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# The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Letters

Norma Clarke

## About the Author

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# **THE RISE AND FALL OF THE WOMAN OF LETTERS**

Norma Clarke



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## *Introduction*

Asked to name a female author of the eighteenth century, most people would have to stop and think. Jane Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey* in the 1790s but none of her novels appeared in print until 1811. Mary Wollstonecraft might be known, especially for her ground-breaking feminist polemic, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), and Fanny Burney for the sensationally successful *Evelina* (1778) which Jane Austen enjoyed, and which, along with the later novels, *Cecilia* (1782) and *Camilla* (1796), secured Burney's place in English literary history. So far so good – and I have tried the experiment a number of times. The difficulty begins when we reach back into the mid and early eighteenth century. Someone might mention Sarah Fielding, sister of Henry; or Frances Sheridan, mother of Richard Brinsley; but usually the next name produced will be Aphra Behn.

Aphra Behn, hailed by Virginia Woolf as the first woman writer to earn a living by her pen, died before the eighteenth century began. She was active as a poet, novelist and dramatist in the 1670s and 1680s, a hundred years before *Evelina*. If Aphra Behn was the first (which may or may not be true), who was the second? What happened between Aphra Behn and Fanny Burney? Were there no women writers worthy of being remembered? Of course not. Was literary life so unwelcoming to women that they chose not to be part of it? Not at all. For though their names may not be as well known to us as the great nineteenth-century novelists the Brontë sisters and George Eliot, or the poets Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, the

simple fact is that they were there. Less simple is why we don't know about them.

*The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Letters* investigates female authorship in the eighteenth century and it makes available writers who were once well known, women who were admired for their writings, even if, as was sometimes the case, what the public admired was their insistence on privacy. However, as the title suggests, the book aims to do more than bring a number of fascinating individuals into the light of our own day. It also tries to explain why they became obscure, exploring the mechanisms by which some writers enter literary history and others do not, how some become 'lost' and some 'found', some are enabled to 'rise' while others have to 'fall'. These concerns have guided the organisation of the material which unfolds backwards, from the late eighteenth to the late seventeenth century.

I have used the term 'woman of letters' for several reasons. 'Letters', the humanist term for literature and scholarship, incorporates all kinds of literary work and few eighteenth-century writers confined themselves to a single genre. The woman of letters might be a poet and a novelist, a historian and a critic; she might busy herself with translation or religious meditations; she might write for the theatre, edit a magazine, be a ferocious polemicist, or a sage and coolly reasoning philosopher. Typically, she engaged in a variety of bookish pursuits - reading, writing, circulating ideas, keeping up with current debate in the full consciousness that to do so was a way of contributing to the improving cultural stock of the nation. For the most part, her activities were intensely and inescapably political, for politics permeated cultural and scholarly life.

To be a woman of letters was to be a public figure, and this is the second reason for using the term. From the restoration of monarchy in England after 1660 and through

to the collapse of prerogative symbolised by the American and French revolutions in the 1770s and 1780s there was, broadly speaking, cultural affirmation for the woman of letters. The 'ingenious' woman, the witty woman, the woman who wrote poems or translated Hebrew and understood theological debates, was admired as an ornament and exception to her sex. If she was a young prodigy like Elizabeth Singer (later Rowe) in the 1690s or Elizabeth Carter in the 1730s, both country girls (one born in Somerset, the other in Kent), her fame might spread to the metropolis and beyond. If she was a bold philosophical thinker, like Mary Astell or Catharine Trotter (later Cockburn) in the 1690s, philosophical men were happy to correspond with her. If she wrote plays, like Susannah Centlivre, theatre managers were pleased to produce them. If she wrote novelistic prose of any kind, publishers were eager to promote it: Delarivier Manley, Elizabeth Thomas, Jane Barker and Eliza Haywood were among those who had no difficulty finding an audience for their work in the early decades of the eighteenth century.

