

## **REDACTED THESIS: Portrait of a Muse**

The Grave of the Muse is the Marriage Bed – critical essay on Portrait of a Muse, my novel about the eighteenth-century poet, Anna Seward, of Lichfield (England).

Portrait of A Muse: A biographical novel about the eighteenth century poet, Anna Seward, of Lichfield (England), with an accompanying critical essay: The Grave of the Muse is the Marriage Bed © 2022 by Susan D. Dickson.

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## **REDACTED THESIS: *Portrait of a Muse***

***The Grave of the Muse is the Marriage Bed* – critical essay on *Portrait of a Muse*, my novel about the eighteenth-century poet, Anna Seward, of Lichfield (England).**

Dr Susan D. Dickson, PhD, MBChB, DCH, DGM.

June 2022

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## Introduction

'What does the life of Anna Seward tell us about factors which influenced female literary success in the patriarchal world of the later eighteenth century?'

This is my central research question, investigated through my novel and this accompanying exegesis, where I also consider other aspects of the project relevant to both Anna's history and my re-creation of it through biographical fiction.

In the first part of the essay, I examine the genesis of my semi-fictional biographical novel, *Portrait of a Muse*, which samples the life of Anna Seward (1742-1809), an English provincial poet, who became known as 'The Swan of Lichfield'. I explore issues of methodology and literary contexts, including my novel's relationship to recent historical and biographical fiction, along with stylistic links to early English novels and the Gothic tradition. I elaborate on research findings, characterisation and aspects of social history including portrait-painting and medical matters, along with other elements of my writing journey.

The second part of the essay examines in detail Seward's relationships and her situation as an unmarried woman, relatively independent and able to succeed in her chosen career. Through the medium of Seward's letters and poems, including her seminal work, the verse-novel *Louisa*, I investigate her attitudes to romantic love versus 'mercenary' marriage, and I discuss how *Louisa* reflects much of Anna's own life story. I compare Anna's circumstances to other important female writers of the era.

A thesis overview presents the important aspects of my PhD project, and demonstrates how I have contributed not only to the field of knowledge relating to Anna Seward and her contemporaries, but also to wider aspects of social history. I return to my research question with a summary of my findings.

Finally, in a brief epilogue, I use a short fictional scenario to compare Seward's life story with my own situation as a middle-class educated woman in the twenty-first century.

## PART 1

### Constructing Anna

#### **A Lady of Letters**

Anna Seward found me in the Reading Room of the National Library of Ireland in Dublin, although I had not travelled there to meet her. I was making a study of original letters relating to ‘The Ladies of Llangollen’, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, Anglo-Irish aristocrats who set up home together in north Wales in the late eighteenth century. They survived on love and the produce from their smallholding, while indulging their passions for self-education and literature. Anna Seward befriended them, as did other literary figures, and by the end of the century the Ladies had achieved celebrity status, becoming a tourist attraction for aristocracy, gentry and the hoi-polloi alike. Their Gothicised cottage is still preserved as a museum in Llangollen.

With Anna reading over my shoulder, I enjoyed her ‘Irish’ letters to the Ladies, lyrical in style but at times practical. She rarely spared words and she bewailed the higher postal charges for extra sheets: as with the flimsy air-mail letters I exchanged with my family in the 1970s, every inch of paper is covered, including round the margins. While Ponsonby, in Llangollen, wrote about cows and cabbages, Seward, in Lichfield, flew high on the wings of poetics. I wanted to write her story, to place myself and my readers into her world, to experience vicariously life as an educated woman in the eighteenth century, bound by corsets and convention and yet able to succeed as a poet. Above all, I wanted to identify the factors in her life story which moulded her character and fostered her poetic talent, so that she was allowed for a time to be venerated in the masculine world of the Literati. This required a detailed investigation of Anna’s life, taking in the wider social setting and politics of her era, before I could proceed with writing Anna as a real person, fleshed out with her thoughts and feelings.

I began to study her published letters and poetry, surprised that she does not hold a significant place in the English literary canon despite obvious talent and a prodigious output. Her work stood on the brink of Romanticism, as an Augustan poet.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, she maintained the poetic forms she had learned as a child, using standard metres and rhyming, and featuring classical references and elaborate metaphors, a style which became unfashionable towards the end of the eighteenth century as the Lake Poets, Wordsworth and Coleridge,

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<sup>1</sup> Claudia T. Kairoff, *Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012) Introduction, p. 1.

emerged onto the scene. For a time, Anna was famous for her poems and also her literary criticism, published in high-brow journals of the day, and she was often termed 'ingenious' (a contemporary description for someone both clever and talented). She did her best to burnish this reputation, but her renown faded fairly rapidly after her death in 1809.

So was Anna's self-belief pure vanity, promoted by a father who wanted to see her talent prosper? Perhaps her reputation faded because she was too provincial, closeted as she was in Lichfield? Yet Wordsworth buried himself away in the Lake District with his daffodils, and he lingers there still in spirit, while regarded as one of the great English poets.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Coleridge is still venerated for his opium-fuelled *The Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan*. Anna's older Lichfield contemporary, Dr Samuel Johnson, went to London however, and flourished because of his greatest work, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755): his fame has been perpetuated by James Boswell's anecdotal *Life of Samuel Johnson*. Anna, not awarded a similar contemporary biography, has been largely forgotten, like many of the other writers of her generation, both male and female, although her output was truly impressive. It is satisfying therefore to see that academic interest in her life and work has burgeoned over recent years, through Norma Clarke, Claudia Kairoff, Teresa Barnard, Lisa Moore and others.

Anna's lapse into obscurity after her death is outside the scope of both my novel and this essay. I have concentrated instead on the early part of Anna's life with reference to her relationships with family and friends, aiming to establish how and why she came to be a published writer and 'poetess', in an era when many such literate women were expected only to deal with household accounts, read novels and to write letters to their friends and family.

### **Historical and Biographical Writing**

Aristotle talks of the roles of the historian and the poet: how the historian records what has happened, but it is the poet (and by inference the novelist) who describes what might have happened.<sup>3</sup> I would suggest here that both the historian and the novelist rely on accounts which are already part-fictionalised and subject to bias and the fickleness of memory. As Hayden White comments: 'History is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical

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<sup>2</sup> In an 1807 letter to Walter Scott, Anna was highly critical of Wordsworth's 'dancing daffodils' poem: Anna Seward *Letters of Anna Seward written between 1784 and 1807*, 6 vols, ed. by Archibald Constable (Edinburgh, 1811), VI, (pp. 366-367), pp. 364-365. Google ebooks.

<sup>3</sup> *Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. by S. H. Butcher (London: Macmillan 1922), Ch. 9, p. 35. Internet Archive ebook.. <<https://archive.org/details/poeticsofaristot00arisuoft/page/n5/mode/2up>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

representation...readers of histories and novels can hardly fail to be struck by their similarities.<sup>4</sup>

Hilary Mantel takes up this theme in her Reith lectures: '[History] is what's left in the sieve when the centuries have run through it – a few stories, scraps of writing, scraps of cloth. ...It is the multiplication of the evidence of fallible and biased witnesses, combined with incomplete accounts of actions not fully understood by the people who performed them.' She moves on to say: 'The novelist's trade is never just about making things up. The historian's trade is never simply about stockpiling evidence.' Her concern is to access 'the interior drama of my characters' lives'.<sup>5</sup> Hence my historical writing seeks out the gaps in history, aiming to resurrect Anna Seward and her contemporaries from the dusty archives in order to make them think and feel as living characters. As Mantel says: 'The novelist...frees the people from the archive and lets them run about, ignorant of their fates, with all their mistakes unmade.'<sup>6</sup>

Historical novels have been popular almost since the novel itself appeared as a writing form in the early eighteenth century, but Thomas Mallon argues that this popularity has increased in recent times, as also for period drama. This, he says, is because we have so much access to the world of the present through the media, that escape to the world of the past is all that is left for us.<sup>7</sup> I agree with this assertion, but I also feel that historical narratives pander to our love of nostalgia for 'life back then', along with repugnance to it. Mantel points out that we perceive squalor and barbarism in the past as abhorrent, while we choose to ignore these social evils in modern life. She shows how cruelties are often exaggerated by historical writers and dramatists for our benefit, for excitement and vicarious enjoyment, as in horror films and books. From my own perspective, I do not envy the physical and social restrictions Anna endured, along with the primitive medical practices of the time.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, I admire the elegance of her clothes and lifestyle, especially her freedom from the burdens of childcare and housework. All these aspects of her life have been detailed in my novel to satisfy my own and my readers' curiosity, but also because comparisons can be made with the present day. In this context, Michael Lackey talks about 'the novelist's crucial role in critiquing the socio-political

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<sup>4</sup> Hayden White, *The Houses of History : A Critical Reader in Twentieth-century History and Theory*, ed. by Anna Green and Kathleen Troup (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 214.

<sup>5</sup> Hilary Mantel, *The Day is for the Living: Reith Lecture 1*, transcript from BBC Radio 4 (13 June 2017). <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08tcbrp>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Mallon, *Biographical Fiction, A Reader*, ed. by Michael Lackey (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> See later. Medical treatment is discussed in 'Materia Medica', Part 1 of the essay.

mentalities underwriting culture and in reshaping that mentality'.<sup>9</sup> Hence, although my choice of Anna as a subject reflects my desire to see her restored to the literary canon, I feel that she and I hold similar positions in our respective societies and I am able then to contrast Anna's lifestyle with mine, as touched on ironically in my epilogue.

Over the last twenty years or so, many historical novels have achieved the status of literary fiction, and, as Alexander Manshel suggests, it is possible that historical fiction is now the dominant form of literary fiction.<sup>10</sup> Prior to that, novels set in the historical past, although commercially successful, have tended to be classified as 'historical romance' and somehow less worthy. In this context, Georgette Heyer's period novels have been seen as both low-brow and best suited to female readers, along with 'Mills and Boon' style romantic novels. This pattern continues the tradition established in the late eighteenth century, where Gothic novels began to be viewed as reading material for literate women rather than their better-educated male counterparts.<sup>11</sup>

Biographical fiction (biofiction) is not new, but only recently has it been acknowledged as a respectable sub-genre of literary historical fiction. In 1919, Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* re-named and re-sited the character of the artist, Paul Gauguin, in order to introduce a novelistic life history, just 16 years after the artist's death. This distancing of identity allowed Maugham to simplify the story and present his subject in a way which emphasised how the expression of the artist's genius required suffering, sacrifice and considerable egocentricity on Gauguin's part, all of which characteristics can be found in Anna's history.

In 1934, Robert Graves published *I Claudius*, but as Mantel suggests, this biofiction about a Roman emperor was viewed as high-brow literature: 'you didn't taint it with the genre label [of historical romance].'<sup>12</sup> This may reflect the late 1930s influence of the Marxist philosopher, György Lukács, as Michael Lackey discusses. Lukács in his extensive study, *The Historical Novel*, dismissed biofiction as an inferior writing form: while classical historical fiction can use literary symbols to describe the forces which shape human affairs, biofiction fails in this task because it concentrates on the interior world of its subjects. To quote Lukács:

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Lackey, *Biographical Fiction : A Reader*, ed. by Michael Lackey (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), Introduction, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Manshel, *The Rise of the Recent Historical Novel*, 2017, Post45. < <https://post45.org/2017/09/the-rise-of-the-recent-historical-novel/> > [Accessed 13 May 2022].

<sup>11</sup> As parodied in Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, mentioned in Part 2 of this essay.

<sup>12</sup> Mantel, *Reith Lecture 1*.



'...the biographical *belle-lettres* of today, instead of showing the large social connections and their reflection in science and art, revel in pseudo-artistic, psychologically "deepened" portrayal of individual "occasions".<sup>13</sup> Lackey demonstrates how this socio-political judgment by Lukács has since fallen by the wayside, as other scholars have acknowledged biofiction's unique capabilities.<sup>14</sup> I would argue here that biofiction, like historical fiction, or indeed fiction in general, can employ literary symbolism to convey any philosophical message the author chooses.

James Vicars suggests that biofiction, now more in evidence than ever, has 'acted to reveal (and perhaps boosted) an openness to the representation of actual lives in fiction.'<sup>15</sup> He shows how life-writing models range from traditional non-fictional biography to highly inventive biofiction which alters historical facts and timelines to suit both the narrative and the author's intentions: an extreme example of this is seen in *Dutch: a memoir of Ronald Reagan* (1999) by Edmund Morris, where the author 'observes' his protagonist by pretending to have been a direct contemporary. This, along with postmodern stylistic features, led to much adverse criticism. Vicars advises prospective writers of biofiction that '...the reception of the book will be its own salutary warning about the need to avoid playing too fast and loose with readers' expectations.'<sup>16</sup> In comparison, my novel is conservative in its approach, aiming to maintain historical accuracy, although the writing style is less traditional, as I shall discuss later.

Mallon states that historical fiction (and by extension biofiction) is not a substitute for 'perceptively written history', which relies on 'scholarly investigation'. The historical novelist is best placed however to provide 'facts which have been lost to time, and ...a time which has been lost to facts.'<sup>17</sup> Hence lives and time periods which are not well recorded historically can be recreated. In biofiction, I would add that the extra dimension of invention permits appreciation of the world of subjects in a 'real', almost physical sense, and often in a fuller way than in non-fictional biography, even where the latter includes personal writings and intimate accounts by friends and family. The novelist's imagination, supported by intensive research,

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<sup>13</sup> György Lukács, *The Historical Novel* trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Beacon Paperback, Merlin Press, 1963), p.305. < <https://thecharnelhouse.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Georg-Luka%3Fcs-The-Historical-Novel.pdf> > [Accessed 13 May 2022].

<sup>14</sup> Michael Lackey in *Biographical Fiction, A Reader*, ed. by Michael Lackey (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), Introduction.

<sup>15</sup> James Vicars, "Life" Choices, *Deciding to use fiction in biographical writing*, Writing in Practice, Vol. 2, 2016, national association of writers in education. < <https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/wip-editions/articles/life-choices-deciding-to-use-fiction-in-biographical-writing.html> > [Accessed 13 May 2022].

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Mallon, in *Biographical Fiction, A Reader*, p. 60.

can furnish extra detail to facilitate the reader's sensory appreciation of the subject's life. As Mantel says: 'At first you are a stranger in your chosen era. But a time comes when you can walk around in a room and touch the objects. When you not only know what your characters wore but you can feel their clothes on your back.'<sup>18</sup> Using an analogy from theatre: not only do we lose the fourth wall to see the drama being enacted, but we can also experience the drama from inside the actors' bodies, through their thoughts, sensations and emotions.

Hence, rather than total historical accuracy, I see authenticity as the holy grail of the biographical novelist. Access to biographical information is necessary for the bones of a life story, but it is wider historical research which provides authentic detail to add the flesh and blood. The resulting narrative aims to immerse the reader in a past world which can be experienced and believed in, at least for the duration of the novel. This has been my intention throughout the project, to portray Anna from within, feeling the pressure of whalebone corsetry around her ribs, savouring her favourite dessert, or shivering in cold autumn air while she ponders her future as a lonely spinster.

Writing a novel about a real person, albeit not one well-known to the majority of readers, presents difficulties however. There can be conflict between a correct historical record and the dynamic needs of story-telling including emotional responses, narrative flow and a climactic arc. Readers may expect a recognisable plot with a satisfactory ending, whether happy or tragic, but such outcomes are never truly final in real life.

Hence, my first plan was for Anna to tell her story with the hindsight of old age, in a series of reminiscences, covering most of her life like a traditional biography. This offered a wealth of material but it lacked a focussed story. Also a full account in Anna's voice could have restricted the writing to a pastiche of her style, less easy for a modern reader to digest in bulk.<sup>19</sup> I chose therefore to concentrate on the early part of Anna's life, showing her struggles to achieve publication. The pivotal year of 1780 seemed to offer a more novelistic time frame, allowing reminiscences, but also a chronological story with climactic elements, although these could never be as pronounced as might be found in a fictional novel, since Anna's complex life history did not lend itself to this kind of approach.

I needed then to decide whether to change dates or other recorded facts to suit the narrative, a feature of many biographical novels (as I shall discuss below). My eventual choice

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<sup>18</sup> Mantel, *Silence Grips the Town: Reith Lecture 4*.

<sup>19</sup> As I explain later, my fictional 'Emma' letters offer a shorter and more readable imitation of Anna's style.

of year made this unnecessary, since there were minimal records of Anna's activities at the time. The important historical dates are well-recorded, and there was no advantage in changing these and other facts to improve the story. For instance, Anna's publication happened just before her mother's death, while Anna implied that her mother was opposed to her daughter's poetic aspirations: hence I allowed Anna to recruit a publisher in secret while her mother was still alive, and this fictional scenario helped to raise narrative tension. Nevertheless, my novel risked historical inaccuracy because it required a great deal of invention, although in the end this proved to be an advantage, permitting me to manufacture Anna's romantic entanglement with Darwin amongst other scenarios. More than once, however, I felt obliged to alter my narratives when new historical facts came to light, since I saw no good reason to deliberately distort Anna's history and I wanted to respect her legacy.

Another issue which can affect biofiction in particular is the use of language, both in dialogue and in writing which sets the historical scene. Without access to voice recordings or other records of contemporary speech, I found it difficult to write convincing dialogue appropriate to the period and to Anna herself. For both dialogue and Anna's 'Emma' letters it became necessary to avoid modern idioms and slang, while also simplifying Anna's hyperbolic writing style. These concerns also affected the fictional housekeeper's narrative: I wanted her to sound Welsh without leaving readers mystified by her use of Welsh language phrases. Translation was often necessary without making it too obvious, as also was careful explanation of period words such as 'negus' – a spiced wine drink.

The use of a real person's story can present problems with a novel's structure: if this is pretending to be a genuine fact-based account how did the words get onto the paper? How were the records provided and who wrote them down? In early novels this was often explained through a first-person account, or a 'history' revealed from documents or dictated to the author: Daniel Defoe's entirely fictional *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) was for many years believed to be a genuine historical record.<sup>20</sup> Alternatively, a series of letters reveals the plot, as in Richardson's *Clarissa*. In Gothic novels these devices were, and still are, fairly standard, a good modern example being *Melmoth* (2018) by Sarah Perry, which uses both letters and a discovered manuscript to authenticate the fiction. An extreme example is found in *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski (2000), where many different records, including audio

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, ed. by Paula R. Backscheider, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton & Co., 1992) essay by Louis A. Landa, 'Religion, Science and Medicine in *A Journal of the Plague Year*', pp. 269-270.

transcripts, biblical extracts, and letters are combined randomly to direct characters (and readers) into a Gothic labyrinth. My novel is in no sense Gothic, but I have nodded towards this convention by hinting at documentary evidence: Anna did, in reality, bequeath a locked cabinet containing papers to Elizabeth Smith, the daughter of Anna's close friend, John Saville. This acts as a source for my fictional anecdotal letters and for the main third-person narrative.

Overall, it seems to me that the most important decision a writer of biofiction needs to make is how much, or little, to deviate from historical records for the sake of a good story, or to project political or philosophical ideas. In my case, my writing choices gave me the freedom to invent without the need to simplify or distort historical facts in a major way, unlike some of the novels I shall mention in the next section. I was fortunate, too, that I did not have to anticipate negative criticism from Anna's family and friends, a problem sometimes for biofiction set in the recent past.<sup>21</sup>

### **Literature Resources: past and present-day**

A seminal work in the field of biofiction is Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000): Carey's central character is a late 19<sup>th</sup> century criminal and murderer who is eventually brought to justice, but whose impoverished family background exonerates his actions in many ways. This first-person account by Kelly himself is presented Gothic-style, as an epistolary record, 'discovered' in an archive, letters to his daughter along with newspaper cuttings. Vernacular language and limited punctuation emphasise Kelly's lack of education, but also act to authenticate Carey's 'true' history. Unlike many authors, Carey did not discuss the fictional aspects of his novel in his Afterword, although he has since explained that he was able to access the 'Jerilderie letter', an archived letter written by Kelly himself giving some of his life history.<sup>22</sup> My novel bears little resemblance to Carey's work but I do make use of 'vernacular' passages in the sections which represent Matty, the housekeeper. Also, Carey imitates the Kelly letters in pastiche form, and this is how I have constructed Anna's reminiscence narrative.

Colm Tóibín's biofiction, *The Master* (2004), tells the life story of the author, Henry James. The chapters are set over a period of five years later in James's life, and his activities

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<sup>21</sup> Anna's frank biography of Erasmus Darwin, discussed later, caused considerable offence to his family.

<sup>22</sup> Radhika Jones, in *The Paris Review* (undated). < <http://petercareybooks.com/life/paris-review/> > [Accessed 13 May 2022]. Also in a 2010 interview with Ben Evans, Carey talks about his 'colossal freedom to invent' and how he goes 'to the past to illuminate the present, but also to make up weird shit'. < [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/an-interview-with-author-b\\_751473](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/an-interview-with-author-b_751473) > [Accessed 13 May 2022].

generate past memories, along with inspiration for his work. In his Afterword, Tóibín admits, almost apologetically, to having incorporated a significant amount of James's written material. Throughout, James is kept at arm's length, so that he seems an intensely private person, perhaps emotionally repressed, although we can sense more beneath this detachment. To some extent, this has been my treatment of Anna, since her emotional life seems to be filtered through her poetry rather than expressed freely in her personal letters. Like Tóibín, I have used a limited time period for 'present-day' action, while there is emphasis on the development of my subject's writings and how they relate to memories.

*The Gallows Pole* (2017), by Benjamin Myers, is a partially epistolary biofiction, and to some extent echoes Carey's *True History*, in that Hartley, the leader of a gang of coin counterfeiters, writes down his story in dense Yorkshire dialect with minimal punctuation, in between sections of third-person narration. I found these first-person sections difficult to tune into, however, unlike Carey's 'Kelly letters'. Hence Matty's first-person account in my novel echoes this style, but it has been 'improved' by the educated daughter who makes the record.

