authority is not fixed but a process that is continually negotiated throughout the text. Edgeworth arrogates to herself an authority, employing techniques learned from her experience in fiction, by presenting the biography as a deliberately constructed work, compiled out of sources that required careful handling, and balancing a suitable filial reverence with a duty to the truth that the subject shared. Edgeworth's subtle self-presentation throughout *Memoirs* emphasise her role as the creative author, rather than the servile daughter.

This chapter has shown that Maria Edgeworth's second volume reshapes that narrative to align her father's life with broader historical and cultural contexts. This chapter has argued that her experience as a novelist significantly informs her biographical writing, as she drew on a narrative trajectory of progress and self-improvement, seen in her fiction, to frame her father's life within a trajectory of Enlightenment ideals. In historicising her father's life, Edgeworth positions him within a larger context of Anglo-Irish culture, using his biography as a reflection of Enlightenment ideals about self-improvement, rational inquiry, and societal progress. In doing so, she also challenges established, patriarchal modes of biography by asserting that the life of an individual—especially one engaged in scientific and philosophical pursuits—must be understood within the broader historical and cultural frameworks that shaped their thinking. In this way, Edgeworth's work moves beyond a simple recounting of events; it makes larger

claims about the relationship between individual lives and the historical moment in which they live.

Edgeworth's negotiation of her identities as both daughter and writer emerges as central to her biographical strategy. While Edgeworth emphasises her father's involvement with her own literary career, in *Memoirs*, she subtly asserts her own literary authority through the construction of the biography. *Memoirs* presents an innovative approach to family biography by blending personal narrative with broader social and historical contexts. Like Piozzi and Seward, Edgeworth challenges modes of biographical writing that prioritised detached accounts over more intimate insights. While Edgeworth is granted credibility and authority as her father's daughter, it is her mode of narration, rather than her paternity alone, that creates a nuanced understanding of the biographical subject. In this way, Edgeworth redefines the boundaries of family biography, demonstrating that biographical authority emerges from the merging of private family history with Anglo-Irish history.

## Conclusion

This dissertation has redressed the scholarly neglect of women's literary life-writing in the late Georgian period. Through the examples of Hester Piozzi, Anna Seward, and Maria Edgeworth, it has argued that women biographers used the genre to arrogate to themselves critical authority, negotiating relationships with authoritative male mentors and precedents, and experimenting with aspects of the genre established by Samuel Johnson and his early biographers. This study has brought together critical perspectives on sociability, forms and genres, masculine traditions, and reading practices, showing how these women writers both drew on and redefined the conventions of life-writing. These authors engaged and experimented with a range of biographical forms including memoirs, letters, and anecdotes and increasingly responded to a rise of historical consciousness by positioning their subjects within broader social and political contexts, anticipating the broader engagement with national history that would come to characterise early Victorian biography. Future research could build on this work by further exploring other literary networks and cultures and further investigation is also required into mentorships, including how these varied across gender and regional contexts, and how they affected biographers' authority and innovation. This dissertation contributes to the recovery of women's literary history, advocating for a more integrated understanding of their role in shaping the genre, and as such future research must explore how women's life-writing both engages with and challenges male-dominated traditions. In this conclusion, I want briefly to consider the implications of this research for what ensued, suggesting that the traits I discern in late Georgian life-writing inform those in the early Victorian period.

As the nineteenth century advanced, biography began to diversify while asserting its identity ‘as a distinct literary genre’ from history.<sup>1</sup> Modern scholarship has demonstrated that nineteenth-century biographical writing exhibited considerable variety, challenging the assumption that the genre was narrowly moralistic or celebratory. David Amigoni observes, for instance, that biographies that illustrate a ‘cult of exemplarity’ have ‘affected perceptions of the entire tradition of Victorian biographical writing’, and Juliette Atkinson notes the tendency to describe Victorian biographies as ‘wordy hagiographical tomes’.<sup>2</sup> There was no distinct break from precedents set in the eighteenth century. Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets* and Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* and remained touchstones of biographical writing and remained popular among the reading public. In an 1834 letter published in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), Brontë recommends Johnson’s and Boswell’s biographies.<sup>3</sup> For biographers, devices utilised in writing biography in late Georgian period, such as anecdotes, were still popular. Writing in the 1830s, Thomas Carlyle, for instance, advocated for the value of anecdotes in bringing the subject home to the reader.<sup>4</sup> In the 1850s, Gaskell valued anecdotes for the same reason. In her manuscript of the *Life of Brontë*, she enjoined: ‘get as many anecdotes as possible. If you love your reader and want to be read, get anecdotes!’.<sup>5</sup> However, as Hermione Lee observes, ‘a more protective practice of idealising or censoring biography developed [...] in the Victorian period’.<sup>6</sup> While Gaskell prized the characteristic details anecdotes could impart, she was also cautious of being too

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<sup>1</sup> Juliette Atkinson, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century ‘Hidden’ Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 23.

<sup>2</sup> David Amigoni, *Victorian Biography: Intellectuals and the Ordering of Discourse* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 1. Atkinson, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Alan Shelston (London: Penguin, 1975), 152.

<sup>4</sup> See Hermione Lee, *Body Parts: Essays on Life-Writing* (London: Pimlico, 2008), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Gaskell, cited in Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber, 1993), 406.