That the rise of the woman of letters should begin with the return of monarchy is no accident; nor that her fall should coincide with the beginnings of democracy and the undermining of a system based on deference. Monarchical rule provided the model for the celebration of female literary power, just as it offered the only form in which women were accorded political power. Kings and queens perched at the apex of a hierarchical system that invested them with divine attributes; they were admired as much (or more) for the rank they occupied as for the qualities they brought to the task of leadership. Similarly, the praise lavished on writers like Katherine Philips, 'the matchless Orinda', and Aphra Behn, 'the divine Astraea', situated them as objects of worship above the rank of ordinary mortals. Philips and Behn may be considered the originating figures in a distinctively female tradition; they were by no means

the first women to write seriously, but they were the first to acquire iconic significance. As women they represented the female sex and showed what it was capable of; their example set the standard for other women to emulate. As geniuses they were seen as exceptions to the sex, vessels of the muses, who in their divinity and matchlessness could only be adored not imitated. When Elizabeth Montagu, the wealthy and powerful bluestocking (the name by which intellectual women came to be known in the mid eighteenth century), was dubbed 'queen of the blues', it was in acknowledgement of her will to rule over a literary system conceived on monarchical lines. In this fantasy, built on the socio-historical fact that literature emerged from courtly and aristocratic milieux, those who were admitted were raised by the association and were expected to behave accordingly.

By the end of the eighteenth century, national prosperity, improved educational facilities, a vastly expanded commercial press and the reading and buying public that sustained it, had produced women writers in abundance. Prodigious and ingenious women were everywhere. The mythology of divinity so bound up with aristocratic ideology was largely exploded. What had once been 'high' in a social order based on absolute distinctions of rank might be 'middling' or 'low'. What was 'low' might be 'high', or at least in the process of striving to be so. The eighteenth century witnessed the slow decline of patrician culture which can be traced, among its other manifestations, in the shift of literary power from the country houses of the great to the offices of the major booksellers. In the 1720s, when the publisher Edmund Curll (the so-called 'unspeakable Curll') took writers into his household and into his pay, practising a commercial version of the old aristocratic habit of giving houseroom to estimable writers, this was 'low' compared to the 'high' honour of patronage from, say, the Earl of Dorset who plucked Matthew Prior from a tavern, or

the Duke of Weymouth at Longleat whose protégée was the young Elizabeth Singer. By the 1780s, when Mary Wollstonecraft sought out Joseph Johnson in St Paul's Churchyard, she understood that his interest in her signified the possibility of honorable independence: her talents in writing meant she could support herself 'in a comfortable way'. Johnson was a successful publisher well aware (like Edmund Curll earlier) of the commercial value of female authors: he had recently brought out the poems of two 'lissing Sapphos' of seventeen and fourteen. Wollstonecraft readily assented to his proposition that she stay with him for a few weeks and then move into a house that he would find for her. Putting herself under Johnson's protection was not a 'low' move; by contrast, her time as a governess in the aristocratic household of the Kingsborough family had felt to her like servitude.

It was not only lissing Sapphos who were of interest to the public Mary Wollstonecraft aimed to reach. Classicists, historians and literary scholars acknowledged the extraordinary fact that women, disadvantaged by their sex, were producing heavyweight intellectual work. Scholarly bluestocking Elizabeth Carter's translation from ancient Greek of *All the Works of Epictetus* came out in 1758 and was widely acclaimed; so was Catherine Macaulay's massive *History of England* which ran to eight volumes and was published over a twenty-year span (1763–83). Elizabeth Montagu's *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare* which appeared in 1769 earned her celebrity in both England and France. (The essay was a rebuttal of Voltaire's criticism of Shakespeare.) Montagu's title, which echoed Joseph Warton's *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope* (1756), an important early work of literary criticism, as well as her choice of subject, made clear her ambition to position herself at the head of this emerging genre. Clara Reeve, in an 'Address to the Reader' in her *Original Poems on Several Occasions* (1769), explained that there was

nothing blameable in recognising and using one's God-given talents. Indeed, it was a duty 'to cultivate, to improve and to communicate'. She went on to describe her own journey to this understanding:

I formerly believed that I ought not to let myself be known for a scribbler, that my sex was an insuperable objection, that mankind in general were prejudiced against its pretensions to literary merit; but I am now convinced of the mistake, by daily examples to the contrary. I see many female writers favourably received, admitted into the rank of authors, and amply rewarded by the public; I have been encouraged by their success, to offer myself as a candidate for the same advantages.

Being known as 'a scribbler' might be problematic, but by 1769 a woman could make use of more dignified formulations: she could be 'admitted into the rank of authors'.