Margaret Forster's *Lady's Maid* (1990) is another example of biofiction which augments the third-person narrative with letters purportedly written by Wilson, a real maid in the household of the poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The letters are constructed in the semi-literate style of a servant, while the book is more about the life story of Wilson than about the mistress to whom she is obsessively dedicated. Forster's Afterword details the fictional aspects of the novel, including the letters, but justifies these inventions with historical evidence, namely the letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself. Forster also adds a short summary of Wilson's life history beyond the scope of the book. My fictional 'Matty' narrative is subsidiary to Anna's history, but it gives a biographical account of Matty herself, intended to compare and contrast the circumstances of mistress and servant, much as Forster does.

Mantel's literary biofiction has been inspirational in the way that she offers authentic period detail alongside both the 'masculine' concerns of politics and war and the 'feminine' concerns of childbirth and domesticity, 'history driven over the bodies of women' as Claire Armitstead says.<sup>23</sup> Mantel's novel, *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), is a mammoth undertaking in both physical scale and in the history covered. It uses several voices, male and female, and a variety of writing styles, to give a chronological account of the French Revolution. It includes

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<sup>23</sup> Claire Armitstead, 'Hilary Mantel: 'Being a novelist is no fun. But fun isn't high on my list'', *Guardian*, 4 October 2020. < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/04/hilary-mantel-wolf-hall-mantel-pieces> > [accessed 18 October 2021].

major political events, along with domestic details, especially for the women caught up in the upheaval. Mantel's Cromwell trilogy (2009 onwards) employs a single voice, however, that of Cromwell himself, experiencing the political machinations of Henry VIII's Court through his own life story and the women with whom he interacts. My novel does not aspire to a historical Diorama on this scale, but the effects of war and social unrest are shown to impinge on Anna's life to some degree. Like Mantel and others, I have manufactured plausible scenarios and details of daily living in keeping with the historical record and I have created the characters of servants, who are otherwise rarely represented in historical documents.

By contrast, Heyer's Georgian and Regency historical romances have remained in print for nearly a century, with short, fictional narratives in Gothic style, featuring abductions, cross-dressing and rags-to-riches endings, not unlike original eighteenth-century novels such as those of Samuel Richardson. The detail offered by Heyer demonstrates meticulous research, and as Margaret Drabble says: '[Heyer's] sense of period is superb, her heroines enterprising, and her heroes dashing.'<sup>24</sup> As a source of eighteenth-century detail, Heyer's *These Old Shades* is invaluable, although the period slang can feel overdone. Certainly, I can identify Heyer's 'enterprising heroine' as a female character who is able to take some control of her own life, as did Anna Seward.

Anna enjoyed contemporary novels, including Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (published mid-century), perhaps an unconventional choice for a cleric's daughter, because of its sexual innuendo. In a mid-1770s letter to her friend, Mrs Sykes, she paraphrases 'Uncle Toby', a character from *Tristram Shandy* and his comment about another character, Le Fever, who 'shall not die'.<sup>25</sup> Likewise Anna often refers to Richardson's popular novel, *Clarissa* (1748) in her letters. She is also likely to have read Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), along with Henry Fielding's clever parody, *Joseph Andrews*, (1742). As a modern reader, I find the archaic language of these novels a challenge to decipher, but rich in authentic detail. More accessible are the early nineteenth-century novels of Jane Austen, and I suspect that some of my language inflections and humour may reflect Austen's ironic style. When I re-read *Persuasion* (1817), however, I was surprised to find that Austen included very little detail of dress, travel, food, nor even the practicalities of bathing in Bath, the novel's setting. Perhaps Austen's readers, familiar with the mundanity of daily life and not wanting to

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<sup>24</sup> Margaret Drabble, cover-notes for Georgette Heyer, *These Old Shades* (London: Arrow Books, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Letter to Mrs Sykes, undated, Lichfield, Samuel Johnson Birthplace Museum (SJ BM) Seward collection, MS 2001. 72.9. The story of 'Le Fever' can be found in Laurence Sterne, *The Life & Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, (London: Penguin English Library, 1967) p. 411.

be reminded of larger world events, were more interested in the romantic affairs of Austen's women. Fortunately, I was able to illustrate Anna's Bath story through exploration of the city's historical sites. Later I reviewed the BBC film of *Persuasion*, where the ladies are seen wading in the hot baths, swathed in canvas robes and feathered headgear, like 'a graceful flotilla of exotic water birds'.<sup>26</sup>

In this context, I find that Anna rarely presents the trivia of everyday life in her letters, since much of the writing was intended for a higher purpose, her literary criticism. Her co-correspondents mostly knew each other, and had first-hand experience of the discomfort of corsets and coach travel. Perhaps the exception is the regular mention of illness and its treatment, for health was hugely important. Her letters also act as 'hatch, match and despatch' records, as she itemises the life events of her various friends and acquaintances.

I have studied several other modern historical novels set in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

*Life Mask* (2004), a biofiction by Emma Donohue, takes place in the 1790s. Eliza Farren, an actress, is courted by the twelfth Earl of Derby, who is estranged from his wife and tries to persuade Eliza to become his mistress. She values her independence however, supporting herself with her acting. She finally agrees to consummate the relationship by marriage after Derby is widowed, by which time Eliza's acting career is waning. The third main protagonist is Ann Damer, aristocratic niece of Horace Walpole, the author. A talented sculptress, Damer is unable to pursue a career professionally as a woman. She is also tainted by rumours of Sapphism (lesbianism) but eventually settles into a lesbian relationship and retires into obscurity. *Life Mask* is constructed chronologically, using male and female voices in free indirect style and, like Mantel's historical novels it visits both the 'masculine' world of politics and the 'feminine' world of its female characters. The lesbian aspects of the novel relate to Anna's story in that it has been asserted that she had lesbian tendencies because of her close attachment to her foster-sister, Honora.<sup>27</sup>

Another novel set in the late eighteenth-century is *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock* (2018) by Imogen Hermes Gowar. This non-biographical novel also examines the importance of marriage for women in that era. We meet Angelica, a fictional courtesan, who faces ruin

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<sup>26</sup> *Persuasion*, dir. by Roger Michell (BBC Films, 1995) [DVD]. The 'graceful flotilla' is described in my novel, *Portrait of a Muse*, p. 164.

<sup>27</sup> This assertion is discussed in Part 2 of the essay

when she loses her patron. She is at the mercy of her bawd until she attracts a lonely widower, a merchant who makes his fortune through the acquisition of a fake mermaid. Angelica is able to leave her past behind to settle into marriage, the only kind of long-term security available to her. By means of a present-tense narrative, we experience the voices of both Angelica, and her eventual husband. The novel features also a genuine mermaid, captured at sea, another female at the mercy of the masculine world, but with mysterious powers to generate despondency until she is allowed to escape. In my novel, the sad mermaid has reappeared in Anna's mind as a candidate for Mr Greene's Museum of Curiosities in Lichfield.<sup>28</sup>

*Birdcage Walk* by Helen Dunmore (2017), has elements of a murder mystery, featuring 1790s Bristol, where the fictional middle-class female protagonist is trapped in a mercenary and abusive marriage to a property developer who has murdered his first wife. The second wife gives a first-person account while a 'frame' story, using an archived document, allows the novel to offer biographical information about a real bluestocking writer, Julia Fawkes Gleeson.

Another novel by Emma Donohue, *Slammerkin* (2011), takes place in 1760s Monmouth, where the real-life Mary Saunders becomes a prostitute through abuse and social deprivation, until she is taken into service. She eventually reacts against her situation by murdering her mistress. In a free indirect narrative, we hear Mary's version of events. Similarly, in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), set in 1840's Canada, a non-fictional female servant has survived childhood deprivation only to face lifelong imprisonment for the murder of her employers. She appears powerless and yet is able to manipulate the male doctor who is sent to examine her history and prove her innocence. Her story is told in a first-person account, but also from the third-person viewpoint of the doctor. Both these books create life histories for women marginalised by poverty and class, like Matty in my novel.

Stevie Davies, in *Awakening* (2013), set mid-nineteenth-century, utilises the voices of two fictional sisters, one conventional and subservient to the male leaders of a religious sect, the other woman more free-thinking, but terminally ill: the politics of nonconformist religion are featured and I echo this a little through Anna's encounters with her Baptist relatives and Methodism.

Finally, I should mention Philippa Gregory's *A Respectable Trade* (1995), the 1780s story of a fictional Bristol merchant who takes a wife, Frances, for her aristocratic connections

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<sup>28</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 11, after Anna's visit to Greene's Museum.



although she is penniless; she develops feelings for Mehuru, a household slave, while she observes the horror of the slave trade, much as she recognises that she too is bound by the slavery of her marriage.<sup>29</sup> The voices of both Mehuru and Frances are used to create free indirect narratives.

As in several of the above novels by female writers, I portray a woman struggling to achieve relative independence, following the theme of women as enslaved creatures, subject to patriarchal control and without civil rights, although they may be allowed to escape in one way or another. This gender bias might have been predicted by Jerome De Groot, who discusses how, in the past, popular historical fiction has been divided: historical romance, written by women for women, has featured female characters in domestic settings, sometimes aristocratic, whereas historical adventure, written by men for male readers, has portrayed the heroic (and violent) exploits of male characters.<sup>30</sup> This division has since been eroded by the advent of literary historical fiction, as exemplified by many of the modern novels I have mentioned.

The novels discussed also demonstrate some of the styles which can be used to produce biographical and historical fiction, along with the variation in the amount of fictional content and historical distortion, often difficult to define. Some of the novels are biographical, where the main protagonists are real historical subjects supported by fictional characters. The central character(s) have been selected for a variety of reasons, but often because of their fame and/or infamy. Cromwell and Henry VIII are well-known from our school history books, the murdering servant women in *Slammerkin* and *Alias Grace* are not, but all of these biographical subjects are able to offer insights into social history, along with the inner lives of the people responsible for making it.

I have chosen Anna as a subject for reasons I have already given, but my portrayal of her through biofiction resuscitates her in a way which would perhaps be limited in a traditional biography. As Irving Stone says, a life suitable for this fictional treatment needs to have 'specific dramatic elements...themes of conflict and accomplishment'.<sup>31</sup> Anna is provincial, middle-class, overweight and unglamorous, but she experiences conflict in abundance, and is able to accomplish the writing success she desires. Most importantly, she stands up for herself in a patriarchal society where the generally accepted view was that women had inferior

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<sup>29</sup> The concept of marriage as a form of slavery is echoed by Anna in Chapter 1 of my novel.

<sup>30</sup> Jerome De Groot, *The Historical Novel* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), Chapter 3.

<sup>31</sup> Irving Stone, 'The Biographical Novel' from *Three Views of the Novel* (1957) in Lackey, *A biographical Reader*, p. 117.

intelligence and were fit only for breeding and home-making. This attitude was still prevalent when I trained in Medicine half a century ago, although, as one of a minority of female medical students, I was given the chance to alter these perceptions for the next generation.

## **Finding Anna**

### **1. Letters**

Although I first met Anna in Dublin, she probably never visited Ireland. She was born in the English village of Eyam in Derbyshire on December 12<sup>th</sup> 1742, moved with her family to the small cathedral city of Lichfield in Staffordshire as a child, and stayed there for the rest of her life, although she made occasional forays to other parts of England and Wales, especially the spa towns of Matlock, Buxton, and Bath, all referred to in her letters. In more peaceful times I think she would have loved to visit Europe, but through the letters of friends she enjoyed armchair travel, especially to the Vaucluse area in France, the fourteenth-century home of one of her favourite poets, Petrarch.<sup>32</sup>

Anna's letters acted as the mainstay of communication with family and friends afar, since travel was difficult and at times dangerous in horse-drawn transport, as illustrated in my description of the Lichfield to London stage-coach journey as it might have been in the depths of winter.<sup>33</sup> In addition, letters operated as a form of bush telegraph, with news from one friend copied into a letter for another to save time and postage. Anna also recorded her reading habits and her literary criticism, a practice apparently encouraged by her father, Thomas. I was able to transcribe an early letter to Anna from Thomas, and established that the work under discussion was Matthew Prior's 1707 poem, *Henry and Emma*, which is important in the context of Anna's verse-novel, *Louisa*.<sup>34</sup> This connection I shall discuss later.

Soon after Anna's first major literary success with *Elegy on Captain Cook*, in 1780, Anna began to copy her letters into letter-books before despatching them to favoured recipients. Seeing herself as an important poet and literary critic, she created an epistolary legacy which she could also edit at a later date if she chose. Hence she captured some of the social history of her times, from her own experiences and those of her friends and family. Anna bequeathed her

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<sup>32</sup> The Vaucluse is mentioned in several letters in *Letters*, Vol. I. Anna liked to relay poetic descriptions of scenery and other delights as she gathered them in from the correspondence of her travelling friends.

<sup>33</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 2.

<sup>34</sup> Letter from Thomas Seward to 'Nancy' (undated), SJBMS 2001.71.43.

letter-books to Arthur Constable in Edinburgh, to be released over several years. Instead they were subjected to considerable tactical editing and all were published together in 1811, the six volumes sanitised often to the point of banality. This was presumably because references to living persons were sensitive, but also because Anna's work was seen as unfashionable in the new century.<sup>35</sup>

Most of the remaining original letters are scattered round the world, where Anna is fostered as a passenger in the archives of contemporaries. The Covid19 pandemic has limited my access considerably, but I have been able to examine letters in Dublin, The Cadbury Collection in Birmingham, a few in Derbyshire Records Office, and a small archive at the Samuel Johnson Birthplace Museum in Lichfield: the latter repository is ironic since Anna disliked Johnson (an aversion I have employed extensively in my novel). There are very few original documents remaining from before 1780, notably an unpublished collection of letters to two close friends, Dorothy Sykes and Mary Powys, written in the 1770s, and the juvenile journal, 'Letters to Emma'.<sup>36</sup> At the Johnson Museum, I was also able to transcribe Anna's handwritten draft of her poem *A Receipt for a Sweet Jar* which differs from the published version in several details.<sup>37</sup> It was a delight too to see Anna's mourning ring for her sister, Sarah, who died in 1764.<sup>38</sup>

## 2. Biographies

Anna Seward died in 1809, aged 66, leaving behind more than 360 published poems, her verse-novel *Louisa*, and biographical writing and translation. Walter Scott was entrusted with the poems, some of which had short explanatory notes by Anna herself. She corresponded regularly with him towards the end of her life and he visited her in Lichfield. In his biographical notes he outlines her life history and describes her physical appearance, and the beauty still apparent in old age: 'the regularity of her features, the fire and expression of her countenance... Her eyes

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<sup>35</sup> Teresa Barnard, *Anna Seward, A Constructed Life*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 13-14. Google ebook.

<sup>36</sup> The Powys and Sykes Letters, MS Seward Collection, SJBM.

The 'Emma' letters were published by Walter Scott with Anna's poems. The original letters have been recovered and the redacted parts restored by Teresa Barnard in: Anna Seward, *Anna Seward's Journal and Sermons*, ed. by Barnard (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

<sup>37</sup> The process of drafting this poem features in Chapter 3 of *Portrait*.

<sup>38</sup> See photo of the ring in Appendix II. The ring is described at the end of *Portrait*, p. 210.

were auburn of the precise shade and hue of her hair.<sup>39</sup> He was less enthusiastic about the poetry, however, decrying Anna's fondness for ornamentation and 'compound epithets'.<sup>40</sup>

Apart from Scott's short notes, there have been a number of biographical studies of Anna, beginning with an 1809 obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine* which damned her work with faint praise: 'Her poetry is particularly distinguished by beauty of imagery and vigour of sentiment; yet we do not totally acquit it from the charge of occasional affectation.'<sup>41</sup>

In 1837, Anna was mentioned in *Lives of Eminent and Illustrious Englishmen*, along with a handful of other women, including the writers Elizabeth Carter and Mary Wollstonecraft, and Sarah Siddons, the tragic actress. These fortunate ladies were promoted temporarily to masculinity alongside several thousand famous men.<sup>42</sup>

Following that, Anna seems to have been largely ignored, until Edward Lucas took up her story in 1907, describing her 'pontifical confidence, her floridity and her sentimentalism'.<sup>43</sup> This was followed, in 1909, by Stapleton Martin, who gives a shorter, more sympathetic account but describes Anna as affected by conceit, 'for the three things that might have corrected it were all lacking: poverty, London life, and marriage'.<sup>44</sup>

In a more extensive biography of 1931, Margaret Ashmun portrays Anna as a woman out of kilter, condemned by her gender but also 'too much flattery within a limited circle'. Anna was someone who, in more modern times, could have become 'a preceptress of a girl's school' and 'an ardent ally of the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals'.<sup>45</sup> I cannot help but smile at this 1930s picture of an independent single woman. In the present day I would probably expect Anna to be the Principal of an Oxford college, or even a foreign correspondent for the BBC.

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<sup>39</sup> Anna Seward, *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward with Extracts from her Literary Correspondence*, 3 vols, ed. by Walter Scott (Edinburgh 1810), I, pp. xxxiv – xxxv. Google ebook.

<<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=KEE1AAAAMAAJ&pg=GBS.PR22>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. xxv.

<sup>41</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine, and Historical Chronicle, London, (GM)* (April 1809), Vol. LXXIX, (pp. 378-379) pp. 402-403. Google ebook.

<<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=5hY3AAAAAYAAJ&pg=GBS.PA378>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>42</sup> 'Anna Seward', *Lives of Eminent and Illustrious Englishmen from Alfred the Great to Latest Times*, ed. by George Godfrey Cunningham, (Glasgow: Fullarton & Co, 1837) Vol VIII, (pp.157-160), pp.152-155. Google ebook. <[https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=C\\_ExAQAAIAAJ&pg=GBS.PP8&hl=en](https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=C_ExAQAAIAAJ&pg=GBS.PP8&hl=en)> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>43</sup> Edward Lucas, *A Swan and Her Friends*, (London: Methuen, 1907), p. 2. Internet Archive ebook. <<https://archive.org/details/swanherfriends00lucarich>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>44</sup> Stapleton Martin, *Anna Seward and Classic Lichfield* (Worcester, 1909, repr. Dodo Press), p. 29.

<sup>45</sup> Margaret Ashmun, *The Singing Swan* (New York: Greenwood, first repr. 1968), p. 281.

Hesketh Pearson followed closely in 1936 with a selection of her letters. His enthusiastic biographical notes describe Anna, as ‘an honest and courageous human being’ although he comments disparagingly about her ‘unreadable criticisms’.<sup>46</sup>

In 2009, Teresa Barnard published *Anna Seward, A Constructed Life*, piecing together a much fuller account of Anna’s life using published and unpublished letters, along with critical analysis of Anna’s work. Barnard’s biography demonstrates how Anna constructed her own life story through the legacy she left behind, modified and redacted by her own hand and by her editors, and not always true to the accounts of others who knew her.

Marion Roberts, in her 2010 M.Litt. thesis, *Close Encounters: Anna Seward, 1742-1809, A Woman in Provincial Cultural Life*, supplements Barnard’s work with local detail, a chronology of Anna’s life events and a full transcript of Anna’s Will. I was later able to read the Will itself in the British Library, along with the much shorter Will of Anna’s father, Thomas, who bequeathed Anna his entire estate, thus ensuring her financial independence after his death in 1790.

Claudia Kairoff’s *Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century* (2012) augments Barnard’s biography, and offers a critical study of Anna’s work along with further context regarding Anna’s place in the literary canon.

Although Anna never wrote an autobiography, her 1804 *Life of Erasmus Darwin* cleverly incorporates information about herself, along with criticism of Darwin’s poetry as exhaustive as the anatomical dissections he carried out in his cellar. Later on, however, her unflattering descriptions of Darwin offended his family. Anna also supplied Boswell with anecdotal material critical of Johnson, the ‘literary Colossus’, but this was at a time when Johnson was being canonised.<sup>47</sup> It is of note perhaps that both Darwin and Johnson have their own museums in Lichfield, while Johnson is also resurrected in marble in Lichfield’s market square, along with his acolyte, Boswell. These honours, awarded to famous sons of Lichfield, seem at present unlikely to be awarded to its most famous daughter, Anna Seward.

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<sup>46</sup> Hesketh Pearson, *The Swan of Lichfield, a selection from the correspondence of Anna Seward* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1936), p. 10.

<sup>47</sup> One of a number of ironic nicknames she awarded Johnson. ‘Literary colossus’ in: Letter to Rev T.S Whalley, Nov 1784, in *Letters*, I, p.10. Johnson was staying in Lichfield at the time and causing Anna much heartache because she saw that he was dying, but at the same time she could not abide his literary opinions.

### Anna and the literary world.

In the late eighteenth century, the first step to publication of poetry, as now, was often to submit to the literary journals, and to follow on with long poems or poetry collections published privately or by sponsorship. There were several such journals, including *The Gentleman's Magazine*, which featured monthly poetry pages in Latin and English, usually anonymous or accredited to male authors. It is difficult to establish how often female poets were featured, but occasionally 'from a lady' might hint at penwomanship, suggesting that it was unusual for women to publish openly. These magazines featured history, politics and literary criticism, and were clearly intended for male readers, gentlemen with a classical education. Once Anna became famous, however, she published poems and criticism in these journals, and under her own name, while she was often referred to as 'The Swan of Lichfield' and 'Queen Muse of Britain'.

For women there was a sister journal, *The Lady's Magazine*, which was preoccupied with fashion, royal gossip, serialised novels, and guidance on good wifely conduct, along with sentimental poetry, songs and condensed reports on history and politics, but no literary criticism. In my novel, therefore, Anna is shown to have little affection for such publications. One might consider here how present-day 'red-top' magazines have continued the 'women's interest' traditions started more than two centuries ago.