<sup>6</sup> Lee, 3-4.

intimate. Though she promised to write ‘truly’ and withhold ‘nothing’, she adds that ‘some things, from their very nature, could not be spoken of so fully as others’.<sup>7</sup>

From the 1780s, as this dissertation has shown, life-writing was focused on satisfying public interest in writers’ private lives by revealing intimate insights and favouring a ‘warts and all’ approach. By the 1840s, biography had shifted toward emphasising the public achievement of a professional life, and domestic details were either suppressed or censored.<sup>8</sup> The gendered two-spheres organisation of society mapped more directly on to nineteenth-century biography than it did in late-Georgian examples, where that ideology is more inchoate and more strongly resisted. The Victorian period also saw an increase in discretion, as evangelical moral standards dictated that biographers had a duty to protect their subjects’ reputations, resulting in more hagiographic portrayals. Lengthy chronological ‘life and times’ narratives became commonplace and subsumed the array of discursive forms of biography analysed in this dissertation – memoirs, anecdotes, and letters. As Chapters Three and Four showed, there was an increasing apprehension of historicity – the historical situation of the individual – in biographical writing in late Georgian examples. Biography moved away from accounts of the individual’s literary achievements and personal life against a backdrop of an intimate, bookish sociability toward a broader engagement with the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they existed, and life-writing sought to consolidate national stories that emphasised patriotic and heroic ideals in the post-Napoleonic period. Lee notes Robert Southey’s *Life of Nelson* (1813) as an early example of a biography that ‘set the tone for life-writing as a form of patriotism’. Literary biography was similarly significant in consolidating a national history and character by portraying authors as

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<sup>7</sup> Gaskell, 490.

<sup>8</sup> Domestic biography did develop as a sub-genre in the nineteenth century. Atkinson notes that in the writing of women’s *Lives* ‘any departure from the domestic sphere would be condemned as transgressive’, 28.



moral exemplars, situating their works within historical and social contexts, and contributing to the formation of a national literary canon. Frederick Lawrence's 1855 biography of Henry Fielding, for example, situates him within his social and political context, offering a more nuanced view that rehabilitated his reputation and cast his novels as an embodiment of English writing.<sup>9</sup> This move toward collective national history reflected the 'cult of exemplarity' characteristic of Victorian biography, whereby individual lives modelled national virtue.<sup>10</sup> Biographies were not, Atkinson argues, concerned with 'long-term remembrance' of a particular subject or canonising their work, but rather 'are above all recognitions of the hidden influences that sustain the nation'.

The status of the biographer also evolved. In the late eighteenth century, literary biographers positioned themselves as arbiters of knowledge, contributing to intellectual discourse and offering general reflections through the lens of a particular life. While a personal relationship between biographer and subject could be advantageous, what mattered was how a biographical account was constructed, through uses of domestic insight, reading practices and literary criticism, or presentations of literary-intellectual sociability, to achieve authority as a contribution to intellectual debate or to build from an account of the particular life to reflections on life in general. After Edgeworth's *Memoirs*, there was an expectation that biographers – who were, by this time, often family members – should be inconspicuous. As Atkinson observes, in the first half of the nineteenth century, 'an enduring trend was to minimize the presence of the biographer within the work as far as possible', because 'it was generally accepted that the biographer was a man of lesser talent' than the biographical subject.<sup>11</sup> However, as Amigoni has shown, Victorian biographies were crucial in promulgating emerging ideas of culture and

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<sup>9</sup> See Thomas Lockwood, 'Richardson and Fielding' in *A Companion to Literary Biography*, ed. Richard Bradford (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), 455-468, 463.

<sup>10</sup> Lee, *Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 63. See also Atkinson, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Atkinson, 13, 24, 22.

ordering the canon.<sup>12</sup> Life-writings by Hester Piozzi, Anna Seward, and Maria Edgeworth are significant for these developments, both in terms of how biographical subjects were presented and how biographers shaped their own identities.

Piozzi's *Anecdotes* exemplifies an intimate, domestic, and conversational form of life-writing, where her authority emerges from personal familiarity with Johnson. Against the grain of treatments of Johnson, she aligned her work with a cultural shift that privileged private, emotional insights over public accomplishments, and she crafted a mode of biographical writing that captured her gendered, domestic perspective. Seward sits at an intersection between Piozzi's and Edgeworth's biographies. Though she decidedly wrote from her domestic, and provincial, position in *Memoirs* and *Letters*, she positioned herself as an arbiter of literary taste through carefully crafted biographical and autobiographical contributions. These texts reflect her recognition of her own historic and literary importance, blending personal insight with a more intellectual, critical approach. Seward thus demonstrates how women writers leveraged their reputations as published authors to assert authority in biography. Edgeworth's *Memoirs* marks the culmination of this trajectory, the familial relationship as a source of biographical authority. Although her life-writing stems from the examples of Piozzi and Seward, she moves toward the structured, chronological narratives that would more fully define Victorian biography, blending personal insight with broader cultural and historical context. Edgeworth's move towards historicising her father reflects that shift toward using biography to consolidate national narratives of virtue and moral exemplarity. This dissertation has shown that Piozzi, Seward, and Edgeworth were instrumental in rewriting the course of literary biography, which evolved from the intimate and personal and yet critical precedent of Johnson toward the professionalised and morally driven biographies characteristic of

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<sup>12</sup> See Amigoni, *Victorian Biography*, especially Chapter One.

early Victorianism. By situating their life-writings within broader intellectual and literary networks, it repositions these women as crucial figures in reshaping biographical conventions. Their contributions illuminate how the genre of biography and the figure of the biographer evolved, reflecting a complex interplay of gender, genre, and authority that has been central to the development of literary biography.

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