English literature as we understand it came into being in this period in the shift from the classics to the vernacular and in the development of textual scholarship, literary history and literary criticism, along with new genres like the novel, literary biography and memoir. The move away from the classics opened a space for women and they began making the novel their own: the astonishingly prolific Eliza Haywood dominated for almost four decades after *Love in Excess* (1719), so much so that in the 1730s Henry Fielding put her in a play as 'Mrs Novel'. But the status of the novel as a literary form was equivocal. Unlike poetry and drama, it had no classical antecedents; it offered no means by which authors could feel themselves enrolled in a lineage that reached back to antiquity and might reach forward into posterity. In the hierarchy of genres poetry was high, the novel low. Poetic and dramatic criticism, by contrast, could



share in the high status of the works and writers discussed and be rooted in a classical past by references to Aristotle, Longinus and others.

For many women, the novel was a form to be avoided, especially because of its association with tales of illicit love. Apart from Eliza Haywood, only three of the early eighteenth-century writers discussed in this book – Jane Barker, Delarivier Manley and Mary Davys – were novelists, and none of them exclusively so. Jane Barker was a poet and autobiographer; Delarivier Manley a poet, dramatist, political propagandist and autobiographer; and Mary Davys a dramatist. Of the others, Elizabeth Elstob was an Anglo-Saxon scholar; Elizabeth Thomas a literary critic and poet; Anne Finch a poet; Catharine Trotter Cockburn a dramatist and philosopher; Elizabeth Singer Rowe a poet who later published short prose fictions; Martha Fowke Sansom a poet and autobiographer; Lady Mary Wortley Montagu a poet and letter writer; and Anna Seward a poet, literary critic and letter writer. The many women who *did* write novels in the middle and later decades of the eighteenth century, such as Sarah Fielding, Sarah Scott, Charlotte Lennox, Frances Sheridan and others, often took pains to distinguish themselves from ‘low’ practitioners like Eliza Haywood, a habit of rejection that earned a famous rebuke from Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey*.<sup>1</sup>

Some readers will be uneasy about a chronology which locates a ‘rise’ for the woman of letters in the late seventeenth century and a ‘fall’ in the late eighteenth. Was it not at the end of the eighteenth century that, in the words of Virginia Woolf, ‘the middle class woman began to write’? The answer is both yes and no. Woolf herself acknowledged that there was a longer history when she added:

masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, and George Eliot done homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carter.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Jane Austen did pay her dues to Fanny Burney, naming her in *Northanger Abbey* as being among the novelists whose knowledge of human nature and whose wit and humour 'conveyed to the world in the best chosen language' were slighted by those who preferred to be seen reading the *Spectator*. But the general point, which both Austen and Woolf understood, remains an important one: the middle-class woman writer already had a history when she 'began' to write at the end of the eighteenth century. The problem was that she was not supposed to know about it, and perhaps genuinely didn't. Fanny Burney should have laid a wreath on the grave of Jane Barker or Delarivier Manley. That she did not do so and was never likely to is an important fact in itself.

The generation of women who came of age as writers in the 1770s and 1780s entered on a mixed inheritance. The bluestockings had made high achievement praiseworthy, but the duty to cultivate talent which Clara Reeve pointed to was by no means straightforward. In the classical texts which were the foundation of male education at the time, learning and lewdness in women came together. Juvenal warned that women who read a great deal and conversed freely with men upon learned topics became correspondingly bold in their sexual behaviour, and - worse - then used their wit to justify libidinous ways. This model permeated eighteenth-century thinking. It identified the pleasures of study and the delight of unfettered enquiry

with a general loosening of restraints. Independence of mind in women signalled the likelihood of disreputable freedoms with the body.

Women believed this too, if not about themselves then certainly about other women. The conduct of female writers in the past supposedly illustrated it. Thus, if talent were to be developed in a woman who seemed capable of producing work of literary merit, the consciousness of that talent had best be free from 'pride, impudence and self-conceit'. She had to show that she was virtuous. Virtue was identifiable by modest behaviour, not just sexual modesty but modesty about having talent. John Duncombe in *The Femiuiad* (1754) explained that women who 'prize / Their own high talents . . . deserv'd contempt'. So-called 'conceit' of this sort was among the vices: vice was 'bold', noisy and 'unblushing'. Those identified as 'vice's friends' in the past were to be passed over in silence and veiled from sight. Duncombe made brief mention of Delarivier Manley, Aphra Behn and Susannah Centlivre, all of whom had been 'admitted into the rank of authors' in earlier eras, but only to say that they could not be included in his poem. Female authors from the first half of the eighteenth century who came into the category of the vicious included those who noisily and unblushingly laid claim to authorial personae, such as Eliza Haywood and Laetitia Pilkington.