Alongside *The Lady's Magazine* there were various annual ladies' 'pocket-books', portable diaries which carried 'enigmas' (word puzzles), theatrical ballads, and the fashionable dances I describe at Anna's Subscription Ball in February 1780.<sup>48</sup> I was surprised to find, however, that an engraving of Richard Samuel's painting, *The Nine Muses of Great Britain*, celebrating the achievements of famous contemporary women, prefaced the *Ladies New and Polite Pocket Memorandum Book for 1778*.<sup>49</sup> As Stephen Colclough discusses, however, these pocket-books were primarily designed to promote feminine domesticity, functioning also as note-books for recipes, household accounts and memoranda.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *The Ladies' Own Memorandum-Book or, Pocket Journal for the Year 1780* (London: G. Robinson, 1780). Google ebook. <[https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=k\\_Qhj1X2ZkAC&pg=GBS.PP10&hl=en](https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=k_Qhj1X2ZkAC&pg=GBS.PP10&hl=en)> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>49</sup> See Appendix II for image. The painting is also discussed in Part 2 of this essay. *The 1778 Pocketbook: Elizabeth Eger, and Lucy Peltz, Brilliant Women, 18<sup>th</sup> Century Bluestockings* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2008), p.62.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Colclough, 'Pocket Books and Portable Writing: The Pocket Memorandum Book in Eighteenth-Century England and Wales', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 45, 'The History of the Book' (2015), 159-177 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/yearengstud.45.2015.0159> [accessed 18 October 2021].

Despite publishing issues, a considerable number of eighteenth-century women achieved recognition as writers, well before the ‘greats’ of the Regency and early Victorian era, Austen and the Bronte sisters: Anne Radcliffe (1764-1823) wrote best-selling Gothic novels, building on a tradition established by Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* of 1764; Catharine Macaulay (1731-1791) (cameoed several times in my novel) published her masterpiece, *The History of England from the Accession of James I to that of the Brunswick Line*, in eight volumes from 1763 to 1783. She was in competition with eminent male historians of the times, including Edward Gibbon with his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789). I was certainly aware of Gibbon in my schooldays, but not Macaulay.

This was the era of early feminist writing: Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, a work praised by Anna several times in her letters; Mary Robinson (1757-1800), the first mistress of the future king, George IV, published *Thoughts on the Condition of Women, and on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* in 1799; the pious and unmarried Hannah More (1745-1833) advocated better education for women, decrying fashion and frippery, but she believed that female education should foster harmonious marriage, as well as equipping women for domestic life: ‘The profession of ladies, to which the best of their instruction should be turned, is that of daughters, wives, mothers, and mistresses of families.’<sup>51</sup> I am not sure that Anna would have agreed entirely with More’s precepts, although Anna accepted her own domestic responsibilities as an only daughter.

More wrote stage plays, as did Hannah Cowley (1743-1809): *The Belle’s Stratagem* was premiered in 1780, as I describe in Anna’s second trip to London.<sup>52</sup> This was a parody of George Farquhar’s *Beaux’ Stratagem* of 1707 with a feminine twist. Successful ‘poetesses’ included Charlotte Smith (1749-1806) and Charlotte Lennox (1730-1804): Anna praised Lennox but she disapproved of Smith’s literary style.<sup>53</sup> Mid-century onwards, Elizabeth Montagu (1718-1800) and her friend, Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806), (famous for her translation of Epictetus, the Greek philosopher), were holding literary salons and had begun to be labelled ‘bluestockings’.

What do we retain of this fruitful era of female accomplishment? Mainly the word ‘bluestocking’, which is thought to relate to the dress favoured by Benjamin Stillingfleet, a

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<sup>51</sup> Hannah More, (1799) *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* Vol 1. Fifth edition (London: T.W. Cadell jun. & W. Davies, 1809), p. 107. Google ebook.

<<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=bqQTAAAAIAAJ&pg=GBS.PR2>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>52</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 4.

<sup>53</sup> Barnard, *Constructed Life*, p. 149.

member of the Montagu salon, who wore the blue stockings of the labouring classes rather than fine white silk.<sup>54</sup> Here we see the covert and later overt condemnation of female intellectuals. Before long 'bluestockings' became a derogatory term for women who stepped outside the usual boundaries of female education and social interaction.<sup>55</sup>

As a bluestocking herself, Anna occupies the middle ground perhaps, not part of the Montagu salon, and never making public pronouncements on female education or Robinson's 'subjugation' and yet demonstrating through her own education and work that an intelligent woman could challenge the predominantly masculine world of the Literati.

### **Writing Anna**

As I have mentioned above, my chosen structure, using four narrative strands, allows different parts of Anna's life to be sampled, but I concentrate on a single pivotal year to focus on important elements of her story: her transition from obscurity to literary fame, alongside the social and biological pressures which dictated she should marry and have children. Here her relationship with Darwin operates as a 'last chance' scenario.

The main third-person free indirect narrative describes aspects of Anna's daily life, coloured by Anna's own perspectives and emotions: here the use of present-historic tense adds immediacy, away from traditional past-tense story-telling. Alongside this, first-person reminiscences are inserted as letters from Anna to an imaginary friend, 'Emma': this epistolary style is found in eighteenth-century novels, and it mimics Anna's semi-fictional juvenile letters, but in a simpler form. A third narrative strand is a series of first-person semi-dialect reminiscences made after Anna's death by the fictional housekeeper, Matty (who borrows the name of Mary Atkins, the housekeeper awarded an annuity in Anna's Will). These reminiscences are tailored to Matty's educational level and are presented as a 'dictated' account to avoid the possible pitfalls of having her make a written diary when only semi-literate.<sup>56</sup> Finally, a short present-historic tense epilogue is added in universal narration, closing Anna's story and describing the setting for Matty's account. Throughout, I have utilised Anna's poems as chapter headings and also within the text, to demonstrate aspects of her story. I have also

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<sup>54</sup> Eger & Peltz, p. 29.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, pp. 127-133.

<sup>56</sup> Conversely, Wilson, in Forster's *Lady's Maid*, is deemed able to write letters to friends and family.



included a Petrarchan sonnet which is entirely fictional, a pastiche of Anna's work. For obvious reasons, this has to be consigned to the floor of her dressing room.<sup>57</sup>

This multiple narrative approach can be criticised in a number of ways, but perhaps mainly because the novel's flow and pace is interrupted by the changes between sections. I would defend this by saying that I have chosen to present an interlinked 'patchwork' of Anna's life and character rather than a more traditional continuous narrative. The third-person Anna account provides elements of climactic drama, firstly with the publication success and secondly with the failed Darwin relationship, demonstrating the importance of Irving Stone's 'conflicts and accomplishments'. Matty's story is also deliberately piecemeal, to reflect the random nature of her memories, but she too has experienced the dramas of life.

Both the main narrative and Matty's reminiscences reconstruct thirteen calendar months, from December 1779 to December 1780, to include Anna's first nationally successful publication as well as the deaths of Honora Sneyd/Edgeworth, Anna's foster-sister, and two months later, Elizabeth Seward, Anna's mother. I have taken Anna into a series of imagined but plausible scenarios, while her 'Emma' letters give past-life anecdotes which formed her character and inspired her work.<sup>58</sup> I have utilised historically recorded events: war abroad, the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots, the summer exhibition at the new Royal Academy, and the deaths of Major André and Captain Cook. Here I should add that Anna's *Elegy on Captain Cook* appeared only a few months after the news of Cook's death reached London, and the poem's success was undoubtedly aided by the patriotic fervour engendered by various military defeats at the time.

Included also are local events: the subscription balls and concerts, the advertised visit by the conjuror, Sieur Boaz, in April, and the Lichfield Bower festival at Whitsuntide.<sup>59</sup> I have taken Anna on regular walks to the Stowe Pool to observe seasonal changes and demonstrate her dislike of winter and her love of nature. A lonely swan becomes a metonym for Anna herself, while the old willow tree symbolises Samuel Johnson. Its descendant still overlooks the Stowe Pool in Lichfield and sheds its bark and twigs on the path, and it is easy to see how

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<sup>57</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 3, pp. 36, 42.

<sup>58</sup> Appendix I lists the sources for these anecdotes.

<sup>59</sup> Boaz advertisement in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* (April 1780) Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, MS DR331/2/1.

The Bower festival is still celebrated annually in Lichfield.

it must have dominated the landscape in Anna's time, as 'the Colossus' also dominated the literary world.

I have accompanied Anna on three trips to London in 1780, to visit her publisher, and also to meet up covertly with John Saville, bearing in mind the 1772 scandal about their relationship.<sup>60</sup> Carefully chaperoned by elderly aunts, Saville accompanies Anna to theatre plays where she remembers the recently deceased actor, David Garrick. Anna certainly enjoyed live theatre: in 1786 she admired Sarah Siddons, the great tragic actress, although insisting in her usual forthright way that Siddons did not suit Shakespeare's comedy role of Rosalind.<sup>61</sup>

A serendipitous discovery was the Hall family, resident on London Bridge. Eleanor Hall's death was announced by church bells on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1780, when I had fortuitously placed Anna in the vicinity, to attend *Perdita and Florizel* at Drury Lane Theatre.<sup>62</sup> This family's history was uncovered randomly online, through *The Georgian Gentleman*, a biography of Richard Hall by his descendant, Mike Rendell, inspired by a treasure chest of original documents inherited from his ancestor. Eleanor, Richard Hall's wife (née Seward), was Anna's cousin and Richard liked to send oysters to Anna's family at Christmas. Rendell's book revealed a whole clan of Seward relatives, including 'wicked Uncle William', the Methodist martyr, and his daughter Grace Roberts, née Seward: In the 1780s Anna visited a Roberts family in north Wales, where she was introduced to 'The Ladies of Llangollen'. Grace's children were named in Anna's Will, as was the Hall family, and I was thrilled to read some of Anna's original letters to Richard Hall, thanking him for oysters.<sup>63</sup>

Anna's characterisation developed through biographical research, while I used many other sources to provide details of contemporary daily living. John Mullan highlights the importance of this kind of trivial detail 'the clutter of life' in making a novel believable.<sup>64</sup> Hence weather, food, clothing and local information are used to enhance both settings and mood. Anna enjoys contemporary food dishes while she agonises about weight gain, and natural phenomena such as moon phases and eclipses, along with weather conditions, serve to add emotional dimensions to my novel. Details of household items and period dress also add

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<sup>60</sup> Barnard, *Constructed Life*, p. 86.

<sup>61</sup> *Letters*, I, (p. 165), p. 159 ebook.

<sup>62</sup> *Perdita and Florizel* was listed for Drury Lane in January 1780: *GM*, (p. 9), p. xvii ebook. Another serendipitous find was that this was also the date when news of Captain Cook's death seems to have been reported in the London press: *Captain James Cook 1728-1779*, <<https://www.captcook-ne.co.uk/ccne/timeline/voyage3.htm>> [accessed 11 August 2021].

<sup>63</sup> Derbyshire Records Office, MS D7676. Bag C.

<sup>64</sup> John Mullan, *How Novels Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 190.

authenticity but, like Johnson's willow, can function in a metonymic way, to demonstrate character traits or to represent the themes of my book. Here Mrs Seward's Chinese dragon vase echoes the fierce, dominant nature of its owner; Matty's Staffordshire pottery cat with its broken ear illustrates her vulnerability through the sad memories of her lost lover and the birth of her child; the old coral-stemmed baby's rattle in the nursery represents both Matty's lost child and the child Anna longs for.

Thus my novel incorporates elements associated with postmodern writing as discussed by David Lodge.<sup>65</sup> I employ pastiche and fragmentation, with intertextual referencing between the different narratives, and with Anna's letters and poems. My use of metonymy also allies with postmodern tropes. Nevertheless, I feel that my novel lacks the self-consciousness of twentieth and twenty-first century postmodern fiction, or even its distinguished forerunner, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.<sup>66</sup> My novel is highly structured and features a variety of styles, but it is founded in realism. Designed to be accessible to modern readers, it carries, nevertheless, echoes of eighteenth-century fiction and memoir. This fusion of styles, ancient and modern, respects Anna's seminal work, her experimental verse-novel *Louisa*: I shall discuss *Louisa* in the second part of this essay.

### **The Welsh connection**

Barnard suggests that there may have been a family rift relating to (Uncle) William Seward's conversion to Methodism because Anna's father, Thomas, disapproved of non-conformist sects.<sup>67</sup> This has given me a useful novelistic mechanism: a family secret which is revealed in the last chapter and tidies up loose ends, including the mystery of the origins of Welsh Matty, the fictional housekeeper:

Anna's grandfather, John Seward, was Land Steward for the Earls of Plymouth, who had extensive estates in south Wales, and I soon discovered that Anna's father, Thomas, had his first 'living' as Rector at Llanmaes, a village in Glamorgan close to my home. His brother, William, may have visited nearby Cowbridge on family business, and later on a preaching tour with the Methodists.<sup>68</sup> Hence the character of Matty was born, as the illegitimate child of

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<sup>65</sup> David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing, Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, 1979) Chapter 8 'Postmodernist Fiction' pp. 220-245.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 240.

<sup>67</sup> Barnard, *Constructed Life*, p. 37.

<sup>68</sup> Eric W. Dykes, *Seward Family of Badsey near Evesham*, <<https://dmbi.online/index.php?do=app.entry&id=2441>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

Jennett, housekeeper at the Llanmaes Rectory. One might assume that Matty is Thomas Seward's daughter, but at the end of the novel, in an 'O Henry' twist, I reveal that William, had a (fictional) affair with Matty's mother before his last preaching tour and subsequent martyrdom. Thomas later rescues Matty from the Cowbridge poorhouse to appease his conscience but without acknowledging her as his niece. This practice of taking poorhouse inmates into service was common in middle-class and upper households, as also was the employment of impoverished relatives.<sup>69</sup>

I created Mallte, known as Matty, as a secondary narrator, to supplement Anna's story but also to describe life below stairs in an upper middle-class Georgian residence. This extra dimension revealed the class differences which allowed Anna to be a writer, free from the drudgery of coal fires and cleaning in a house with no piped water supply and the minimum of domestic appliances.

Matty has her own life story to tell, and it was through this that I came to realise how, as a servant, her chances of marriage and childbirth would be severely constrained by her social situation, under the patriarchal control of her employers and hampered by poverty and illegitimacy. Matty does find a suitable partner and, on expectation of marriage, she and Will are allowed a sexual relationship, leading to pregnancy. Will's untimely death leaves Matty with an illegitimate child, and the prospect of no means of support unless she is kept on by the Seward family. Inevitably, the child is sent away for adoption. Later in my novel, another fictional maid, Betsy, is seduced by a soldier, and the resulting pregnancy leads to her dismissal from the Seward household, although Anna is shown to regret this decision.

As housekeeper, Matty is required to be literate enough to deal with accounts and recipes. She has been taught to read by her mother and by Ellen, the previous housekeeper, using the Bible, small illustrated chap-books which feature folk-tales and nursery rhymes, and religious tracts used as wrapping paper.<sup>70</sup> Anna, tutored by her father, recites Milton's poetry and reads conduct books and sermons, while Matty is steeped in folklore and Welsh sayings, but both are familiar with the nursery rhymes and fairy tales we know today. I allow Matty to

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<sup>69</sup> Poorhouse inmates as servants: Bridget Hill, *Servants: English Domesticity in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p. 9.

Relatives as servants: J. Jean Hecht, *The Domestic Servant Class in Eighteenth-century England* (London: Butler & Tanner, 1956), p. 18.

<sup>70</sup> Ruth Richardson, 'Chapbooks' (2014), *British Library* <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/chapbooks> [accessed 18 October 2021].

Religious tracts used to teach reading: Robert K. Webb, *The British working-class reader, 1790-1848, literary and social tension* (New York: Kelley, 1971), p. 24.

mention princesses, wicked witches and the fairy-tale coach which brings her to the Seward family, while similar tropes are used in Anna's subscription ball sequence, and her teenage visit to a country house, derived from Anna's letter of 1787.<sup>71</sup> For me, rags-to-riches stories such as *Cinderella* act to reinforce patriarchal values: the necessity of marriage for female happiness and security, and preferably involving a handsome and wealthy husband. Conversely, Anna talks, in the above letter, of her 'Evisish desire of rambling from my pleasant home', a reference to Eve's dream in Milton's 1667 *Paradise Lost*, where Eve is carried up by Satan to survey the world as a goddess.<sup>72</sup> This theme surfaces a number of times in my novel as a demonstration of Anna's guilty desire to achieve fame and independence.

With regard to Matty's fictional background, Glamorgan parish records show that Christian names were mostly English in the early eighteenth century, confirming that the Llanmaes/Cowbridge area was largely anglicised by then, as it is now. I found one entry for a woman called 'Mallte' along with several named 'Jennett' - an alternative spelling of 'Janet'. Interestingly too, much wildlife was seen as a threat to livestock so that foxes, kites, badgers and 'fitchers' (polecats) were slaughtered in their thousands for bounty. Sadly, the humble hedgehog suffered likewise, not least for the variations of its name. I rather like 'hodgock', amending nicely the Welsh saying about miserliness: 'A hodgock in his pocket.'

Matty's Welsh sayings were drawn from a number of sources and to some extent mirror the way I have used Anna's verses. 'The grave of the Muse is the marriage bed' seems particularly appropriate in the context of my overall themes.<sup>73</sup> Matty's remedies and 'receipts' were adapted from contemporary housekeeping manuals to demonstrate home management in an era with doubtful medical care and limited cooking and food storage facilities. Here I tried to choose ingredients which are recognisable to a modern reader: for instance recipes for 'pease soup' and 'almond cakes' have changed little over 250 years.

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<sup>71</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 5.

Country house story in *Letters*, I, (pp. 266-269), pp. 260-262 ebook.

<sup>72</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book V, third stanza (1674 version)

<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45741/paradise-lost-book-5-1674-version>. [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>73</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 12, p. 186.

'Bedd awen gwely priodas' in Paul Barrett, *The Wisdom of Wales, a Collection of proverbs* (Cardiff: UWIC Press, 2001), p. 14.

## A Portrait Tells a Tale

[See Appendix II for images]

My book carries a central theme of portrait painting, and this derives from my first visual encounter with Anna, her juvenile portrait of 1762, painted when she was nineteen by an up-and-coming artist named Tilly Kettle (1735-1786), who had links with the famous London portraitist, Joshua Reynolds, (1723-1792).<sup>74</sup> After twin portraits of Anna and her sister were completed, Kettle acquired more prestigious commissions although he was never in the same league as Reynolds, the first President of the Royal Academy.

Anna's juvenile portrait was in some ways a forerunner to the graduation and coming-of-age photographs we still treasure, although for Anna the main consideration was preparation for marriage. At about this time she began her juvenile 'Emma' letters, which describe the social life and *amours* of herself and her friends. The Kettle portrait shows an earnest-looking girl, plainly dressed but with an expensive fur-lined shawl (probably beaver, imported from North America), and a valuable pearl neckband, hence a discreet display of upper middle-class wealth. Sarah, of the twin portrait, was matched soon afterwards with Mr Porter, a well-heeled merchant, although she died tragically on the eve of the wedding.

At the time a modest 'head' portrait, 30ins x 25ins, would cost about ten guineas if done by a jobbing portrait painter.<sup>75</sup> The sum represents the annual wage of a junior servant at the time.<sup>76</sup> Thomas undoubtedly commissioned the paintings of his daughters to show off their beauty and talent, but also to hint at the handsome settlements he would have at his disposal for their marriages. Here the modern graduation photograph differs in that it celebrates social and academic achievement rather than wealth.

This brings me to the features of Anna's Kettle portrait which have dictated the thematic structure of my novel:

Firstly the pose, general style and plain background can be explained partly by fashion and partly by commercial considerations. Other portraits of this era are posed similarly, including Reynolds's 1760s portrait of the actress Kitty Fisher, and also *A young woman*

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<sup>74</sup> Martin Postle, (17 Sept 2015) 'Joshua Reynolds' in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [online] <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/23429>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>75</sup> Desmond Shawe-Taylor, *The Georgians: Eighteenth Century Portraiture & Society* (London: Barrie & Jenkins Ltd., 1990), p. 10.

<sup>76</sup> Hecht, p. 81. See also Joanna Martin, 'Servants', *Wives and Daughters: Women and Children in the Georgian Country House* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), chapter 3.

*leaning on a ledge*. Allan Ramsay (1713-1784) was a high-profile contemporary of Reynolds, and his coming-of-age likeness of Lady Susan Fox-Strangways, dated to 1761, echoes Anna's pose but appears to be half-length: 50ins x 40ins. In keeping with Lady Susan's social position, her dress is highly elaborate and there is a stylised classical background, altogether a more expensive undertaking.

Hence Anna's portrait is relatively low-budget, the background a plain dark brown which was very likely painted afterwards using red lead, which speeded the drying process.<sup>77</sup> In this way a young artist could move onto his next commission quickly. This plain style seems to have been fashionable for smaller portraits generally: Kettle made a similar self-portrait at about the same time as he painted Anna. In both portraits he uses light to accentuate the face, in the manner of the *chiaroscuro* perfected by the Old Masters of previous centuries.<sup>78</sup> Kettle's later work has many of the features of the 'grand style' for which Reynolds became famous, with elaborate dress and detailed backgrounds, expensive portraits designed to ally portrait painting with the 'high art' of historical painting. By then Kettle's subjects were further up the social scale too.

At all levels, costume and accessories conveyed the occupation and class of the sitter, a tradition which continues to this day in portrait painting: important for a gentleman were marks of office such as clerical neck-bands, a military uniform, the style of hair or wig and expensive jewellery.<sup>79</sup> In addition, the tools of his trade would be on display: pen and paper, weapons, maps, books, scientific instruments, even his hunting dogs. Behind him, in the grander pictures, would be a view of his library, his mansion, his country park, or for a military man, a representation of a successful battle. Many eighteenth-century male portraits at The National Portrait Gallery (NPG) demonstrate these features, as also those to be found in the stately homes I have visited. At Eyam Hall, Major John Wright (1724-1779), who was Anna's failed fiancé of 1764, stands proudly in front of a raging battle to reflect his military service.