Duncombe's *The Femiuiad* was one of a number of texts which promoted elevated images of the woman writer, putting into verse the bluestocking agenda which dominated English letters for much of the middle and later eighteenth century. The bluestocking movement succeeded in uncoupling the Juvenalian link between learning and lewdness. (In its place emerged an alternative stereotype of the intellectual woman as a mannish, sexless creature.) Led by upper-class women imbued with a vision of the English past in which 'great ladies' in their country houses had engaged in literary projects as a function of sociability and

rank, the early bluestockings reached out of their own sphere to the bright and educated daughters and sons of clergy, doctors, lawyers and the like, and sometimes – though this tended to be more fraught – to milkwomen, shoemakers and laundresses, aiming to create constituencies that were modelled on country-house coteries. Leisure was a sign of social elevation. Learning and literature – letters – properly deployed, showed that leisure had been well used; it added virtue to privilege. Approved knowledge was not to be hoarded, it was to be shared. The vision was of mixed-sex gatherings where minds mingled and words were valued as products of the mind. The appetitive body and its desires, be it for sex or food, ribbons or jewels (the milkwoman poet Ann Yearsley’s purchase of ribbons upset her bluestocking patron Hannah More), was not valued.

The bluestockings opened up the conversation of the leisured classes to carefully selected individuals from lower down the social scale who showed their willingness to be improved and governed. If there was no room in this for the body, nor could commerce be asserted as a value: the ‘scribbler’ who wrote for pay was a lower order of life, a Grub Street hack, or in Virginia Woolf’s disdainful image of Eliza Haywood, ‘a domestic house fly’.<sup>3</sup> The bluestockings were uncomfortable about bodies (and often uncomfortable *in* them) and about payment, even though numbers of them, including Elizabeth Carter, Clara Reeve and Hester Chapone, badly needed the money. Propaganda against ‘scribblers’ was intense, much of it emanating from scribbling types themselves, those who were dependent on the commercial press whilst seeking approval from the aristocracy.

Richard Samuel’s portrait, *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain*, of 1778, depicting nine prominent women of arts and letters, marked a high point in the celebration of virtuous female talent as a social good. These women,

whose activities spanned all kinds of writing (Montagu, Carter and Macaulay, along with Anna Barbauld, Elizabeth Griffith, Hannah More and Charlotte Lennox) as well as the performance of vocal music (Elizabeth Linley) and painting (Angelica Kauffman), were to be admired to the point of worship – the setting was the Temple of Apollo and they were, after all, ‘muses’ – and emulated. The painter made no attempt at creating individual likeness but that was not the point. In its printed version as an engraving in *Johnson’s Ladies New and Polite Pocket Memorandum for 1778*, the painting had wide circulation and symbolic meaning. The women were icons of Englishness rather than individuals. Elizabeth Montagu wrote to Elizabeth Carter with a bravura amusement that betrayed just a little unease: ‘it is charming to think how our praises will ride about the world in everybody’s pocket. Unless we could be put into a popular ballad, set to a favourite old English tune, I do not see how we could become more universally celebrated.’<sup>4</sup>

This universal celebration was not to last. The bluestocking ideal did not survive the combined impact of political upheaval and commercial expansion. (‘Bluestocking’ became a pejorative expression well before the century was out.) Its values lingered on, however, not least in the critical division between ‘high’ or ‘literary’ and ‘low’ or ‘popular’ writings. In the transformations of the Romantic movement, writings categorised as ‘high’ and ‘canonical’ became gendered as male, ‘low’ and ‘popular’ as female. In this sense the Romantic period marks an end, or ‘fall’, for the woman of letters as the eighteenth century knew her.

As for her rise, the extent of women’s involvement in literary activity in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries is only now beginning to be understood. By focusing on some key figures – Elizabeth Singer Rowe, Jane Barker, Delarivier Manley, Elizabeth Elstob, Catharine Trotter Cockburn and Elizabeth Thomas in particular – I have tried

to make available for a general readership some of the exciting developments in scholarship of the period.

As well as reflecting the chronology I have outlined, the title, *The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Letters*, is also intended to capture the characteristic movement of individuals who came to public attention and fell into obscurity again - a repeated pattern within the period. This is a fact of literary life but it has particular relevance for those of us who write about women writers of the past, given the widespread assumption until very recently that women were denied a place in culture and were never famous except when 'fame' rhymed with 'shame'.

That Anna Seward became obscure is readily understood; that she was famous - as a poet, a critic and as 'Britain's Muse' - is much harder to convey.<sup>5</sup> This book begins with Seward because she was a characteristic product of the bluestocking era: a provincial clergyman's daughter able to imagine herself high within a literary system based on rank. Growing up in the 1740s and 1750s when liberal progressives like her own father were well disposed towards intellectuality in women (in 1748 Thomas Seward published his poem, 'The Female Right to Literature'), she imbibed a sense of entitlement that remained with her to her death in 1809. 'Miss Seward' was a figure of national repute whose pronouncements were attended to, whether she was discussing the relative merits of Dryden and Pope in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, or insisting on Dr Johnson's limitations as a literary critic. English literature, especially poetry (or, as she would say, 'the poetic science'), was her passion. At a time when criticism was still in its infancy, she constructed an authoritative role for herself, espousing the absolute value of a literary canon based on correct critical principles, defended by self-selected elites - readers and writers like herself who were independent of booksellers and

patrons, and whose judgements were arrived at after diligent study and thought. Key to her project was the decision to enshrine her views in a literary correspondence conducted for most of her adult life, which she intended would be published after her death.<sup>6</sup>

There were numerous provincial circles such as the one Anna Seward presided over at Lichfield, full of men and women of 'taste' who took seriously their duty to form and monitor the nation's culture. Not infrequently, the central figure in such circles was a woman of exceptional abilities. Her renown brought lustre to the local community, and it might bring celebrated visitors. William Hayley, 'the Bard of Eartham', was the most famous poet of the day when in 1781 he wrote and invited himself along to meet Miss Seward, 'the Swan of Lichfield'. He stayed two weeks in her home. The following summer she travelled to Sussex to stay with Hayley, his wife and the painter George Romney. There was no hint that the unmarried poetess's freedom might betoken sexual impropriety, though Hayley had an illegitimate son, Tom, whose mother was the daughter of his housekeeper, and Romney had abandoned his wife twenty years earlier. Bringing her literary passions, 'the sprightly charms of her social character, and . . . the graces of a majestic person' as Hayley put it, Miss Seward settled for six weeks, thrilled by Hayley's conversation and Romney's talent. Hayley and Seward's ecstatic delight in each other as king and queen of the national literature became public knowledge since they each published poems on the subject. They were mocked for authorial vanity, but not for other putative sins.<sup>7</sup>

Hayley saw in his exciting new friend a physical resemblance to Elizabeth I. The virgin queen was a suggestive role model for the bluestockings, partly because her reign was so rich in enduring literary works, and partly because she was a scholar and writer herself. Elizabeth's use of the idea of virginity was an important element in the

representation of her power. The deference that was paid to leading bluestockings and the cultural authority invested in them did not require them to be virgins as such but it was complicated by sex and marriage, if not always in practice then certainly symbolically, because of the absolute requirement (enshrined in the marriage vows) that a woman obey her husband. By 1781, Seward had already struggled with this dilemma and reached her own solution. She had decided that she would probably never marry. Committed to what she called her 'celibaic spinsterhood', she was, however, established in a relationship with the man whom she loved above all others. He, unfortunately, was already married.

There is little doubt that Seward's reputation as an exceptional woman and the bluestocking insistence on women's entitlement to sociable interchange with like-minded men made it possible for her to live openly (though not co-habiting) as the companion of John Saville, the vicar-choral of Lichfield Cathedral. Her triumph was that she refused to give him up. She forced the world to accept the relationship on her terms, as a union of soulmates tragically denied full expression. It was a union that extended across forty-three years - longer than most marriages - until Saville's death in 1803. Some scandal did, of course, attach itself to her name as a consequence, but what is more remarkable is her ability to ride that scandal. She neither left the country, as Helen Maria Williams did, nor was she forced to endure the obloquy poured on Mary Wollstonecraft after William Godwin published a memoir of his wife's life and spoke openly about her former lovers.