The few eighteenth-century female portraits I have seen on display at the NPG are of royalty, with just a handful of famous Georgian women, including Catharine Macaulay and the actress, Sarah Siddons (1755-1831). As might be expected, male portraits of that era represent

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<sup>77</sup> Leslie Carlyle, (1999) 'Paint Driers Discussed in 19th-Century British Oil Painting Manuals', *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, 38:1, 69-82.

<<https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1179%2F019713699806113538>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>78</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 12: I have made use of all these features in the story of the portrait sittings.

<sup>79</sup> Note the clerical wig and neck-bands in Thomas Seward's portrait by Joseph Wright of Derby (Appendix II).

the writers, scientists, academics and politicians who were nationally recognised. Erasmus Darwin is there, along with his Lunar Society fellows, and Samuel Johnson too. Sadly, Anna's Kettle portrait is placed in a dark corner of the NPG reading room, although it was treated to the bright lights of the main gallery in 2008, in a special 'Bluestockings' exhibition.<sup>80</sup>

Anna's juvenile portrait shows a feature which seems to me both different and prophetic: although she has a 'standard' pose, folded arms resting symmetrically on a table, she is holding an open book, labelled 'Milton'. Her sister, in the matching portrait, has pen and paper but this could be interpreted as the tools of letter-writing.<sup>81</sup> To my mind, Anna's book demonstrates her unusual education and her poetic aspirations, an image unlikely to be approved of by her match-making mother, while Sarah, displaying the same education, is participating in an activity more acceptable for a marriageable gentlewoman. I have reviewed a significant number of female portraits of this era, and have found very few examples of books in female hands, although 'feminine' items are often displayed, for instance flowers, small pets, and occasionally needlework. For instance, Elizabeth Montagu, also painted in 1762 (by Allan Ramsay), is shown expensively dressed with a floral corsage, but with no indication of her literary leanings.

A notable exception is John Fayram's 1735 portrait of the writer, Elizabeth Carter. At the age of 18 she holds a copy of a book by Plato, and, like Anna, she never married. Later, Anna was fond of a 1780s engraving of a painting by George Romney (1734 –1802), whom she met through her friendship with the poet, William Hayley (1745-1820). The picture, known as *Serena Reading*, was based on a 1781 poem by Hayley.<sup>82</sup> The unidentified girl was said to resemble Honora Sneyd/Edgeworth, Anna's beloved foster-sister, but the reading material in question was a passion-inflaming novel rather than a learned text. Another interesting example is a portrait of Lady Sarah Pennington, from the mid-1760s, seen with another woman (possibly her mother) and holding a leather-backed book: this was the conduct book she published in defence of her position as an injured wife, having been obliged to separate from her husband and leave her children behind.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Eger & Peltz, 2008.

<sup>81</sup> Photo of Sarah's portrait, source of original unknown, Seward Archive, National Portrait Gallery, London.

<sup>82</sup> William Hayley, *The Triumphs of Temper, A Poem in Six Cantos* (Portsmouth New Hampshire: Treadwell, 1804), Google ebook. <<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=QGUiAAAAMAAJ&pg=GBS.PP6>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>83</sup> Portrait on view at Muncaster Castle, Cumbria. Lady Pennington's book, published in 1761, was titled *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughters, in a Letter to Miss Pennington*: Emma Plaskitt, (2004)



In a letter of 1788 to Hayley, Anna says that the portrait by ‘poor Kettle’ is often taken to be a portrait of her mother.<sup>84</sup> She may have felt that the picture was best forgotten, and it was not mentioned in her Will, unlike a number of other portraits which were carefully handed down to family and friends. Incidentally, after her death, Kettle’s painting formed the frontispiece of Anna’s published letters, perhaps to present Anna unflatteringly.<sup>85</sup>

Romney painted Anna more than once and in the late 1780s he shows her in the grand style, although soberly dressed. More importantly, she is featured with literary props, a manuscript and pens.<sup>86</sup> This echoes to some extent a 1780 portrait of Hannah More, the writer, pictured also with pen and papers. More was painted by Frances Reynolds (sister of Joshua and another talented but forgotten female of the era). Prior to that, in 1775, Catharine Macaulay was captured in classical grandeur by the American artist, Robert Edge-Pine (1730-1783): in pseudo-Roman robes she leans on an impressive pile of volumes, her *History of England*. The style of these three later portraits seems to me to demonstrate the acknowledgement of feminine success in the predominantly masculine worlds of literature and history.

My narrative mentions a childhood portrait of Anna which is held in a private collection by descendants of the Hall and Seward families: the little girl is shown with pet birds, a blackbird on her hand, and a white long-necked bird alongside her, either a goose or, prophetically, a swan. I cannot confirm the painting’s provenance but I could not resist the temptation to construct a brief anecdote around it.<sup>87</sup>

At Weston Park, Shifnal, in 2019, I noticed a small oval painting by Kettle, undated. The little girl shown was Charlotte Bridgeman, born in 1761, and this dates the painting to the late 1760s. Hence, it is possible that the aristocratic Bridgemans recruited Kettle through an association with Thomas Seward. In a letter of 1796, Anna mentions that, as a child of eight, she knew Lady Bradford (formerly Bridgeman).<sup>88</sup> I have used this connection to take Anna and her father to Weston to visit Honora on her deathbed, since Honora’s husband, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, records that Honora was cared for by the Bridgemans during her final illness.<sup>89</sup>

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‘Pennington, Lady Sarah’ in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by David Cannadine, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/74077>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>84</sup> *Letters*, II (p. 194), p. 190 ebook.

<sup>85</sup> Barnard, *Constructed Life*, p. 184.

<sup>86</sup> This image is printed as the frontispiece in Ashmun’s *Singing Swan*.

<sup>87</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 7, p. 105. The painting is in a private family collection.

<sup>88</sup> *Letters*, IV, (p. 191), p. 188 ebook.

<sup>89</sup> Richard L. Edgeworth, *The Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth Esq.*, 2 vols, (London: R. Hunter, 1821), I, pp. 362-363. Google ebook.

The theme of portrait painting forms the backbone of my novel, with the use of paint colours to introduce the chapters, culminating in Anna's final anecdote about the sittings for her juvenile portrait. I have also accompanied Anna and her friend, Mary Powys, on a visit to the new Royal Academy premises at Somerset House, with an enjoyable tour of the pictures, many of which can still be appreciated on-line or in galleries.<sup>90</sup> My theme was augmented, too, by Richard Samuel's *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain*, exhibited in 1778, an image which Anna associates with her dreams of fame.<sup>91</sup> Later I was struck by the irony of another portrait, the figure in bas-relief who sits under a willow tree on Anna's memorial in Lichfield Cathedral: the scantily-clad nymph is presumably Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry, and she is considerably slimmer than the poetess she mythically represents. In my exhibition story, Anna imagines herself painted as Calliope, a premonition perhaps of her posthumous portrait in marble.

### **Materia Medica**

As a medical practitioner, I have found medical practices of the time fascinating, along with the abundance of bizarre home remedies. Anna's letters record a variety of ailments: her injured knee, her recurrent chest complaint (possibly asthma), and attacks of bilious vomiting, which she described as due to 'a stony concretion of the bile'.<sup>92</sup> In *Sonnet XIII*, she also hints at the use of laudanum, (opium) which was taken freely for both minor and major illness.<sup>93</sup> Likewise, Thomas Seward, writes about his wife's eye condition:

I was extremely surpris'd to hear that she had taken mercurials; tho' I have often taken them it is always with great Reluctance... I think Mr Bayley told my Wife that nothing but necessity should prevail on old People to take them. But why He or any man should think them proper for sore Eyes I cannot guess.

At the end of the letter he returns to his anxiety about Anna's mother:

I am very sorry that my Dear Wife will not send for the oculist near Birmingham. Gentle Openers are the only internal physic I would wish her to take, and if I would add any thing stronger ...it should be antiscorbutics, but the Defluxion from her eyes seems to me chiefly to call for external

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<sup>90</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine* of 1780 lists the exhibition catalogue, along with descriptions of the palatial new accommodation: *GM* (May, July & September, 1780), (pp. 220, 316 & 417), pp. 122, 221 & 325. Google ebook.

<sup>91</sup> Eger & Peltz, p. 60.

<sup>92</sup> 1770s letter to Mrs Sykes, SJB, MS 2001.72.9.

<sup>93</sup> Anna Seward, ed. by Lisa L. Moore, *The Collected Poems of Anna Seward*, 2 vols (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), I, p. 182.

applications...My present favourite medicine is Miss Grammar's Receipt of squills and Venice soap.<sup>94</sup>

Antiscorbutics were used to treat 'scurvy' which seems to have been a catch-all name for various illnesses, although Vitamin C deficiency, true scurvy, was a major problem for long-haul sailors until citrus fruit and plants such as scurvy grass were found to cure the condition. The mention of 'squills' took me back to my own childhood and a foul-tasting cough medicine known as 'Ipecac and Squill'. Both ipecacuanha and squill are plant-derived and the combination is still available as a 'herbal' expectorant.

Thomas's experience of oral 'mercurials' gives me another theory: this treatment was used for a number of conditions, including venereal disease, and Thomas, righteous clergyman though he was, spent time as a young man on the 'Grand Tour' of Italy as tutor to a young aristocrat. Thomas might have enjoyed female company abroad and contracted syphilis, a condition which would cause disability in later life with strokes, increasing incapacity and dementia. This matches Thomas's decline, as recorded in Anna's later letters.

If Thomas had syphilis, he could have infected his wife, Elizabeth, hence exposing her to the risk of still-births, miscarriages, and infant deaths, as seems to have been the case. These ideas are conjecture only, but if Anna was aware of the dangers posed by promiscuity in a husband, this may have contributed to her ambivalence towards marriage.

This brief introduction to eighteenth-century remedies set me on a research path which has been intensely rewarding. Culpeper's seventeenth-century *Complete Herbal* lists a huge number of plants assumed to have medicinal properties, some perhaps with good evidence, some chosen for physical similarities to body-parts or to the condition being treated, and all using astrological associations which date back to Roman times. The physician, the apothecary and the housewife had these herbs and a wide range of other items to choose from, including toxic chemicals like lead and mercury, and animal derivatives such as powdered hartshorn (deer-horn), musk oil (from deer glands) and spermaceti (whale-wax). Thomas's 'Venice soap' was indeed soap, refined for use in pills and lotions. Searches of pharmacopoeia manuals and housekeeper pocket-books bring up astonishing remedies, some of which might be beneficial,

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<sup>94</sup> Letter from Thomas Seward to 'Nancy', undated, SJBM, MS 2001.71.43.

while others are more likely to send the patient to an early grave. Elaborate remedies for plague and smallpox are common and indicative of the fear aroused by these diseases.<sup>95</sup>

Honora's death was almost certainly due to 'consumption' (tuberculosis) and the illness which killed Anna's sister, Sarah, was possibly typhus, which causes a skin rash (known as 'tettters' at the time). Sarah was dosed with 'Dr James's Powders' which had dubious contents, and also an extract of 'Peruvian Bark' which contained quinine, although this did not save her: quinine is still in use against malaria.<sup>96</sup> Poor Honora would have been subjected to bleeding (the collection of blood from cut veins), cupping (the raising of water blisters on the skin to be drained), and purging with enemas and laxatives, along with emetics to induce vomiting. These were standard treatments but I have allowed my imagination free rein to bring in more outlandish options such as the Irish broth prepared from earthworms and snails.<sup>97</sup> I recently came across a modern advertisement for an arthritis treatment, claiming to give a complete cure. The 'active' constituent, an extract from snails, echoes its eighteenth-century counterpart, with belief in its properties being the main therapeutic agent.

My novel features Dr Erasmus Darwin as Anna's putative suitor, and both his life and his medical practice are well-documented. His commonplace book contains his scientific drawings, for instance his plans for a flushing toilet and a mechanical bird, but he also recorded his medical observations and the treatments he used.<sup>98</sup> He liked to experiment, with varying success, but he pioneered foxglove extracts for heart conditions (still in use as digitalis). He advised temperance with alcohol and he favoured fresh air, exercise and bathing, in the sea and at spa resorts. He treated Anna for her gallstones with good effect.<sup>99</sup> According to Anna, there was an occasion when he contemplated transfusing blood into an aristocratic patient.<sup>100</sup> As there was little knowledge at the time of incompatibility problems, his decision not to proceed is one of the factors which may have saved his patient's life.

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<sup>95</sup> In Chapter 9 of my novel, Anna and her father visit Eyam, where memories of the 1665/6 plague remain fresh in local minds. 'Plague Sunday' is still commemorated in present day Eyam.

<sup>96</sup> Jennifer Welsh, (Oct. 1<sup>st</sup> 2010) 'Dr James Fever Powder circa 1746', *The Scientist*. < <https://www.the-scientist.com/uncategorized/dr-james-fever-powder-circa-1746-43055> > [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>97</sup> Aileen Ireland, *Medical Remedies from Eighteenth-century Limerick* <<http://www.limerickcity.ie/media/medical%20remedies.pdf>> [accessed 18 October 2021]. This recipe, extracted from the notebook of Rev William Twigge, 1715, is also found on: <[https://www.pascalbonenfant.com/18c/medicine/recipes/wt\\_snail\\_water.html](https://www.pascalbonenfant.com/18c/medicine/recipes/wt_snail_water.html)>[accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>98</sup> Original book, and a facsimile, both held at The Darwin House Museum in Lichfield.

<sup>99</sup> 1770s letter to Mrs Sykes, SJB, MS 2001.72.9 as above.

<sup>100</sup> Anna Seward, *Life of Erasmus Darwin*, ed. by Philip K. Wilson, Elizabeth A. Dolan & Malcolm Dick (Studley, Warwickshire: Brewin Books, 2010), p. 103.

Darwin was involved in Honora's health care and he probably acted as general physician to the Seward family, although they also made use of specialists such as the Birmingham oculist, and 'Beardmore' in London for dentistry.<sup>101</sup> The Sewards would also have consulted apothecaries, such as Richard Greene, who were the forerunners of today's general practitioners, offering pharmaceutical support rather than surgery. Greene and his shop provide another story, with Anna's fictional visit to his Museum of Curiosities: this was a delight to describe from illustrations of apothecary shops and of the museum itself, as well as catalogue details which include artefacts from Cook's voyages.<sup>102</sup> Anna later contributed further Cook treasures to the museum, gifts from Samwell, one of Cook's surgeons.

The use of home remedies was widespread in an age when medical fees were high, and when even the most minor of afflictions could be life-threatening. Recipes were collected by housewives, house-keepers and aristocratic ladies alike, and their notebooks and published manuals reveal a surprising mix of cookery, cleaning products, and home treatments for everything from pimples to plague. I have enabled Matty to offer remedies which use 'Welsh' ingredients such as samphire and scurvy-grass from the coastal salt-marshes, 'receipts' adapted from authentic recipes. Stain removal is one of Matty's obsessions, but I fail to see how the use of beetroot juice would have helped her, although this is a genuine constituent of a contemporary soap recipe.<sup>103</sup> Her lip-salve is ostensibly a treatment for chapped lips, but the inclusion of 'alkanet' (a red plant dye) makes it an attractive forerunner of today's lipsticks, although the pig fat content might not appeal to modern day tastes.

Finally, as an adjunct to my medical interests: I feel that biological aspects of a woman's life are often ignored in historical fiction, with the exception perhaps of child-birth and sexual activity. For this reason my novel samples three 'taboo' subjects: menarche, menstruation, and menopause, all of which are intimately related to one of my main themes, Anna's desire to have children despite her fading prospects of marriage.

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<sup>101</sup> Letter to Mary Powys (1770) MS SJBM 2001.76.1. Anna often expressed concerns about her teeth, an essential part of a woman's physical appearance, as well as being necessary for chewing food.

<sup>102</sup> S. Cook, engraving, undated, 'Richard Greene's Museum at Lichfield', Wellcome Collection [online] <<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/zpg8mz5g>> [accessed 18 October 2021]. Richard Greene, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Rarities in Mr Greene's Museum at Lichfield*. (Lichfield, 1773), Google ebook. <<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=oC9cAAAacAAJ&pg=GBS.PP1>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>103</sup> Pierre-Joseph Buc'hoz, *The Toilet of Flora*, (London: J. Murray, 1779), p. 235. Google ebook. <<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=ffMHAAAAQAAJ&pg=GBS.PA234>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

## Anna's Places

I have visited a number of the locations linked with Anna's life, fortunately before the Covid19 pandemic limited my travel. In Lichfield I was thrilled to be given access to the Bishop's Palace, now home to the Cathedral Choir School. Although the building was extended in Victorian times, many of the original features remain and I was able to identify the important rooms: the library, the small wood-panelled office which could have been Thomas Seward's study, the parlour used by Mrs Seward, her bedroom, dressing room, closet, and (to the surprise of the school's Librarian) the concealed back-staircase to the servants' attics, for the use of a lady's maid. Further round the landing I inspected a suite of classrooms and one of these was painted in a tasteful blue. From the window there was a view of the Cathedral and the Close and I was easily convinced that this had been Anna's blue dressing-room. The basement rooms were in use for storage and cloakrooms but it was not difficult to imagine how the kitchen, scullery and store-rooms would have been sited there. Outside, a building utilised for a laboratory was clearly the former coach-house and stables.

The Cathedral Close is full of history. Hidden in bushes is the water pump which accessed the water conduit, and all round are the houses which have survived from Georgian times and earlier.<sup>104</sup> Erasmus Darwin House, the former Vicarage, offers displays of the good Doctor's inventions (remastered), his possessions, and his work-room, as well as a tribute to Anna in the form of a reproduction of her Kettle portrait. An ad-hoc tour of the cellar revealed vaulted store-rooms and a possible kitchen. Close by was a large stone slab about the size of a gravestone, eminently suitable for the dissection of a felon's corpse. It requires little imagination to see how Darwin might have had difficulty in retaining the services of a cook!

The cathedral itself is a majestic reminder of its importance as the administrative centre of a huge diocese which extends westward to the Welsh border. There have been substantial alterations to the building since Anna's time but much of the body, and spirit, remains. It holds many monuments to the great and good of Lichfield, including Dr Johnson and Erasmus Darwin, but I struggled to locate Anna's thinly-clad marble Muse, hidden behind some display boards in a dark side-aisle, where Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) also lurks ignominiously. She was never a resident of Lichfield, but a strong-minded relative somehow persuaded the church authorities to allow a memorial to be raised because of her success with

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<sup>104</sup> The problems of a frozen water supply are featured in *Portrait*, Chapter 2.

smallpox inoculation. Poor John Saville, graced by Anna's epitaph, was hidden behind the fold-out racks of the Gift Shop, although, once uncovered, he was better lit.

The town of Lichfield offers a wealth of historical connections too. It was a joy to stay at The George, where I found the original Assembly Room laid out for a festive dinner dance, along with the small side rooms which would have served for refreshments and card tables. The first house occupied by the Swards was on Sadler Street, now Market Street. When I last visited, this terraced town-house was in use as a sandwich shop. Sadly, the original site of Greene's Museum is now the entrance to a shopping arcade.

Away from Lichfield, on a visit to Badsey, near Evesham, I located Seward House, the original home of Anna's grandparents, and nearby was the manor house occupied by her Uncle Benjamin, currently a hotel.<sup>105</sup> Badsey church contains several Seward monuments.

Near Shifnal in Shropshire is Weston Park, the stately home which belonged to the Bridgeman family, and where Honora Edgeworth stayed during her final illness. Again, the house and grounds have retained many original features, including the classical temple on a hill. When Anna visits poor Honora, she is treated to a view of the French tapestries, family silver, a Chinese tulip vase, and a silver baby's rattle with a coral stem.<sup>106</sup> A rattle with bells had already materialised in my novel to be featured in my kitten story, and I was more than pleased to find this identical rattle, displayed at Weston along with the artefacts mentioned above.<sup>107</sup>

### **Anna's People**

To write Anna's story I wanted to assemble a cast of characters with whom she could interact. Some appear in her letters, but they are not always easy to identify, even when described as a relative or friend by Anna's biographers. Most of Anna's published letters are addressed to a named person but often with only a surname and title – Mr Whalley, Mrs Powys etc. Within the letters many names have been blanked out, leaving only an initial or the first and last letter: Mr W, Mrs P----s. Hence I needed more information – their age, where they lived, their class and social background, and their exact relationship to Anna. Some could be placed by references or locations associated with the letter, for instance Aunt Martin lived in Gotham,

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<sup>105</sup> See Appendix II for photo of Seward House.

<sup>106</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 5, p. 65.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 2, p. 29.

Nottinghamshire. Unfortunately many characters seem to have left little or no historical trace, but here research through genealogy websites such as Ancestry.co.uk has been rewarding.

Perhaps the most difficult person to pin down was Anna's lifelong friend, Miss Mary Powys ('Po') who lived for a time at Shrewsbury Abbey. The key, late in my research, came from Anna's mention of 'Mrs Powys of Berwick' in a 1798 letter, which suggests that Mary was related to Thomas Powys, Esquire (a gentleman), of Berwick House near Shrewsbury.<sup>108</sup> His second son, Henry, (born 1717) lived at The Abbey House, Shrewsbury and it seems more than likely that Mary was his daughter, from his first marriage to Elizabeth Langley in 1739. Henry Powys remarried to Susanna Sneyd, Honora's cousin, in 1752, and this links Anna's family both to the Sneyd and the Powys families. Shrewsbury Abbey was, and is, in the diocese of Lichfield, and Thomas Seward would have been acquainted with the clergy there. This gives Mary a similar background to Anna, upper middle class with clerical connections, as might be expected perhaps.

By similar detective work I was able to establish the identities of Aunt Martin and Anna's cousin, Nancy. Anna Martin was Elizabeth Seward's sister, and daughter of Dr Hunter, the Lichfield School headmaster who tyrannised the young Samuel Johnson with regular beatings.<sup>109</sup> As I shall discuss later, Aunt Martin and her daughter suffered physical and mental abuse from the equally tyrannical Uncle Martin.

Anna's adolescent stay in a country house is related in a 1787 letter.<sup>110</sup> She describes how she grew fat on chocolate and 'pease soup' but identifies the house only as B-----n, and her hostess as Mrs C.....n. She refers to the older of the two sons of the family as 'Marmoset'. Later she met him in London as 'Sir George C...'. This family is named Coldbrand by Barnard, because Anna quotes her father's comments about the puny stature of the two boys: 'What have we here? These Coldbrands the giants! These same mighty men! In the name of chastity let the girl go!'<sup>111</sup>

I have been unable to find an aristocratic family of this name and I believe that 'Coldbrand' was a reference to the giant of Irish legend. Eventually, I located Brocton Hall, not far from Lichfield, which was the ancestral home of the Chetwynde family and a Tudor

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<sup>108</sup> Letter to Sarah Ponsonby (1798) *Letters*, V, (p. 143), p.110 ebook.

<sup>109</sup> James, Boswell, ed. by Rodney Shewan (1968) *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 2 vols (London: The Folio Society, 1968) I, p. 38.

<sup>110</sup> Letter to Mrs Cotton (March 1787), *Letters*, I, (pp. 266-269), pp. 260-263 ebook.

<sup>111</sup> Barnard, *Constructed Life*, p. 123. The 'pease soup' letter appears in *Letters*, I, (p. 267), p.261 ebook



manor house in Anna's day. There were two sons of about the right age at the time of her visit, and one was named George. Hence I adopted this family for my revisualisation of her anecdote.

### **The Feline Dimension**

Anna kept a number of pet birds as well as cats and dogs. An amorous 'dogess' named Loo (for Lucretia), is mentioned in a 1770s letter to Mrs Sykes, where Anna implies that her mother wanted poor Loo put down.<sup>112</sup> Later, in 1791, Anna mourned the death of another dog, Sappho.<sup>113</sup> In 1780, however, she had a cat, Po Felina, and, in September, Darwin sent his flirtatious 'cat letter' purportedly from his Persian cat, Snow, proposing marriage to 'Miss Po'. Snow is described as able to vanquish 'my lady's lap-dog', but, as Roberts suggests, this may have been a veiled reference to Anna's close friend, John Saville.<sup>114</sup> In Anna's reply, the mild-natured Po Felina implies that she has been trained not to attack her mistress's birds. Later, however, in Anna's touching poem, 'An Old Cat's Dying Soliloquy', the aged cat, Selima, dreams of catching goldfish, mice, and 'birds unwing'd', a more realistic view of feline behaviour.<sup>115</sup>

In my novel, I have given Po Felina the attention she seems to deserve. Small and 'brindled' (tabby or tortoiseshell), Po wanders through most of my chapters in inimitable feline style, living life as she pleases, although she does leave Anna's pet robin unmolested. I have been influenced here by my own small brindled cat, who is no-one's mistress but her own, although I think she would see a pet robin as fair game.

Po Felina is both a comfort and an object of affection for Anna, but can be viewed also as a child substitute. In addition, Po's parallel life as she stalks sparrows on the Dean's Walk, and claims possession of the patchwork quilt on Anna's bed, symbolises the relative independence Anna can only dream of in 1780.

Meanwhile Snow, Darwin's fierce white cat, finally makes an appearance in November, emerging from the fog outside Darwin's house.<sup>116</sup> By then Darwin has lost interest in Anna, and Snow takes a less than friendly swipe at her glove in his capacity as a metonym for Darwin.

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<sup>112</sup> Letter to Mrs Sykes, SJBM, MS 2001.72.10.

<sup>113</sup> *Letters*, III, (pp. 108-109), pp. 106-107 ebook.

<sup>114</sup> Marion Roberts (2010) 'Close Encounters: Anna Seward, 1742-1809, a woman in provincial cultural life' M.Litt. thesis, p. 159, footnote 11 <<https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/1581/>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>115</sup> 'An Old Cat's Dying Soliloquy', Seward, ed. Moore, II, pp. 144-145.

<sup>116</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 12.

Other cats have insinuated themselves into my narratives, beginning with Dr Johnson's 'Hodge', who was partial to oysters. Johnson's cat is mentioned by Darwin at the beginning of my novel and this leads on to a brief discussion about slavery, because Johnson liked to purchase the oysters himself rather than send out his negro manservant, a freed slave.<sup>117</sup> It would have been interesting to pursue slavery themes further, but although Anna admired the work of the abolitionists, she never took a firm public stand on the issue.

In March 1780, I took Anna to meet James Dodsley, her publisher.<sup>118</sup> In his cluttered emporium, a fictional cat materialised, the dusty grey Socrates with his yellow eyes, washing his nether regions on a pile of Catharine Macaulay's historical works, and thereby, perhaps, signalling contempt for female writers. Socrates disdains Anna on her first visit but later, when she is congratulated by Dodsley, the cat deigns to sit on her lap and drool as she strokes him.

In the meantime, we have met little Tibs, a kitten, and here I have used this fictional anecdote to show how class differences can be blurred when children are left to play together: Matty, a poorhouse outcast, is allowed to share books and nursery rhymes with Anna and her sister. This story illustrates too how a child's acquaintance with death often begins early in life, when a pet dies. The contrast perhaps is that the loss of Anna's siblings in infancy would have educated her very rapidly in the kind of human mortality which is rare in the present day. This may have contributed to her apparent reluctance to marry, as I shall discuss later.

### **Summary of Part 1**

In this first part of my essay I have reviewed my biographical novel within the context of historical novels and biofiction. I have described parts of my writing journey in relation to the development of the novel's structure, style, themes and characterisation. I have discussed my sources, along with the importance of locations, accessory characters (human and feline), and period detail. I have highlighted aspects of my research including portrait-painting, medical matters, and the Welsh dimension of my novel, as portrayed in the character of Matty, the fictional housekeeper.

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<sup>117</sup> James Boswell *The Life of Samuel Johnson* ed. by David Womersley, (Penguin Classics 2009) loc. 22455 Kindle ebook. The bronze avatar of Hodge sits and contemplates an open oyster outside Johnson's former London home (see photo Appendix 1I).

<sup>118</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 4.

## PART 2

### Madam, Mistress or Old Maid

#### Marriage or No?

Throughout my novel, I have tried to reveal the factors which moulded Anna's character and life choices, including her fear of death and decay, which may have been linked with the morbidity she saw in female friends who died young, especially Honora Sneyd/Edgeworth. Directly relevant are Anna's attitudes to romantic love, marriage and child-birth, closely connected with issues of social expectation and parental control. Here I would suggest strongly that Anna's single status may have ensured her continuing success as a writer, not least because of the financial and social independence she achieved later, away from the influence of male relatives.

1780 was the turning point for Anna's writing career, but she was also in her late thirties, towards the end of her reproductive life, and without offspring to care for her in her twilight years or to guard her literary heritage. If she was to have a child it needed to be very soon, and in conventional wedlock. Prospects of marriage must have seemed very slim, however, confined as she was to a small circle of friends and family in Lichfield. Several former lovers had married and left her behind, as had most of her female friends. The marital field was limited to long-term bachelors, single for employment or other reasons, or to widowers with young families to be cared for.

Anna may have hoped to marry John Saville, who had separated from his wife, but remarriage was only possible if Mary Saville died. Divorce was out of the question, firstly on religious grounds, secondly because it required an Act of Parliament, and thirdly because it favoured hugely the male respondent.<sup>119</sup> A well-known case was that of Lady Diana Spencer/Bolingbroke, divorced by her husband in 1768 for adultery, although his promiscuity and abusive nature were notorious.<sup>120</sup> As a woman involved in divorce proceedings, Lady Di

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<sup>119</sup> Wolfram, Sybil (1985). 'Divorce in England 1700-1857', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 5(2), 155-186. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/764190?seq=1>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>120</sup> Carola Hicks, *Improper Pursuits: the Scandalous Life of an Earlier Lady Diana Spencer* (New York, St Martin's Press, 2002). Lady Di was divorced by her first husband and went on to marry a friend of Johnson's, Topham Beauclerk. She makes a cameo appearance at the Summer Exhibition in *Portrait*, Chapter 7, p. 114. Like Frances Reynolds, she was a talented portrait painter, and later earned her living by this.

became a pariah, her reputation destroyed. For Anna, implication in divorce would have ended her literary career and she would have been forced to leave Lichfield.

Nevertheless, Anna managed to preserve her friendship with Saville despite the scandal which it generated and the opposition of her parents.<sup>121</sup> That the Saville relationship became a sexual one remains possible in view of Anna's later travels with him, although the company of his grown-up daughter, Elizabeth Smith, makes this questionable. Marian Roberts suggests that the couple may have indulged in 'bundling' (heavy petting) for sexual gratification, but I think this seems unlikely in the years when Anna's parents were close at hand.<sup>122</sup> Also Anna's religious beliefs and strict social standards would discourage sexual interaction, as, in the earlier years, would the fear of illegitimate pregnancy.

I believe that, in later times, Anna saw herself as Saville's friend and protector rather than as a lover, having resigned herself to his inaccessibility as a husband, and I doubt she was ever his mistress, given the social opprobrium this would have attracted. Her affection for Saville has the hallmarks of unrequited love, however, including adoration of the unobtainable, much like the elevation of Honora into the goddess Anna worships repeatedly in her poems. Honora, also unattainable, becomes Anna's Muse, the inspirational subject of her poetry, but Saville is only named in her correspondence as a dear friend, since love poetry addressed to him would probably have caused further scandal. Not until after his death does Anna refer to him poetically, firstly in the epitaph for his memorial in Lichfield cathedral, and secondly in *Remembrance*, where Saville is mourned alongside Honora and John André as a lost friend. In Saville's case, the reference to harmony is a tribute to his music but it also hints at Anna's affection:

No more, HONORA , shall I see  
Thy speaking eyes , that cheer ' d my soul !  
SAVILLE, the gates of harmony  
Eternally were closed to me,  
When thou didst pass the Mortal Goal !<sup>123</sup>

### **Louisa, Emma, Eugenio and Anna**

I have included a number of references in my novel to Anna's romantic verse novel, *Louisa, A Poetical Novel, in Four Epistles*, which was begun in 1762 but not published until 1784. *Louisa*

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<sup>121</sup> Darwin's role in the scandal is portrayed in Chapter 1 of my novel.

<sup>122</sup> Roberts, p. 79.

<sup>123</sup> Seward, ed Moore, II, p. 310.

was undoubtedly informed by Anna's life experiences, and it showcases her attitudes to love and marriage.

A brief summary of *Louisa*:

Louisa has been jilted by her lover, Eugenio, in favour of a bejewelled and rich Eastern woman, Emira, whom he rescues from bandits in a forest. Louisa contemplates suicide but decides against. Meanwhile it transpires that the marriage was forced onto Eugenio by his father, Ernesto, in order to rescue the family fortunes, swindled from them by a villain. Ernesto then visits Louisa to express his regrets but also to report that the family's wealth has been miraculously restored by the return of their treasure-laden ship. Ernesto takes Louisa to the deathbed of Emira, who, since her marriage, has turned to vice, even neglecting her child by Eugenio. Louisa is reunited with Eugenio whilst Emira, on her dying breath, repents her sins and asks Louisa to care for the child, a daughter, who should be dandled on his father's knee. A conventional happy ending of marriage is not, however, explicitly confirmed.

Anna saw *Louisa* as her *magnum opus*, a demonstration of her status and skills as a writer of high-register poetry, able to take risks with a writing form which was both ambitious and experimental. She had previously attempted a similar project, with a set of epistolary poems between lovers known as Evander and Emillia, probably written in the mid-1760s after she began *Louisa*. In these poems, Evander tries to justify his beloved's accusations that he has given his heart elsewhere. As Barnard says, Emillia, who sits embroidering as she seethes with jealousy, is probably a version of Anna, while Evander may represent Saville.<sup>124</sup> All ends happily, perhaps as wish-fulfilment for Anna.

*Louisa*, published in 1784, is on a much larger scale, running to 2,786 lines, and it continued rapidly into further editions because of its popularity. The poem is presented in four 'epistles' between three main protagonists: Louisa, Eugenio, and the faceless character of Emma, a go-between. In Anna's preface, she refers to Matthew Prior's *Henry and Emma* of 1707 (approximately 800 lines) and Alexander Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard* of 1717 (just over 400 lines), but explains that she wants to create 'a more faultless female character'. She adds that she wishes to emulate the descriptive elements of nature presented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his 1761 prose novel, *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Heloise*.

As Daniel Robinson points out, the labelling of *Louisa* as a novel is unique in the eighteenth-century litany of long poems. The work is an 'elision of forms', the fusion of epic

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<sup>124</sup> Barnard, *Constructed Life*, p. 92.

poetry with sentimental verse and the contemporary narrative of a novel.<sup>125</sup> Anna follows the tradition of epic poems in the classical style of Ovid, and later Spenser's monumental *Faerie Queen* of 1590 (more than 36,000 lines) and Chamberlayne's *Pharonnida* of 1659 (2,500 lines), but she uses 'modern' subject matter, as featured in prose novels such as *Evelina*, by Fanny Burney, published (anonymously) in 1778.

By choosing an epistolary format, Anna copied Pope, but this was also a novelistic style encountered in Rousseau's *Julie*, as popularised earlier by Richardson in *Clarissa*: both novels are mentioned in Anna's juvenile letters.<sup>126</sup> Pope's *Eloise to Abelard* recounts the story of a twelfth century love affair forbidden by religious convention, where the lovers are never reunited. *Julie*, is a cross-class affair where the aristocratic heroine is obliged to reject her fiancé, a humble tutor, in order to marry another aristocrat. She is partially reunited with her lover, only to die tragically rescuing one of her children. *Clarissa* was a lifelong favourite of Anna's: here the heroine is a model of girlish innocence and is fooled into eloping with a libertine, Lovelace, in order to escape a forced marriage, only to be imprisoned and raped by him. She starves herself to death rather than surrender her spiritual virtue. It is easy to see echoes of this morally perfect heroine in the portrayal of Louisa: a strong-minded, steadfast character prepared to endure the worst but with the Christian capacity to forgive.

By contrast, Prior's Emma accedes repeatedly to her lover's absurd and dangerous requests for proof of loyalty: she is rewarded finally with marriage to the demanding Henry, but at the expense of her dignity and intelligence. This can only have offended Anna's sensibilities and I might speculate here that this was why Anna chose the name Emma for the fictional friend of her juvenile letters, sometimes directing this 'friend' away from unwise choices in relation to men.

Although Anna enthused about *Clarissa*, she came to believe that most later novels were not comparable with the high art of poetry: 'You must not suppose that I make a practice of reading novels', she wrote in 1787, 'I open none that have not been recommended to me by those whom I believe judges of fine writing.'<sup>127</sup> At the time Anna may have been experiencing regrets about allowing *Louisa* to be titled as a novel: she seems to be reiterating the general

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<sup>125</sup> Daniel Robinson, 'Forging the Poetical Novel: The Elision of Form in Ann Seward's Louisa' in *The Wordsworth Circle*, 27.1 (Winter, 1996), 25-29.  
<<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/TWC24042475?mobileUi=0&>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>126</sup> Both *Julie* and *Clarissa* are discussed in Letter 2 (Oct 1762), *Seward's Journal and Sermons*, ed. Barnard, p. 15.

<sup>127</sup> Letter to Mr W. Newton, The Peak Minstrel (10 May 1787), *Letters*, I, (p. 29), p. 22 ebook.

belief that novels were intended for relatively uneducated readers, and especially women.<sup>128</sup> As Robinson points out, Anna never referred to *Louisa* as a novel in her letters.<sup>129</sup>

Anna presumably decided to finish and publish *Louisa* because of her other successes, hoping to avoid the taint of populist prose novels: 'This Poem has little chance to be popular. A feeling Heart and a fondness for Verse must unite to render it interesting,' she says modestly in her preface. She risked comparison with the likes of Christopher Anstey, however, a friend she met at Mrs Miller's Bath-Easton literary salon, with his satirical *New Bath Guide* (first published in 1766), epistolary verse intended for amusement rather than edification. There was also a fashion in this period to publish poetic 'legendary tales', chivalric love stories in the tradition of Prior's *Henry and Emma*, although in most cases with the tragic theme of lovers united in death, not unlike Shakespeare's play, *Romeo and Juliet*. I have traced several examples:

*Edwin and Ethelinda, a Ballad* was published anonymously in 1767 in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (London).<sup>130</sup>

In 1776, Hannah More's *Sir Eldred of the Bower* appeared in *The Gentleman's and London Magazine* (Dublin) and her authorship was acknowledged.<sup>131</sup> In two parts, the first preceded a mock sentimental poem about the death of a puppy and the second was sandwiched between 'American Affairs' and 'Parliamentary Proceedings'. A further tale by More, *The Bleeding Rock*, succeeded a political satire and I cannot help but feel these unfortunate juxtapositions were not accidental. In More's first tale, Eldred and BIRTHA are the doomed lovers, and in *The Bleeding Rock*, Polydore dies after accidentally killing his love, IANthe, a nymph.

In 1778, Thomas Sedgwick Whalley, Anna's friend and also a Bath-Easton regular, published (under his own name) *Edwy and Edilda*, a ballad-style story set in Saxon times. It has failed to join the canon of great literary works, possibly because of lines such as these:

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<sup>128</sup> In Austen's satirical *Northanger Abbey* (completed in 1803) the youthful heroine is carried away by romantic ideas from Gothic novels.

<sup>129</sup> Robinson, p. 25.

<sup>130</sup> *GM* (London) (1767), (p. 377), p. 340 ebook.

<[https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The\\_Gentleman\\_s\\_Magazine/eiU7AAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=edwin+and+ethelinda+a+ballad&pg=PA648&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Gentleman_s_Magazine/eiU7AAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=edwin+and+ethelinda+a+ballad&pg=PA648&printsec=frontcover)> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>131</sup> *GM* (Dublin) (Jan, Feb, Mar, 1776), pp. 62, 123, 159. Google ebook.

Full text of both Hannah More tales: *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*

<<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004838037.0001.000/1:4?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>> [accessed 18 October 2021], also: Google ebook. <<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=Yq9YAAAAcAAJ&pg=GBS.PA>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

From struggling Galvan's panting breast,  
Besmear'd with foam and gore,  
The beast he dragg'd; and with a crash  
His jaws asunder tore.<sup>132</sup>

I am instantly reminded of Lewis Carroll's satirical nonsense poem, *Jabberwocky* of 1871:

One, two! One, two! And through and through  
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!  
He left it dead, and with its head  
He went galumphing back.<sup>133</sup>

In the 1779 London edition of *Edwy and Edilda*, the author's name is conveniently omitted, and in a Dublin edition of 1783, now described as a Gothic Tale, Whalley's masterpiece is wrongly attributed to 'the author of *The Old English Baron*, A Gothic novel': this was by the female author, Clara Reeve.<sup>134</sup>

In the same edition is an advertisement for *Edwin and Eltruda*, by an unnamed 'young lady', actually Anna's friend, the poet Helen Williams. Set in the fifteenth century, the lovers, Edwin and Eltruda (daughter of another Emma), meet their inevitable fate, dying improbably of grief.<sup>135</sup> It seems that these mediæval tales (with character names beginning with 'E'), were now being associated with female authorship and, by inference, intended for the novel-reading public. Other similar works include *Anna and Edgar*, of 1781 by a Mrs Richmond Inglis, as well as a set of three poems by a mysterious R. Roberts, published in 1783.<sup>136</sup>

How much these legendary tales influenced Anna is hard to say, given that she had started her long poem well before they appeared. Certainly, as with the earlier Evander and Emilia poems, Anna favours names beginning with 'E' – Emma, Eugenio, Ernesto and Emira, but these names are Italianised, as seen in Shakespeare's plays. 'Eloisa' is, however, transmuted to 'Louisa' which modernises the narrative, and the use of a happy ending gives

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<sup>132</sup> Thomas Sedgwick Whalley, 'Edwy and Edilda, A Tale' (London: J Dodsley, 1779), p. 9. Google ebook. <<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=KkoCAAAQAQAJ&pg=GBS.PP6>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>133</sup> Lewis Carroll, 'Jabberwocky' (1871) Full text of poem at <<https://poets.org/poem/jabberwocky>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>134</sup> Whalley, *Edwy and Edilda, A Tale*, (Dublin: Colbert, 1783) Title page, Google ebook. <<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=AX6WEuX8Ne8C&pg=GBS.PA2>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>135</sup> *Edwin and Eltruda, A Legendary Tale*, by a Young Lady (London: Cadell, 1782), Google ebook. <<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=3rliQs4xASgC&pg=GBS.PP8>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

This edition also features More's *Sir Eldred of the Bower* and *The Bleeding Rock*.

<sup>136</sup> Mrs Richmond Inglis, *Anna and Edgar or, Love and Ambition, A Tale*, (Edinburgh: Murray & Cochrane, 1781, repr. British Library Historical Collection).

R. Roberts, *Albert, Edward, and Laura, and the Hermit of Priestland; Three Legendary Tales*, (1783). Miss Roberts was a prolific writer and contributor to *The Lady's Magazine*: Jenny DiPlacidi, 'Searching for 'R' A collaborative Identification' (February 2016), *The Lady's Magazine, 1770- 1818: Understanding the Emergence of a Genre*. <<https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/ladys-magazine/2016/02/>> [accessed 18 October 2021].



the poem a more novelistic dimension. Hence, although it contains similar romantic elements, Anna's poem does not read as a legendary tale.