Anna Seward's ambitions were directed towards posterity: she believed her genius and application had earned her a place in English literary history. Men cared about posterity too (it was one of the commonplaces of eighteenth-century literature that posterity ranked higher than present company) but an alert eighteenth-century woman had



cause to take special measures to ensure her survival. Seward had followed the fortunes, in life and death, of numerous female authors. She was anxious that *her* version of her story should survive in as complete a form as possible, and she edited and re-edited her papers with this in mind throughout her life. The letters were key to this project, for they displayed her critical acumen and critical authority in a form which incorporated other people's acknowledgement of the significance of her views. Seward hoped to bequeath to posterity her status as well as her opinions. But posterity did not remember that eighteenth-century culture had celebrated the woman of letters; and quite soon it ceased even to know that a girl born in 1742 could grow up and imagine a future for herself in the annals of the nation's literature.

## *Chapter One*

### ANNA SEWARD, BLUESTOCKING

Prior tells us, that every man of ability should, either by compass, the pencil, the pen, or the sword, leave his name in life's visit.

Anna Seward<sup>1</sup>

#### **Leaving a name in life's visit**

In 1784 Anna Seward (pronounced See-ward), a provincial clergyman's daughter, began transcribing her letters. The laborious copying out was no light undertaking since she had an extensive network of correspondents, but she had decided that the letters should be published after her death as a record of her life and opinions. The transcripts, which were to grow into thirteen thick volumes (though these represented less than a twelfth of those she actually wrote), were frequently returned to in the years that followed: they were read over, edited, rewritten – often more than once. In 1807, in poor health and knowing that she was unlikely to live much longer, she prepared them for the press. She spent much time planning how her posthumous works should be put before the public, deciding that she would bequeath the letters to Constable on condition that he brought out the volumes at the rate of two per year. Meanwhile, she also began negotiations for a complete collection of her poetry and prose, published and unpublished. She had arranged these and estimated that they would run to six or possibly eight volumes of verse and four of miscellaneous prose in addition to the thirteen

volumes of letters. Walter Scott, who had agreed to be her literary executor, conducted negotiations for her. She set a high price on her works: she wanted one thousand guineas plus fifty copies to give out as presents – that is, fifty complete sets of the ten or twelve volumes.

Anna Seward was a poet. By 1784, when she took the decision to preserve copies of selected letters, she had already established for herself a national reputation. Her published output was relatively small, a fact which neither inhibited acclaim nor diminished her own sense of herself as an important writer. There was the ‘Elegy on Captain Cook’, published in 1779, and the ‘Monody on the Death of Major Andre’ (1780), two substantial poems which extended what had until then been a local reputation in Lichfield and Bath, where she had won the prizes at Lady Miller’s Batheaston poetry contests. Most importantly, there was her novel-poem, *Louisa*, which was a great success, going into four editions on its appearance in 1784. James Boswell reviewed *Louisa* favourably, as did William Hayley. One purpose of the correspondence was to circulate information of this sort, promoting an image of herself in the minds of individuals who would then pass it around their own circles. ‘You will be kindly gratified to hear,’ she wrote to her correspondent the Revd Thomas Whalley, author of the well-received poem, *Edwy and Edilda*, and a wealthy Bath socialite, ‘that I receive the highest encomiums upon my poem, *Louisa*, by the first literary characters of the age. I enclose the beautiful eulogium with which it has been honored by Mr Hayley. This eulogium has appeared in several of the public prints.’<sup>2</sup>

Constable declined to pay a thousand guineas and there was never to be a twenty-five-volume edition of Seward’s complete works. Nor, when it came to it, did he issue the thirteen volumes of letters as instructed. After Seward’s death in 1809, he published a selection in six volumes, bringing them out all at once in 1811. (It is not known where

the originals are or if they survive.) Robert Southey thought she had been 'ill-used' and that the publisher had 'no other thought than how to make the most immediate profit by the bequest'.<sup>3</sup>

Walter Scott published in full the posthumous letter he received from Seward, giving him directions about what he was to do. This explained that he had exclusive copyright to all the published and unpublished verse, four sermons and a critical dissertation, and a collection of 'juvenile' letters from 1762 to 1768. Everything had been made ready for the press and there were 'specified directions to the printer through their whole course'. What Scott was explicitly *not* bequeathed were the transcribed letters from 1784. He was not trusted with these treasured materials, apparently, because they included strongly expressed political views with which she knew he did not agree. Scott was a Tory while Seward was a Whig and passionately opposed to what she called the 'sanguinary' war policy of William Pitt's government.

To Mr Constable, rather than to yourself, have they been bequeathed, on account of the political principles which, during many past years, they breathed. Fervent indeed, and uniform, was my abhorrence of the dreadful system in our cabinet, which has reduced the continent to utter vassalage, and endangered the independence of Great Britain. Yet I know these opinions are too hostile to your friendships and connections with the belligerent party, for the possibility of it being agreeable to you to become the editor of those twelve epistolary volumes.<sup>4</sup>

The literary correspondence of a provincial spinster poet might seem an unlikely location for incendiary political opinions. This seems to have been Scott's view. He claimed that he had wanted nothing to do with editing the letters,

assuming that they were full of scandal and tittle-tattle, and having, as he put it to his friend Joanna Baillie, 'a particular aversion at perpetuating that sort of gossip'.<sup>5</sup> Nor did he much enjoy what he *had* agreed to do, which was to edit the poetry (or rather, proofread, since Seward had already edited them heavily herself) and provide a biographical essay.

Unfortunately, Scott had a low opinion of the poetry, telling Baillie he thought it 'execrable'; and though he had been charmed by Seward when they met and 'really liked her' - indeed, he allowed himself to be persuaded to stay two nights when he had planned only a brief call: 'such visits', his hostess crowed, were 'the most high-prized honours which my writings have procured for me' - the charm did not survive the arrival of the manuscripts. He doubted what he called 'the general reception' her poems were likely to meet. He decided to reduce the complete works down from a potential twelve volumes to three, suppressing an unfinished epic, *Telemachus*, which Seward considered her life's major work in poetry, and removing the poems by her father which she had wanted to include.

Scott found the job wearisome (he called it his 'penance'). In his biographical essay he drew attention to the public nature of Seward's fame, a fact which in itself justified the memorialising of her life: 'The name of Anna Seward,' he began, 'has for many years held a high rank in the annals of British literature; and the public has a right to claim, upon the present occasion, some brief memorials of her by whom it was distinguished.' The essay as a whole offered a measured, affectionate and shrewd assessment of a woman who represented for him a bygone era, but there was no disguising his own feelings: a barrage of urbane double negatives unconsciously stressed the 'uniform', 'idle', 'tedious', and 'uninstructive' aspects of his task: 'As the tenor of her life was retired, though not secluded, and

uniform, though not idle, the task of detailing its events can neither be tedious nor uninteresting.

Robert Southey, another young man of letters who, like Scott, was flattered by and, in professional terms, understood the value of Anna Seward's approbation, seems to have been jealous that Seward chose Scott as her literary executor. In Southey, Seward had recognised one of the 'rising stars' of the new generation (along with Coleridge whom she also admired), considering Southey's *Joan of Arc* to approach 'in genius, nearer the *Paradise Lost* than any other epic attempt in our language'. Of *Thalaba* she had some criticisms, but by *Madoc* she was enraptured. Southey's name was ever on her lips and in her letters. He began a correspondence in 1807, and in the summer of 1808 made a visit, accompanied by a friend, Miss Barker, a young woman who had 'a quick sense of the ludicrous'. On this first meeting, the young people were shown up to find the sexagenarian Miss Seward at her writing desk, copying out some verses of her own in Southey's praise. Southey noted her beautiful eyes, the hair in unexpectedly youthful ringlets, her 'warmth', 'liveliness' and 'cordiality' - though all a little too youthful, too spirited - and then described the 'tragi-comic or comico-tragic' scene that followed:

After a greeting so complimentary that I would gladly have insinuated myself into a nut-shell, to have been hidden from it, she told me that she had that minute finished transcribing some verses upon one of my poems - she would read them to me, and entreated me to point out anything that might be amended in them. I took my seat, and, by favour of a blessed table, placed my elbow so that I could hide my face by leaning it upon my hand, and have the help of that hand to keep down the risible muscles, while I listened to my own praise and glory set forth, in sonorous rhymes, and declared by one who read