In *Louisa*, Anna melds weather, seasons and scenery with emotional responses, a scheme borrowed overtly from Rousseau, but refined by Anna's own inventiveness. These themes, important to Anna, have found their way into my novel, including the weather and seasonal changes described in her poems. Anna took part in a literary tradition we see transmuted now into films and television, where a rainstorm dampens the spirits of sorrowful characters, and sunshine ushers in happiness and optimism. Here is an example of Louisa's misery as she waits in vain for Eugenio:

O'er this deep Glen, departing Autumn throws,  
With kind reverted glance, a short repose,  
E'er yet she leaves her England's fading scene,  
Where sickly yellow stains the vivid green,  
And many an icy morn, and stormy gale,  
Embrown the pathway of the winding vale.<sup>137</sup>

*The Gentleman's Magazine* of 1784 praised *Louisa* effusively: 'To incidents most common, [Miss Seward's] uncommon poetical powers have given a glow, a pathos, which must be felt by all who have a taste for poetry.'<sup>138</sup> There was, however, a mixed report in *The Monthly Review*. Although it was admitted that a new literary form had been invented, the critic went on to grumble: 'We cannot, however persuade ourselves that it approaches to the degree of excellence which might have been expected from the talents of Miss Seward.' The poetess had, apparently, lost direction through 'flights of fancy' and it was not desirable 'to accumulate glaring metaphors and dazzle with superfluity of ornament'.<sup>139</sup> This marks perhaps the beginning of the gradual erosion of Anna's literary reputation, when her poetry began to be regarded as contrived and hyperbolic. Nevertheless, in 1785, an anonymous 34-page *Hyper-criticism* offered a spirited defence to these aspersions, claiming that 'the very essence of poetry is a bold, a glowing, a metaphoric style'.<sup>140</sup> That this kind of discussion was taking place shows how seriously Anna's work was being viewed in the literary world at the time.

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<sup>137</sup> Anna Seward, *Louisa, a Poetical Novel in Four Epistles* (Dublin: Messrs Jenkin, White, Byrne, Burton, Cash, and Davis, repr. British Library), Epistle 1, p. 2.

<sup>138</sup> *GM*, (May 1784) (p. 357), p. 209. ebook.

<<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=ZoU3AAAAYAAJ&pg=GBS.PA356>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>139</sup> *The Monthly Review*, Volume LXXI, (November 1784) (London: R. Griffiths, 1784), (p. 335, p. 340), p.257, p. 262. Google ebook. <<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=Q73kAAAAMAAJ&pg=GBS.PP6>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>140</sup> *Hyper-criticism on Miss Seward's Louisa, Including Observations on the Nature and Privileges of Poetic Language* (London: C. Dilly, 1785), (p. 14), p. 10. Google ebook.

As Robinson states, however, there were no subsequent imitations of *Louisa* in the eighteenth century and Anna's verse-novel may have faded into oblivion as a result.<sup>141</sup> The various legendary tales are also largely forgotten now, although there were further offerings, including *Edwin and Matilda* by Anne Hughes (also in 1784) and, in 1791, Fanny Burney's *Edwy and Elgiva*, adding to the ranks of mediæval lovers cursed with names starting with 'E'.

The success of *Louisa* brought further fame and fortune, which increased Anna's independence, but it also perhaps categorised her as a writer of romantic 'sentimental' fiction, which may have damaged her status as a respected poet. She also risked ridicule, by revealing elements of her life story as an unmarried woman, although she may not have appreciated this at the time.

In her preface, Anna says that the first 156 lines of *Louisa* were written when she was nineteen, which would date it to 1762 and the Kettle portrait sittings, soon after her parents had discouraged her from writing poetry. I believe that Anna's choice of Prior's *Henry and Emma* as a model may have represented a partial escape from the relentless control which Thomas Seward, ever the pedagogue, exerted over his daughter's education and reading habits. He allowed Anna to study the poem but he criticised it forcefully in the mid-1770s, when Anna was in her thirties:

Your character of Prior's Emma is certainly a true one; but as certainly an execrable one to be a Pattern for imitation, unless violent Passions uncontrolled by Reason Morality or Duty are not only justifiable but commendable. It was originally an old tale in the days of Romance and Prior has cloathed it in the most pathetic and delicate stile...[it] shows the infatuating power of Poetry...I would no more wish a Daughter or Friend of mine to follow her [Emma's] example...<sup>142</sup>

This fatherly advice is followed by a condemnation of Prior as showing a lack of moral judgement. Thomas's diatribe can be interpreted as a warning to Anna that she should not nurture sentimental dreams of romance, nor even perhaps consider writing about it. I might suggest that the finished *Louisa* can only have pleased Thomas for its high moral tone and expressions of filial duty, but it may have failed to respect his dislike of sentimentality. That the novel's publication occurred when his health was declining may be relevant here.

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< <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=jN9hAAAAcAAJ&pg=GBS.PA2&hl=en> > [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>141</sup> Robinson, p. 25.

<sup>142</sup> Thomas Seward, Letter to Nancy, SJBM, MS 2001.71.43. This letter was discussed earlier in a medical context.

As Robinson suggests, Anna presents the brave Louisa as a heroine with more self-belief, one who would not be fooled or bullied by the likes of Prior's duplicit Henry.<sup>143</sup> Hence, although Prior's Emma is redeemed by 'chaste tenderness', it could be said that her character flaw is not so much lack of respect for Reason or Duty but simple spinelessness. Likewise Pope's Eloisa is spoiled by her excessive 'voluptuousness', having had a sexual relationship with her lover.<sup>144</sup> In strait-laced Louisa we see therefore a girl who maintains her virginity, waiting patiently in her bower for her lost lover. Overall, Kairoff characterises Louisa as 'a modern British woman of sense as well as sensibility'.<sup>145</sup> I feel that this description could equally be applied to Anna herself.

Anna states in her preface that the first 156 lines of the poem were rediscovered 'sixteen months ago' after which she went on to complete it. This would imply a re-start in 1781 or 1782. However, the first epistle, which is by far the longest, is dated for October 1779. This date could be fictional, but it may indicate the actual time that *Louisa* was resumed. I have blurred the issue by allowing Anna to work on the novel in 1780, in order to illuminate the important parallels with Anna's life story:

The early section is used to set the scene, to establish Louisa's misery and rejection by Eugenio but there is otherwise very little information about the plot. When Anna began her novel, she had been involved in a secret love affair with Captain Temple, ended after ten months by the departure of his regiment from Lichfield.<sup>146</sup> She may not have formulated Louisa's story fully at that stage, but when she resumed the novel she had experienced several failed relationships including Temple, Major John Wright and Cornet (later General) Richard Vyse. Engagements to these three were terminated, Anna says, through parental intervention because the men were not financially secure, although Anna may have rejected Wright because he was much older and relatively uncultured.<sup>147</sup> It is also possible that Wright's father forbade the match because the Wright family were higher up the social scale as landed gentry. Temple certainly did not meet financial expectations, although he rose to the rank of Colonel later. Vyse seems to have jilted Anna in favour of her wealthy friend, Miss Spearman (Anna

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<sup>143</sup> Robinson, p. 3.

<sup>144</sup> Seward's Preface, *Louisa*.

<sup>145</sup> Kairoff, p.117.

<sup>146</sup> Letter 3, Nov 1762, *Journal and Sermons*, p. 18.

<sup>147</sup> Barnard, *Constructed Life*, pp. 73-74. However, in a previously unpublished 'Emma' letter of Aug 1764, Anna states very firmly that her parents prevented the marriage: *Journal and Sermons* pp.101-103.

Susannah), ‘...a graceful but not beautiful young lady. Her fortune, in her own possession, exceeded my future prospects.’<sup>148</sup>

This first Mrs Vyse, Anna Susanna, died in childbirth after a year of marriage, and Anna was prompted to write a monody in her sad memory. Vyse went on to marry a high-born heiress, Ann Howard, in May 1780, a useful date for my novel.<sup>149</sup> Temple has been difficult to identify but Marion Roberts lists his given name as Hugh.<sup>150</sup> His wife wrote to Anna in 1796 and a reply from Anna describes her earlier relationship with Temple, including her decision to reject him on reacquaintance in 1764.<sup>151</sup> There is a record of a London marriage for a Hugh Temple on 13<sup>th</sup> November 1780, and this further coincidence of dates has allowed me to add a coda to Anna’s regrets about lost loves.<sup>152</sup>

According to Anna, other suitors were directed Anna’s way by her parents and she refused them herself.<sup>153</sup> It seems clear to me that this pattern of failed courtships scarred her and may have contributed ultimately to repudiation of marriage. There were further attempts at matchmaking in the 1770s, including the attentions of a widower from Buxton, father of three children. Anna discouraged him, not least because he wore a wig, as older men often did.<sup>154</sup> Anna’s aversion to wigs I have made use of in my novel, along with her contempt for the fashionable ‘frizzed’ hairstyles for women of the time.<sup>155</sup>

In 1776, Boswell, Johnson’s acolyte and biographer, tried to start an affair with Anna, although he was married. In a less provincial setting one wonders whether Anna might have agreed to be his mistress: she flirted with him enough to send him a lock of hair, but it was accompanied by a short poem which poured cold water on his passion:

Not with the bright, yet dangerous rose of love,  
By Florio’s hand, be this light lock enwove,  
But with the lily, cull’d from Friendship’s bowers,  
That hides no thorns beneath its snowy flowers.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Letter to Mrs T-, March 1796, *Letters*, IV, (p. 179), p.177 ebook.

<sup>149</sup> Information on both marriages obtained through Ancestry.co.uk. [online].

<sup>150</sup> Roberts, *Chronology*, p. 8.

<sup>151</sup> Letter to Mrs T-, March 1796, *Letters*, IV, (pp. 175-178), pp. 173-176 ebook.

<sup>152</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 13.

<sup>153</sup> Letter to Mrs T-, as above.

<sup>154</sup> Letter to Mrs Sykes, September circa 1777, SJB, MS 2001.72.18.

<sup>155</sup> Letter to Mary Powys, circa 1777, SJB, MS 2001.76.7.

<sup>156</sup> ‘*With a Lock of the Author’s Hair to a Gentleman who Requested it*’, Seward ed. Moore *Poems*, II. p. 175.

Perhaps not surprisingly, ‘thorns’ were very much in evidence when she argued later with Boswell publicly over his biography of Johnson.<sup>157</sup>

All through this period, Anna’s relationship with Darwin may have been platonic, but I believe there was more to it. She knew him from her teenage years and when he married her friend, Mary Howard, in 1757, Anna may have harboured hopes of securing him for herself, that is if Richard Edgeworth is to be believed: ‘It seems that Mrs. Darwin had a little pique against Miss Seward, who had in fact been her rival with the Doctor.’<sup>158</sup> Desmond King-Hele repeats this assertion, channelled apparently from Charles Darwin, Erasmus’s grandson. King-Hele also describes Anna as ‘a little waspish and ambivalent about her famous neighbour [Darwin]’.<sup>159</sup> It is possible however that these claims related to prejudice against Anna, firstly from Edgeworth because she blamed him for Honora’s death, and secondly from the Darwin family because of her warts-and-all anecdotes about their beloved forefather in her *Life of Erasmus Darwin*.

After Darwin’s first wife died, he cohabited with his children’s governess, Mary Parker, and had two daughters with her, but he was able to remarry if he chose. It seems likely therefore that Anna and her parents would have considered him as a potential husband sooner or later, especially when he had established his successful medical practice. In the double standards of the day, his dalliances might have been ignored, and the shared interest in poetry would facilitate (in Anna’s mind at least) a marriage of convenience, as I imply in my novel. She was usually averse to the idea of marriage not primarily based on love, but my feeling is that she might have accepted Darwin had he undertaken a more serious courtship, if only because of her need for security and the chance of children.

My 1780 narrative describes Anna’s life at a time when she was suffering traumatic bereavement twice over, for Honora Sneyd/Edgeworth in April and for Elizabeth Seward, her mother, at the end of July. Honora had already been distanced by her marriage seven years before, but the loss of Anna’s mother must have hit particularly hard. Despite all this, Darwin chose to send his flirtatious ‘cat letter’ (from his cat, Snow, to Anna’s cat, Po Felina) only a month after Mrs Seward’s death, a letter which in effect offers Anna marriage. This may have been intended as light relief, and Anna responded in similar vein, but she must have been

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<sup>157</sup> Kairoff, p. 246.

<sup>158</sup> Edgeworth, I, p. 161.

<sup>159</sup> Desmond King-Hele, *Doctor of Revolutions, The Life and Genius of Erasmus Darwin* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1977), p. 46.

extremely vulnerable at the time. It seems inconceivable to me therefore that she did not view Darwin's letter as a serious proposal.

At the end of her entertaining reply, Anna writes: 'Marry you Mr Snow I cannot; since though the laws of our community might not oppose our connection, yet those of principle, of delicacy, of duty to my mistress, do very powerfully oppose it.'<sup>160</sup> This uncompromising rejection is followed, however, by an offer to 'preside at your concert' where Po Felina and Snow are to perform competitive ballads. To me, this suggests that further approaches by Darwin might not have been repulsed quite so firmly.<sup>161</sup>

Late in 1780, Anna's father seems to have been showing signs of debilitating illness, necessitating long-term care. At the same time, Darwin left for Derby, in order to marry Eliza Pole, now a wealthy widow. Anna may have known of Darwin's attachment to Eliza, but while the husband was alive Darwin could not follow through. Darwin's departure thus extinguished any hopes of the union offered so tantalisingly in his cat epistle. Hence, as my novel progresses, Anna is seen to be toying with the idea of marrying Darwin as she also begins to realise that John Saville, saddled with his 'vixenish' wife, Mary, is beyond her reach.

Returning to *Louisa*: as Kairoff describes, the characters of Anna's novel are all 'stock' choices, to be found in literature of the period.<sup>162</sup> Nevertheless they can be seen as representative of the people closest to Anna, with Anna herself as the innocent, virginal Louisa. Certainly the heroine's rejection by her lover seems to refer to some or all of Anna's unsuccessful relationships in her twenties and thirties, especially the near engagement to Cornet Vyse. The hapless Eugenio is allowed to justify his prosperous marriage through filial duty, and here Vyse's selection of Anna's friend, Miss Spearman, was probably influenced by such considerations. As well as Wright, Temple and Vyse, Eugenio may also represent Saville, with his beautiful voice, although in Eugenio's case it is speech rather than music which captivates Louisa:

Such soft, insinuating sweetness knows,  
As from that voice in melting accent flows.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Anna Seward's *Life of Erasmus Darwin*, p. 114.

<sup>161</sup> Marion Roberts, in Appendix 1 of her thesis, has identified two versions of Darwin's 'cat letter', the first as it appeared in Seward's *Life of Erasmus Darwin*, and the second from Sir Francis Sachaverel Darwin's papers held in Cambridge. Francis was Darwin's second son by Eliza Pole. Roberts sees Seward's version as 'embellished' and perhaps intended as 'retaliation', presumably for Darwin's desertion. I am not convinced that the relatively minor differences support this argument however.

<sup>162</sup> Kairoff, p. 146.

<sup>163</sup> *Louisa*, Epistle 1, p. 7.

This would place wealthy Emira as Mary Saville, although Mary had been a servant, made pregnant by middle-class Saville who was then obliged to marry her.<sup>164</sup> It is not difficult to see how the Saville marriage might have soured therefore. Kairoff views Emira as the victim in a loveless marriage, emotionally abused by a husband whose affections are promised elsewhere.<sup>165</sup> I would add here that the abuse of Aunt Martin and her daughter may have inspired Anna as she constructed Emira, although by convention Emira has to be evil, superficially at least, in order to be Louisa's nemesis, redeemed only by her death-bed repentance.

When Anna refined *Louisa* she may also have had Darwin in mind, along with his choice of wives: Mary Howard was possibly richer than Anna and able to facilitate the establishment of his medical practice; likewise Eliza Pole had both wealth and aristocratic connections. Caroline Franklin describes *Louisa* as 'a story typical of the age of sensibility in that it pits the importance of feelings against the power of 'attractive Commerce''.<sup>166</sup> In similar vein, Kairoff discusses how *Louisa* is a critique of mercenary marriages, often brokered by parents anxious to gain money and status.<sup>167</sup> Repenting his actions made in the name of duty, Eugenio is freed of the rich Emira by her untimely death, allowing him to return to Louisa's loving embrace. I might conjecture that an untimely death is the fate that Anna, in her worst moments, would have wished for Eliza Pole, five years younger than Anna, fifteen years younger than Darwin, and able to supply the good Doctor with several further children.

Missing from *Louisa* is a character closely resembling Anna's beloved foster-sister, Honora, but perhaps the go-between, Emma, might fulfil this role as the friend separated by distance. Eugenio's father, Ernesto, is a classic eighteenth-century patriarch and, as Kairoff says, most likely a version of Anna's father, a portrayal motivated by Anna's resentment at his interference in her love affairs.<sup>168</sup> Ernesto is exonerated later, however, by his actions to reunite Louisa with his son.

Towards the end of *Louisa*, Eugenio's infant daughter, neglected by her mother, is handed over to Louisa. I see a reference here to Anna's own situation as a childless spinster.

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<sup>164</sup> Roberts, describes this marriage using archive records: Roberts, p. 77.

<sup>165</sup> Kairoff, p. 156.

<sup>166</sup> Caroline Franklin, introduction to Anna Seward's *Louisa, A Poetical Novel in Four Epistles*, p. x., in: *The Romantics: Women Poets*, 12 vols (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996). The quote 'attractive Commerce' is from *Louisa*, Epistle 1, p. 15, describing the pressures of foreign trade and filial duty which have led to Eugenio's departure abroad.

<sup>167</sup> Kairoff, p. 150.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, p. 153.

Her education of and affection for Honora, and later her temporary adoption of young Marianne Sykes, both suggest that Anna had strong nurturing instincts, and I believe that she would have dearly liked to bring up a daughter of her own had her circumstances been different.<sup>169</sup> If Emira's fictional infant had been gendered male, his father would be largely responsible for his welfare and education, whereas a daughter would be seen as within the province of a mother or step-mother.

Barnard's assessment of *Louisa* includes the following:

Seward's single status, her childlessness and her relationships with John Saville and her foster-sister, Honora Sneyd, are mirrored in the character Louisa, who retains a virginal quality when her lover's wife dies leaving a child. She willingly adopts the role of the child's mother without having had any sexual contact.<sup>170</sup>

In this reading, Eugenio, the lover would represent both Honora and Saville, as lost loves, but, as I have said, there are echoes too of Anna's other relationships in the situation played out through Eugenio's character. I would argue also that, while Louisa's recovery of Eugenio displays wish-fulfilment on Anna's part, another object of the exercise is the acquisition of a baby girl to be nurtured and educated, thus demonstrating her view of Honora as 'my child of recompense, as your little Anna is yours', a comment made in a letter to a female friend in 1797.<sup>171</sup>

### **A Sapphist Monster?**

I am left with the question of whether Anna chose not to marry because she had lesbian tendencies, as suggested by her attachments to Honora and other young women, and also her association with the Ladies of Llangollen, unmarried ladies cohabiting as a loving couple. Anna has acquired the cachet of lesbianism in a number of scholarly works, including *Surpassing the Love of Men* by Lillian Faderman, who stresses the importance of Anna's romantic friendships with women, especially Honora. With regard to Anna's love for Honora, Faderman states: 'it cannot be assumed that, because it probably had no genital expression, this passion was not

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<sup>169</sup> Marianne's stay with Anna, *Portrait*, Chapter 10, Emma letter, p. 147-9. Marianne's letter about eating oysters is quoted in E.M Forster's history of his grandmother, Marianne Thornton, who was Marianne Sykes's daughter: E.M Forster, *Marianne Thornton, 1797-1887, A Domestic Biography*, ed. by Evelyn Hanquart-Turner (London: André Deutsch Ltd, 2000), p. 24.

<sup>170</sup> Barnard, *Constructed Life*, p. 25.

<sup>171</sup> Letter to Mrs Stokes, March 1797, *Letters*, IV, (p. 327), p. 325. ebook.



deep and intense.’<sup>172</sup> More recently, Terry Castle cites Anna’s ‘exorbitant feelings for women’ as a justification for including Anna’s work in *The Literature of Lesbianism* (2003).<sup>173</sup>

Sapphism, as lesbianism was known, was regarded as aberrant in the late eighteenth century although, unlike male homosexuality, it was not actually illegal.<sup>174</sup> It may have been tolerated by virtue of being hidden, but public disclosure was a different matter. Elizabeth Mavor discusses the distress experienced by the Ladies of Llangollen, when a newspaper article in 1790 implied that they were indeed Sapphists.<sup>175</sup> At the time there was also a scandal about Ann Damer, the sculptress, and her relationship with Elizabeth Farren, the actress.<sup>176</sup> Although bed-sharing by women was common, it seems to me unlikely that Anna would have pursued a sexual relationship with Honora within their strictly controlled home setting, although a ‘romantic friendship’ (non-sexual) was perhaps tolerated. Honora’s return to her father’s house, in 1771, may have reflected Sneyd’s intention to see his daughter married to an approved suitor, but there may also have been suspicions of an unhealthy attachment between Anna and Honora. In 1774, following a eulogy about Honora’s place as ‘the object of my heart’s dotage’ Anna laments to Mary Powys: ‘The first terror...was the information you gave me in the year 1770, that the breath of Censure threaten’d to blast [my and Honora’s] tranquillity – yet I fondly hop’d it might not have the power to wound us.’<sup>177</sup>

Mavor infers that most of Anna’s female friendships had lesbian foundations, beginning with Honora, and moving on to the later friendships, including that with young Elizabeth Cornwallis (a daughter of the Bishop of Lichfield) who was bequeathed five guineas in Anna’s Will. Anna referred romantically to Elizabeth as ‘Clarissa’ but the friendship foundered because of the bishop’s disapproval and the risk of Anna’s loss of tenancy of the Bishop’s Palace.<sup>178</sup> Towards the end of her life, Anna employed Elizabeth Fern as companion and this lady was bequeathed an annuity of sixty pounds, almost twice that awarded to Mary Atkins, Anna’s housekeeper. Unlike the romantic friendship of the Llangollen Ladies, Fern’s involvement acted as a means of supporting Anna in later life, as was common for elderly

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<sup>172</sup> Lilian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (London: Junction Books, 1981), p. 135.

<sup>173</sup> *The Literature of Lesbianism*, ed. by Terry Castle (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 338.

<sup>174</sup> Catherine Craft-Fairchild, *Sexual and Textual Indeterminacy: Eighteenth-Century English Representations of Sapphism in Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 15.3 (2006), pp. 408-431.  
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4629670>> [accessed 12 August 2021].

<sup>175</sup> Elizabeth Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973, repr. 1976), pp. 73-75.

<sup>176</sup> This affair provides the main narrative for Donohue’s 2004 novel, *Life Mask*, as discussed in Part 1.

<sup>177</sup> Powys and Sykes letters, SJB 2001.76.10.

<sup>178</sup> Mavor, p. 89.

women of the upper classes living alone. Fern seems to have been younger, but with little chance of marriage because of disfigurement, as mentioned below.

Barnard does not categorise Anna as lesbian, although she suggests that Anna's former romantic attachments to men, as described in her 1796 letter to Mrs Temple, may have been foregrounded because of contemporary gossip about 'unnatural' practices between female friends.<sup>179</sup> For instance Hester Thrale-Piozzi, a mutual friend of Anna and the Llangollen Ladies, was well-known for her disapproval of Sapphism:

The Queen of France is at the Head of a Set of Monsters call'd by each other *Sapphists*, who boast her Example; and deserve to be thrown with the *He Demons* that haunt each other likewise, into Mount Vesuvius. *That Vice* increases hourly in Extent.<sup>180</sup>

Redfern Barrett places Anna as within the queer spectrum, again because of her attachments to female friends and her apparent dislike of matrimony. He states: '... Seward had friends of both sexes, though she only pursued true romantic friendships with women.'<sup>181</sup> This, like Mavor's assertions, seems to downplay her close attachment to Saville, which, in its early stages at least, may have had a romantic basis. Barrett also comments: 'Seward's fascination with women was not exclusively spiritual: she idolised female beauty and would describe in detail the physical form of others.'<sup>182</sup> I can concur with Barrett here, but in some of the examples found in her letters, Anna seems to be assessing the subject's marriage prospects, along with searching for resemblances to Honora. In a letter of 1804, she laments the skin rash suffered by her companion, Miss Fern, a tragedy which is likely to destroy the poor lady's chance of marriage.<sup>183</sup> Anna frequently describes both women and men in physical terms, sometimes flattering, and sometimes not, but very much as a way of passing on a mental image to her co-correspondent. Hence my impression is that she hopes to see the daughters of friends and acquaintances happily married, but for love as well as financial security. On the occasions

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<sup>179</sup> Barnard, *Constructed Life*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>180</sup> Hester Thrale-Piozzi, *Thraliana, The diary of Mrs Hester Lynch-Thrale, later Mrs Piozzi*, Vol II (1784-1809), ed. by Katharine Balderston (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), p.740. Internet Archive ebook. <<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.59336/page/n3/mode/2up>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>181</sup> Redfern Barrett, 'Anna Seward's Queer Ideal', Chapter 2, p. 8, in: *Queer Friendship: same sex love in the works of Thomas Gray, Anna Seward, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin*, (2010) PhD thesis, Swansea University.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

<sup>183</sup> Letter to Charles Simpson, Sept 1804, *Letters*, VI, (pp. 192-193), pp. 190-191 ebook. This letter also describes Anna's cousin, Susan Seward, as a 'bank-bill', possessing fortune, merit and accomplishments, i.e. highly marriageable, especially from a financial perspective.

when she seems to be discouraging friends from matrimony, I feel that it relates to her fear of losing their friendship as they withdraw into married life.

As Judith Bennett and Amy Froide discuss, in relation to Anna's era: 'Fathers, brothers, and male lovers were certainly important to singlewomen, but for love, support, and shared residence, singlewomen turned more often to women.'<sup>184</sup> Anna was certainly capable of strong attachments to women and girls, including the romantic friendships favoured by Faderman and Mavor, but there remains no direct evidence of homosexual activity on Anna's part, although lesbian tendencies cannot be entirely excluded. Nevertheless, I would argue that Anna saw herself in these relationships as guardian, mentor, and mother-figure rather than as a lover. Having lost first her sister, Sarah, and then Honora, Anna was lonely, and she spent her life searching for a surrogate for both, as well as for the child she could not have. Her association with the Ladies of Llangollen was partly brokered by friends, and it may also have been a career move, since many of the celebrities of the day were invited to the romantic cottage with its aristocratic inhabitants. The correspondence with the Ladies blossomed through similar interests, and I believe that Anna envied the Ladies' simple rural lifestyle, relatively free from masculine control. Anna's eulogistic poem *Llangollen Vale* is full of lyrical descriptions of scenery, but there is little mention of the Ladies themselves.<sup>185</sup> I might speculate that, if circumstances had been different, Anna could well have made a similar move with the right female companion and I have allowed Mary Powys to hint at this in my novel, on the summer visit to the Royal Academy exhibition.<sup>186</sup>

### **The Yoke of Marriage, The Blessing of Children**

I believe that Anna in her teens and twenties nurtured dreams of romantic love leading to happy marriage, but that she was also aware of the realities of marriage for a woman: the loss of independence which involved giving up rights to a career, property, children and ultimately her own body. Anna was also a witness to the physical and mental torment experienced by her aunt, Anna Martin, and her cousin, Nancy: 'My Uncle's tyranny to my Aunt increases daily, & it is a dreadful evil indeed – It is now aspir'd to personal abuse.'<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Judith M Bennett and Amy M. Froide, 'A Singular Past', *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, ed. by Judith M. Bennett and Amy M Froide, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1999) Chapter 1, p. 26.

<sup>185</sup> Seward, ed. Moore, I, p. 149.

<sup>186</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 7.

<sup>187</sup> Letter to Dorothy Sykes, mid 1770s, SJBM, MS 2001.72.2.

Anna's juvenile letters certainly imply ambivalence about marriage. A discussion with 'Emma' in 1762 warns about a man who is considerate and appealing in courtship:

If he should treat you, after marriage, with tolerable kindness and good nature, it is the best you have reasonably to expect...[consider] the delights you must renounce [for marriage] in the morning of your youth.<sup>188</sup>

Having said that, she bitterly resented her situation as a spinster controlled by her parents. As she writes to Dorothy Sykes in May 1773:

An unmarried woman, from twenty-five till fifty, is often oblig'd to earn her daily bread by the most abject submissions to people, perhaps her inferiors in understanding, because they gave her a being which they render wretched. The disposal of her time, the choice of her friends, the dearest affection of her soul, are wrested from her by caprice, or wrong judgement.

Perhaps in consideration for her friend's seniority, Anna adds in mitigation:

It is certainly the duty of children of all ages to be respectful and obliging to their Parents thro' their whole life. Till a proper age obedience is also their duty, after that age if Parents demand to see, hear, think, and judge for their children and direct their actions they are unreasonable and tyrannic.<sup>189</sup>

Anna's definition of a 'proper age' is not given, but I can only assume that, at the age of thirty, she felt herself included in this absolution from total obedience to her parents.

In an earlier letter of 1767 to 'Emma', Anna warns about a loveless marriage. Presumably the suitor in question is bound for India:

What say you to being a nabobess?... Gold and silver muslins, and pearls and diamonds, will suit thy empress kind of figure. But has he, who can bestow them, made an interest in thy heart? If he has not, if he cannot, then disdain, I pray thee, the glittering baubles!...It is true, the chances are extremely against a woman ever marrying, who resolves not to approach the altar of Hymen without she is led thither by a man whom she prefers to all the rest of his sex.<sup>190</sup>

Hence love is all important, but there are echoes here of the Oriental jewels possessed by the anti-heroine, Emira, in *Louisa*: the wealth, along with beauty, which seduces Louisa's lover. This fascination with the East was probably fostered by the availability of eligible young men employed by the East India company at the time, many of whom made their fortunes: Tilly Kettle established a successful portrait business in India in the 1770s, painting these 'nabobs' and their wives. Also, in the early 1760s, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Embassy Letters* were published, describing her life in Turkey and Asia, as well as advocating the Eastern method of

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<sup>188</sup> Letter 4, Barnard, *Journal*, p. 24.

<sup>189</sup> Letter to Dorothy Sykes, May 1773, SJBM, MS 2001.72.1.

<sup>190</sup> Letter 36, Barnard, *Journal*, p.142.

smallpox vaccination. Later, Anna admired the translations of Eastern poetry by Sir William Jones, Orientalist.<sup>191</sup>

In the same 1767 letter, Anna, who was staying at Gotham with the Martin family, describes her unhappy cousin, Nancy, as taking her tastes and opinions from her friends, but there are hints about the family dysfunction which destroys Nancy's confidence: 'Dear girl! heavily, with her, must drag the cold and darkened months ! — No sister , no companion out of the parental character!'<sup>192</sup>

This juxtaposition of oriental wealth and treasure with the circumstances of domestic abuse are the origin of my use of Emira's 'boast of Oriental mines', as depicted in *Louisa*.<sup>193</sup> The magnificent jewel at Emira's waist becomes a topaz brooch, given by Uncle Martin to his wife to be worn compulsorily at family occasions, thus metonymic of the abuse she suffers from him.<sup>194</sup>

At the end of the 1767 'Emma' letter, Anna enthuses about the pleasant lifestyle of a local parson and his wife: 'Without children they seem to have none of the cares of life, nor to want any of its pleasures which are beyond their reach.' The contrast with the misery of the Martin household must have been striking, but there are intimations also that a lack of children offers advantages. Later, in a letter of 1792 to her languishing friend Mrs T-, she refers to the pain and debility of infant nurture, although this confers 'the blessing of children', and in 1793 'the pain of bearing and the fatigue of nursing [children]' is reiterated to the same friend, who is still incapacitated, not least because of marital discord.<sup>195</sup>

With regard to the dangers of childbirth, Anna had only to consider her mother and other friends and family who suffered stillbirths, miscarriages, infant death, and, not infrequently, maternal death. Without reliable contraception, multiple pregnancies were unavoidable for a married woman prior to the menopause, unless she or her husband was infertile, or they were separated by circumstances. There was no national birth or death registration at the time, although most were recorded in parish registers through baptism and

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<sup>191</sup> Anna's sonnet 50, *A Persian King to His Son Seward*, ed. Moore, *Poems*, I, p.203. This paraphrases one of Jones's prose translations of an Arabian poem in his 1772 *Essay on the Poetry of the Eastern Nations*.

<sup>192</sup> Letter 36, Barnard, *Journal* p. 142.

<sup>193</sup> *Louisa*, Epistle 2, p. 30.

<sup>194</sup> Portrait, p. 85.

<sup>195</sup> *Letters*, III, p. 149 and p. 310.

burial. Roberts has identified several lost siblings for Anna through these registers and I have confirmed some of her findings through *Ancestry.co.uk*.

In her poem *Eyam*, Anna revisits Eyam church and sees white gloves hanging over an empty seat, a local custom marking the death of a young person. She recalls her baby sister, Jane, known as Jenny, born in 1747 and dead by the age of seven months, when Anna was five:

Passing the vacant Pulpit to the space  
Where humble rails the decent Altar grace,  
And where my infant sister's ashes sleep  
Whose loss I left the childish sport to weep.<sup>196</sup>

This poem inspired my fictional anecdote about a church service at Eyam where Anna as a young child remembers her infant sister.<sup>197</sup> Clearly, Jenny's death seriously affected Anna, as it did her parents. Her father's sad little poem, *Ode on a Lady's Illness after the Death of her Child* reflects on the child's beauty, his wife's depression and his own guilt at the loss, and again I am left wondering whether he suffered from syphilis:

But oh just God! If this affliction's sent  
To my dear consort for her husband's sin...<sup>198</sup>

It is possible to estimate infant death rates from the annual bills of mortality published in journals such as the *London Magazine and Monthly Chronologer*. In 1738, 16,060 children were christened, and 9,600 infants (under two) were buried. In 1746, 14,477 children were christened and again 9,600 infants buried, implying that more than half of children born died before the age of two in that era.<sup>199</sup> This was the situation in London, but it is unlikely that the provinces fared much better. In 1780, for 16,631 births in London, 6,810 infants died, a reduction perhaps but still a death rate for infants of over 40%.<sup>200</sup> By this time the reports included causes of death for adults and children. Amongst such mysteries as 'Mortification' (sepsis and gangrene) and 'Rising of the Lights' (lung problems), maternal deaths in 'Childbed'

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<sup>196</sup> Seward ed Moore, *Poems*, I, pp. 168-9.

<sup>197</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 3.

<sup>198</sup> *The Poetical Register and Repository of Fugitive Poetry for 1805* (London: F. & C. Rivington, 1807), pp. 13-14. Google ebook. This edition also contains poems by Anna, who may have arranged the publication of her father's poem.

<sup>199</sup> Annual bills of mortality in: *The London Magazine and Monthly Chronocler for 1738* (London: T. Astley), (p. 630), p. 605, Google ebook. <<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=PLoPAAAAQAAJ&pg=GBS.PP4>> [accessed 18 October 2021]; also in *The London Magazine and Monthly Chronocler for 1746* (London: T. Astley), (p. 647), p. 650, Google ebook.

<<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=wfoqAAAAYAAJ&pg=GBS.PP4>> [accessed 18 October 2021]. The figures for 1780 were collated from the monthly bills of mortality in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 1780, ed. by Sylvanus Urban (London: D. Henry), Google ebook. <<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=FyM7AAAAYAAJ&pg=GBS.PA19>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

were recorded as 190, representing 11.4 per 1,000 births. For comparison, the current UK maternal death rate is calculated as less than one in 10,000 births.<sup>201</sup>

Whilst Anna may never have studied statistics, she experienced the results both in her own family and in the families of friends and relatives, often commiserating with them on child and maternal deaths. Conversely, in a letter of 1793 to Saville she notes with joy, almost surprise, that the Sykes family have managed to raise all of their children but one.<sup>202</sup>

### **Merry Widow or Miserable Old Maid?**

As I have mentioned, Anna's close friend, Miss Spearman, died in childbirth, and Anna's monody laments this untimely death. Anna points out to the bereaved husband, however, that his wife has gone to a happier place (Heaven) and that she will never have to suffer the misery of losing her husband:

The large arrears of grief she must have paid,  
Had she not early sunk in death's eternal shade.<sup>203</sup>

The loss of children may also have been in Anna's mind but the grief in question is ostensibly related to widowhood. I have portrayed the Seward's family friend, the awful Molly Cobb, as a merry widow, financially independent, but also in pursuit of a husband. Well past middle age, her chances of finding one were likely to be slim without the attraction of her money. Widowhood was not a prospect to be relished in general because financial security was not guaranteed, particularly if property passed down into the male line. Widowed men were usually in a better position, although they were often obliged to remarry quickly to provide care for their children and to keep their households running smoothly. Men who wished to father more children were likely to choose younger, fertile women and, if these subsequent wives survived childbirth, there was a greater chance of them being widowed themselves by husbands considerably older.

Darwin, after a few years as a widower, selected the much younger Eliza Pole once she was widowed, but she outlived him by more than 30 years. Edgeworth married four times in total and fathered more than 20 children. After Honora's death in May 1780, he married her sister, Elizabeth, after only seven months. John Sneyd, Honora's cousin, who married Anna's

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<sup>201</sup> Statistics reported in 'BAME maternal mortality' UK government press release (2 Sept 2020) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-working-with-midwives-medical-experts-and-academics-to-investigate-bame-maternal-mortality>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>202</sup> *Letters*, III, p. 273. Google ebook.

<sup>203</sup> 'Monody on Mrs Richard Vyse', Seward, ed. Moore *Poems*, II, p. 102.

friend, Polly Adey, was reported by Anna in 1794 to have danced with three women at a ball in 1757, and to have subsequently married each one in turn.<sup>204</sup> Richard Hall remarried in December 1780, just 11 months after the death of Anna's cousin Eleanor.<sup>205</sup> Thus, for Anna, marriage offered prospects of early death, or, if she survived, the chance of a prolonged and impoverished widowhood. Nevertheless, this was to be balanced against the unpalatable position of remaining single for life, lonely and rejected by a society which ridiculed and despised old maids.

In my novel I have used Anna's interactions with the fictional Featherstone sisters to illustrate the potential plight of older unmarried women, especially those with limited financial support. In the miserable cottage of these two old maids, Anna is obliged to listen to 'prolonged accounts of sad lives, chances missed and offers not taken,' while she wonders whether Darwin has abandoned her, thus adding to the catalogue of her own missed opportunities, along with forebodings about her future.<sup>206</sup>

In 1759 Dr Johnson saw old maids as a threat: 'Amazonian...nearest to independence, and most likely to be animated by revenge against masculine authority', and I have alluded to this in Chapter 1 of my novel.<sup>207</sup> Earlier, in 1727, Thomas Ruffe poked fun at old maids in his burlesque poem '*An Old Maid's Fortune*: 'old and stale' was one of many unflattering descriptions of an older woman who had missed out on marriage.<sup>208</sup> Amy Froide gives further examples of how older single women were frequently satirised throughout the eighteenth century by male authors.<sup>209</sup>

The worst insult to Anna's spinsterhood came from her friend, William Hayley, who published an essay anonymously in 1785 in defence, supposedly, of old maids. In reality it reinforced much of the general condemnation, including that such women had failed, despite their best endeavours, to achieve the 'golden chain of marriage', and that they envied their married sisters, making them malevolent and capable of the black arts, thus perpetuating the

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<sup>204</sup> *Letters*, III, p. 363, ebook.

<sup>205</sup> Mike Rendell, *The Journal of a Georgian Gentleman* (Brighton: The Book Guild Ltd., 2011), p. 145.

<sup>206</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 10, p. 144.

<sup>207</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Idler* number 87 (December 15, 1759), Samuel Johnson's Essays, republished 260 years later [online] < <https://www.johnsonessays.com/the-idler/amazonian-bravery-revived/> > [accessed 12 August 2021]. Johnson's 'Amazons': *Portrait*, Chapter 1, p. 10.

<sup>208</sup> Thomas Ruffe, *An Old Maid's Fortune: or, the Bride at her Wits-End, A Burlesque Poem, occasion'd by the reading of Hans Carvell* (London: John Applebee, 1727), p. 2. Google ebook. <<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=8qZYAAAACAAJ&pg=GBS.PP6>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>209</sup> Amy M Froide, 'Spinsters, Superannuated Virgins, and Old Maids: Representations of Singlewomen' in: *Never Married, Singlewomen in Early Modern England*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Chapter 6, pp. 173-178.



mores of witch-hunting.<sup>210</sup> The essay was dedicated to the writer, Elizabeth Carter, a lifelong spinster, and one can only wonder what she made of it.

Froide shows how Anna was placed in a difficult position with regard to Hayley's essay.<sup>211</sup> Anna had befriended Hayley in order to further her career and at first she used humour to ally herself with her 'sisters, the old maids' as portrayed by Hayley.<sup>212</sup> Later she became openly critical of Hayley's satire and this may have led to cooling of the friendship. Despite this, I believe that Anna did not truly see herself as an old maid. Two years later she praises the 'spirited portrait in poetry of the Votary of Scandal, The Detestable Old Maid' in a poem by Theophilus Swift, *The Temple of Folly*.<sup>213</sup> She expresses some reservations about the poem, especially its length, but makes no comments about the subject matter.

Anna's older friend, Anne Mompesson, was a descendant of the Reverend Mompesson, who placed Eyam village into quarantine against the Plague in 1665. This independent lady administered her family estates but did not marry, although she adopted the courtesy title of Mrs, as did many older unmarried women, in order to confer status and respectability (as also did actresses and senior female servants).<sup>214</sup> Elizabeth Carter is styled Mrs in her published letters to Elizabeth Montagu, who is also styled as Mrs, but by right of marriage.<sup>215</sup> Anna was writing to a Mrs Mary Powys in the late 1790's but more formally to a well-to-do Mrs Mary Powys of Berwick, who was married with a daughter. It is possible that the former was her old friend, Miss Powys, of Shrewsbury Abbey, now elevated to Mrs by virtue of age alone. Hence the title of Miss, retained by an older woman, implied 'old maid', someone who had failed to trap a husband. Nevertheless, Anna chose to be styled as Miss throughout her life, and I might suggest that this reflects her confidence as an unmarried woman, independent in a patriarchal society, proud to be an 'autumnal spinster' rather than denigrated as an old maid.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> William Hayley, *A Philosophical, Historical, and Moral Essay on Old Maids, by a Friend to the Sisterhood*, 3 vols (London: T. Cadell, 1785), I, (p. 86), p. 110. Google ebook.

<<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=YwEqAAAAYAAJ&pg=GBS.PR2>> [accessed 18 October 2021]

<sup>211</sup> Froide, pp. 213-214.

<sup>212</sup> Letter to Court Dewes, January 1786, *Letters*, I, (p. 115), p.109 ebook.

<sup>213</sup> Letter to Humphrey Repton, October 1788, *Letters*, II, (p. 175), p. 171 ebook.

Theophilus Swift, *The Temple of Folly in Four Cantos* (London: J. Johnson, 1787), Google ebook.

<<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=kKdfAAAACAAJ&pg=GBS.PR2>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>214</sup> Matty is often addressed as Mrs Atkins in my novel.

<sup>215</sup> Elizabeth Carter, *The Letters of Mrs Elizabeth Carter to Mrs Montagu between the years 1755 and 1800*, ed. by Montagu Pennington, (London: F.C & J. Rivington, 1817), Google ebook

<<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=7YQEAQAIAAJ&pg=GBS.PP10&hl=en>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

<sup>216</sup> Letter to Miss Wingfield, July 1795, *Letters*, IV, (p. 82), p. 80 ebook.

Mary Powys, apparently chose to remain single: ‘You seem resolv’d against marriage’ writes Anna in about 1772, before wishing that her friend was married ‘...for Love, & settled in the country, upon an income of 7 hundred pds [pounds]’.<sup>217</sup> I believe that this would have been Anna’s wish for herself, a love-based marriage which also gave financial security. As it was, following her father’s death, Anna was obliged to settle for less than £400 annually and life in Lichfield without a husband, although supported emotionally by her long-term relationship with John Saville.<sup>218</sup>

Earlier, in a 1763 ‘Letter to Emma’, Anna refers to her sister Sarah’s passionless fiancé, Mr Porter, and the ‘irrevocable ceremony’ of marriage. Anna wonders that: ‘there are not yet more old Maids, ambling, bridling over the dim, unvaried plains of Celibacy’.<sup>219</sup> She implies that celibacy is less than desirable, but perhaps better than a loveless marriage, which cannot be reversed. Norma Clarke uses this quote to illustrate Anna’s preference for spinsterhood, but I feel that Anna is showing ambivalence rather than complete rejection of marriage.<sup>220</sup> A reinforcement of this ambivalence comes in her 1777 letter to Dorothy Sykes, where Anna discounts the Buxton widower as a potential husband:

‘It is to me astonishing that Women have ventur’d to marry, unsusceptible of passionate partiality to their Husband without which that state must probably be miserable - at best insipid; for ever including such dearer sweeter hope.’<sup>221</sup>

Anna often refers to the marriage of various friends and relatives in her letters, not always enthusiastically. A late example of her approval, however, occurs in a letter to Walter Scott, dated November 1807. As almost a postscript she writes: ‘On Monday last my young cousin Miss [Susan] Seward...was very advantageously married to Major Burrowes, late of the 38<sup>th</sup> regiment of foot, the heir to a large estate and in himself all that a reasonable young woman can desire in a husband; esteemed and beloved by all who know him.’<sup>222</sup>

This might signify the loss of another of Anna’s protégés to wedlock, and it is possible that criticism of the marriage has been removed by editing, but if not, Anna seems to be pleased

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<sup>217</sup> Letter to Mary Powys, SJB, MS 2001.76.4.

<sup>218</sup> Anna’s income: Letter to Mrs Piozzi, Apr 1790, *Letters*, III, (p. 7), p. 5 ebook.

<sup>219</sup> Letter 13, June 1763, Barnard, *Journal*, p. 56.

<sup>220</sup> Norma Clarke, *The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Letters* (London: Pimlico, 2004), p. 35.

<sup>221</sup> Letter to Mrs Sykes, September, circa 1777, SJB, MS 2001.72.18.

<sup>222</sup> *Letters*, VI, (p. 490), p. 388 ebook. This is the final paragraph in the last letter of Constable’s edited collection, written approximately 18 months before Anna’s death. In some ways it offers the happy ending of an ideal marriage, although Susan Seward was described by Anna earlier as a ‘bank-bill’ because of the attraction of her monetary fortune to a potential husband.

about this happy outcome, if perhaps a little wistful that she has never been able to capture such an ideal husband for herself.

Overall, I believe that Anna wanted her protégés, including sister, Sarah, and foster-sister, Honora, to achieve the perfect marital union: a love-match to a man with similar interests, a comfortable income and the willingness to allow his wife to pursue a career. This ideal husband might also permit his wife to maintain her former female friendships. I think it likely that Anna would have accepted such a union for herself, rather than be left as an old maid. Later, as she witnessed the drawbacks of matrimony, she embraced spinsterhood as both desirable and inevitable. My novel captures her at the time when she is caught between these two states.

### **Marriage and Authorship**

I have carried out a brief survey of some of the successful female authors of Anna's era in relation to marriage and children:

Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806), Hannah More (1745-1833), and Helen Maria Williams (1751-1827) all remained single, without children.

Elizabeth Montagu (1718-1800) married at age 22 to a man of 50, had one son who died and she was estranged from her husband later.

Elizabeth Griffith (1727-1793) was married, had two children, and supported her family throughout her husband's bankruptcy and later.

Charlotte Lennox (1730-1804) had two children, worked to support her husband and they were later separated.

Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743-1825), married at 31, suffered an unhappy marriage and adopted a child.

Catherine Macaulay (1713-1791) married twice, the second time to a much younger man, and had one recorded child.

Hannah Cowley (1743-1809) was married at 26 but separated later, having had three children.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) married at 21, separated thirty years later and she had two children.

Anne Radcliffe (1764-1823), married at 22 and had no recorded children.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) had an illegitimate child and married later, only to die in childbirth.

Charlotte Turner Smith (1749-1806) was pushed into marriage at the age of fifteen and had at least twelve children. She supported the family with her writing during her husband's imprisonment for debt, but later left her husband.

Mary Robinson (1757-1800) married young and had at least one child. She also supported her husband by working as an actress while he was in debtors' prison. During or after her affair with the Prince of Wales, she separated from her husband. The prince paid an annuity (unreliably) but otherwise she supported herself with her writing.

Finally, Fanny Burney (1752-1840) married for love at age 41, having had a successful literary career and five years employment with Queen Charlotte at Court. After her marriage she had one son and supported the family with her writing.

This list includes seven of the women portrayed by Samuel in *The Nine Muses of Great Britain*, the 1778 picture Anna discusses with her friend, Mary, at their visit to the Royal Academy.<sup>223</sup> These literary women were Carter, More, Montagu, Lennox, Barbauld, Macaulay, and Griffith. The other two 'Muses' were Elizabeth Sheridan (1754-1792), a singer, who gave up her professional career on marriage to Richard Sheridan, the theatre impresario, and Angelica Kauffmann (1741-1807), a Swiss-born painter who married, separated within a year, established her career afterwards, and remarried in 1781, only to retire to Rome.

It is not difficult to see patterns here: that most of these women were married, not always voluntarily; that it was unusual for them to raise large families; and that most separated from their husbands. Several were the main breadwinners for their families. Only a handful stayed single, as Anna did, unburdened by profligate husbands and demanding children, and with the relative freedom to pursue their careers.

Unlike many authors, Anna seems to have published independently, although she may have supplemented her income later with her work, and was helped further by inheriting her

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<sup>223</sup> *Portrait*, Chapter 7.

father's estate in 1790. Certainly Anna's situation as a reasonably well-off single woman allowed her to pursue her writing for many years without the pressure of having to earn a living for herself. She was obliged to look after her invalid father until his death, but this was a burden which could be eased by the employment of carers. Finally, unlike her married friends, Honora, Mary Howard/Darwin and Anna Spearman/Vise (all dead before their thirtieth birthdays) Anna survived into her sixties, which gave her time to consolidate her fame as a writer.

## Summary of Part 2

In the second part of this essay I have used examples from Anna's life and work, especially her verse novel *Louisa*, to demonstrate her attitudes towards marriage and childbirth and I have shown how Anna's spinsterhood, whether it was voluntary or accidental, allowed her to pursue her dream of writing success. I believe Anna regretted her childlessness and the inability to fulfil her nurturing instincts, but she managed to safeguard her literary legacy through her Will, leaving her papers for posthumous publication.<sup>224</sup> It is clear that she was ambivalent about marriage, aware of its drawbacks for women, but in her early years she wished to marry for love, whilst recognising that financial security was also important. She may have been involved in romantic friendships, forming close attachments to a number of women: I would suggest that these were not primarily sexually motivated, but reflected her loneliness, along with a search for a replacement for Honora, the foster-sister and surrogate child she had educated. Later Anna accepted spinsterhood as inevitable, but if Saville's wife had died I think Anna would have persuaded him to marry her, even without the blessing of children of her own.

To return finally to my central research question:

'What does the life of Anna Seward tell us about the factors which influenced female literary success in the patriarchal world of the later eighteenth century?'

My biographical reconstruction has demonstrated many of the aspects of the character and life events which allowed Anna to become a famous poet: she was highly intelligent, and an only child after the death of her sister, so that she benefited from a wide literary education given by her father, who may have wished initially to see his own literary ambitions realised through his daughter; she was able to rebel against her parents later when they discouraged her from developing a professional writing career; Anna's *Elegy on Captain Cook* gave her

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<sup>224</sup> Barnard, *Constructed Life*, p. 13.

overnight success at a time when patriotic fervour was at its height and her subsequent work maintained this success; unlike many female writers of the period, she was not dependant on income from her writing; her relative longevity also allowed her to maintain her literary fame until her death.

As I have discussed in detail, one of the most important factors which allowed Anna to succeed as a writer was her unmarried status. She refused marriage arranged for wealth and class considerations rather than mutual love. Both her passionate attachment to her foster-sister and her long-term friendship with a married man may have led to social condemnation initially, but these relationships undoubtedly inspired Anna's poetry to a level which made it commercially successful. If she had married, her writing life could well have been restricted by family concerns and the intervention of a husband, and she might also have succumbed to the perils of childbirth.

### **Thesis Overview – *Portrait of a Muse***

*Portrait of a Muse* began as an investigation into the life of Anna Seward, an eighteenth-century female poet encountered serendipitously through a separate research project. Once found, not easily forgotten, and indeed there has been increasing academic interest in Anna's work in recent years, although she remains little known outside the specialised world of eighteenth-century English literature.

In my novel, I demonstrate how Anna's social background and its pressures may have affected her when she was coping with issues of bereavement and future spinsterhood, whilst approaching the peak of her creativity and striving to achieve national publication. Her reminiscences also highlight character-forming events from her childhood and young adulthood. Set against this is the life story of her fictional Welsh housekeeper, Matty, which illustrates the position of a woman born into the serving classes in the Georgian era. By telling both stories, I am inviting my readers to consider the position of women, then and now, especially regarding the social and biological imperatives which drive expectations of finding a male partner in order to have children.

In part 1 of my essay, I have analysed my novel in the context of biographical fiction as a sub-genre of historical fiction, as well as discussing structure, style, research, and other aspects of my writing journey. *Portrait of a Muse* contains elements of postmodern writing: fragmentation, metonymy, and pastiche, but it lacks the overt self-consciousness of postmodern fiction. Likewise, the use of present-historic tense third-person narration in free indirect style distances my novel from traditional past-tense historical fiction. Nevertheless, my epistolary and diary-led first-person accounts reflect the narrative devices of the earliest English novels, which became part of the Gothic tradition. Thus I am offering a fusion of forms, and this experimental approach echoes Anna's seminal publication, her verse-novel *Louisa*, a work which is analysed in detail in Part 2 of the essay.

In Part 2, I have mainly concentrated on Anna's romantic relationships and her attitudes to love and marriage. Anna is sometimes categorised as a lesbian writer, because of her

ambivalence towards marriage and her close attachments to female friends. I use my research to demonstrate that these friendships may have been founded on mentorship and nurturing instincts rather than sexual desire. I also show how Anna's single status may have contributed ultimately to her success as a writer.

In this PhD project, I have presented new material and extended existing biographical information about Anna and her contemporaries. I have demonstrated many practical aspects of day-to-day living in Georgian society, including medical treatments, cookery recipes, clothing and travel, all with the aim of presenting Anna Seward and her housekeeper in a lifelike way through biofiction.

Overall, I have tried to answer my central research question, by showing how and why Anna succeeded as a female poet in a literary world dominated by men. Her intelligence, her education, her poetic talent and her life experiences were all important, including her ability to resist social expectations for a woman of her class. She was blessed with relative financial independence and she did not marry, both of which gave her more freedom to write. Hence she differed from most of the other female writers of her generation, many of whom were obliged to marry and have children, and sometimes also to use their writing to support their families.

Through my biographical historical novel and its accompanying critical essay, I hope to bring Anna Seward's highly individual and talented work to a wider audience, along with an authentic portrayal of life for an educated middle-class woman and her housekeeper in the patriarchal mores of provincial eighteenth-century Britain.

### **Epilogue: A Last Meeting**

Before I return Anna to her quiet corner of Lichfield Cathedral, I find myself reflecting on the knowledge gained through writing my novel, and in particular how Anna's social position compares to mine as a professional woman in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Perhaps I may be allowed, therefore, to borrow Dr Erasmus Darwin's flying machine to travel back in time, for one last meeting with Anna:

I am standing in the parlour of the Darwin's old house in Lichfield, in front of the reproduction of Anna's juvenile portrait by Kettle. I turn to find Anna herself, majestic in Cousin Eleanor's green silk. We study the picture together until she clicks her tongue and says that it's not a bad likeness, but rather plain, and didn't Mr Romney make a much better job?

I tell her about my book and she smiles in pleasure, but wants to be assured that it demonstrates 'fine writing', and that she is not to appear in some trashy novel (although for 'trashy' she says 'tawdry' or 'ill-written'). She is disappointed to hear that I have chosen prose for my *magnum opus*, but brightens when I mention that her poetry is an essential feature.

We move to Darwin's workroom, to see the instruments and charts and the wax model of the good Doctor.

“Not at all like the man himself,” she says, “and where is his smell, his bad breath, and the hair-powder on his greasy coat?”

We climb the stairs to view Darwin’s commonplace book, displayed in a glass case.

“I couldn’t make sense of his drawings, nor often, indeed, his writing!” laughs Anna.

We gaze up at the mechanical bird swinging over our heads and I tell her how, in this present century, we are able travel all over the world in flying machines, even to the moon. At this Anna looks wistful, and asks if people can fly to the Vaucluse in France, to see the lovely valley of the poet, Petrarch? I half-nod, half-shake my head and describe the comforts of motorised transport, leaving out the horrors of traffic jams and busy airports.

The museum is about to close. We exit through the herb garden and walk along The Close to the Cathedral and the Bishop’s Palace. Anna is surprised to see schoolchildren emerging from the Palace gates, boys and girls together and I explain about the Choir School now resident there. She comments about the short skirts worn by the girls—rather immodest?—then slyly looks me up and down and asks why I dress as a man in long breeches, and do I wear stays under my loose tunic? I explain, as best as I can, about supportive underwear, and jeans.

She sniffs loudly, then asks am I married? Have I had children? Do I work to keep myself and my family? Have I been able to follow a profession?

“Yes to all these questions,” I answer.

“You must employ many servants to manage all that,” she says.

“No, not servants,” I say, “but professional women often pay for help with childcare and cleaning, in order to work away from the family home.”

“Not servants?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

“So, your husbands – they must help with the housework, the raising of their children?” she continues, her lips holding a half-smile.

“Indeed yes,” I say, frowning a little, “although there are men who still believe that these tasks are entirely for women, as it was for their mothers and grandmothers.”

“And your politicians, your government? Are you and your sisters represented?”



“Again, yes. We women vote for Parliament and take seats at Westminster. A few reach the top, though only a few. And we have a Queen too, another Elizabeth, but she is a figurehead, not like the first Elizabeth, nor even your King Georges. Our Queen is never seen to meddle in politics.”

“So you must have great poetesses now, to be remembered over the centuries? And lady artists as famous as Mr Romney and Mr Reynolds, musicians and composers like Mr Handel? Perhaps scientists and inventors like Dr Darwin?”

“There are many such famous women now, and they are acknowledged for their success,” I reply, a little self-righteously.

“And your children, are they equal now, the boys and the girls, in their education, and their prospects? Do they make equal progress in their careers?”

“Girls and boys are given the same chance at school. But it is women who bear the children, and too often they fall behind in their chosen careers.”

Here I find myself sighing, and Anna gives me a knowing smile.

“So there is progress to be made still?” she asks.

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” I say.

We reach the West Door of the cathedral and look up at the statues, rosy now in the evening light.

“There has been restoration, and not all of it good,” Anna says, frowning, “but the old place retains its dignity and majesty, does it not?”

“Yes, indeed it does,” I reply, my eyes drawn suddenly to a hawk hovering over the cathedral spires.

Silence, while I wait for the question which I know is to come.

As the setting sun disappears behind a cloud, the hawk swoops down behind the cathedral. The air is suddenly cold and I find myself alone in deepening dusk.

“Tell me. Am I still remembered?” asks the faintest of voices, as I turn back towards the town.

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2. Original printed page numbers in historic ebooks are entered: (*in italics*) followed by the corresponding ebook page numbers.

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## Images

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## APPENDIX I : Sources for ‘Emma letters’ in *Portrait of a Muse*

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Chapter 7, June 1780 – Darwin praises Anna’s poetry over that of her father: in Margaret Ashmun *The Singing Swan*, pp. 13-14, also in: *The Poetical Works of Ann Seward*, ed. by Walter Scott, 3 vols, I, p. vii/ p. xix ebook.

Chapter 9, August 1780 – Eyam and Major Wright: Barnard, *A Constructed Life*, pp 73-75.

Chapter 10, September 1780 – Visit by Marianne Sykes: Letters to Dorothy Sykes 1776, Seward Collection, Sykes letters SJBM MS. Also, quote from Marianne’s letter to her father in E.M Forster, *Marianne Thornton (1797-1887)* (London: Andre Deutsch, 2000), p. 24.

Chapter 11, October 1780 – Mrs Miller’s literary salon at Bath-Easton. Barnard, *A Constructed Life*, p. 133.

Chapter 12, November 1780 – Portrait sitting with Tilly Kettle in 1762: fictitious.

## APPENDIX II : IMAGES

(For full attributions see Bibliography)



Tilly Kettle, *Anna Seward*, 1762  
(National Portrait Gallery/NPG)



Kettle, *Sarah Seward*, 1762 (NPG archive)  
(photo: Dickson)



Joshua Reynolds, *Kitty Fisher*, 1762 (NPG)



Reynolds, *Young Woman Leaning on a Ledge*, 1760  
(public domain)





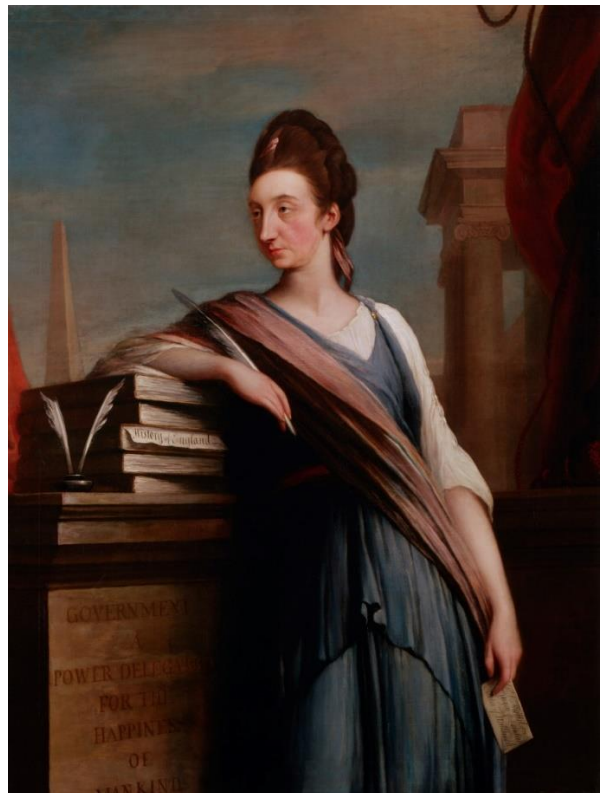
Allan Ramsay, *Lady Susan Fox-Strangways*, 1761 (pub. dom.)



Kettle, Self-portrait, 1762 (pub. dom.)



Unknown artist, *Major John Wright*, circa 1760s (photo courtesy of Nicola Wright, Eyam Hall)



Robert Edge Pine, *Catharine Macaulay*, 1775, (NPG)



Ramsay, *Elizabeth Montagu*, 1762 (pub. dom.)



William Beechey, *Sarah Siddons, 'Mrs Siddons with the Emblems of Tragedy'*, 1793 (NPG)



After Joseph Wright of Derby, *Dr Erasmus Darwin*, original circa 1770s (NPG)

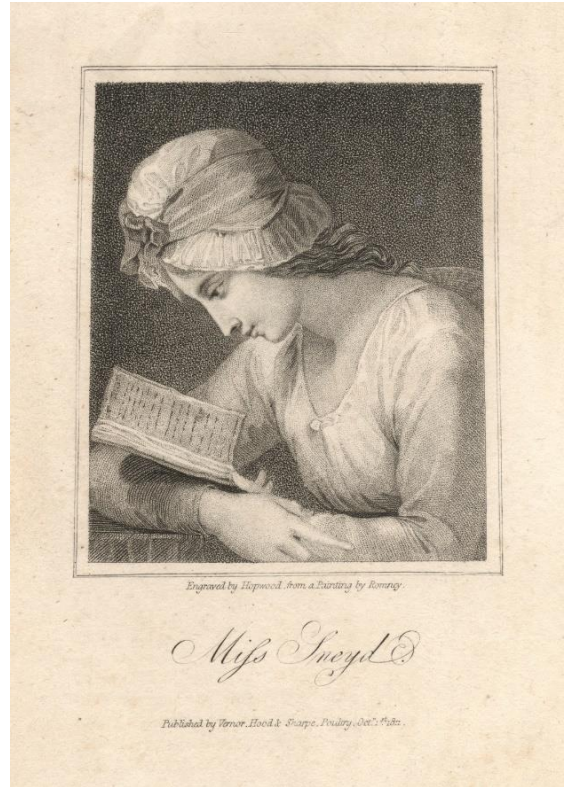


Reynolds, *Dr Samuel Johnson*, 1756-1757 (NPG)





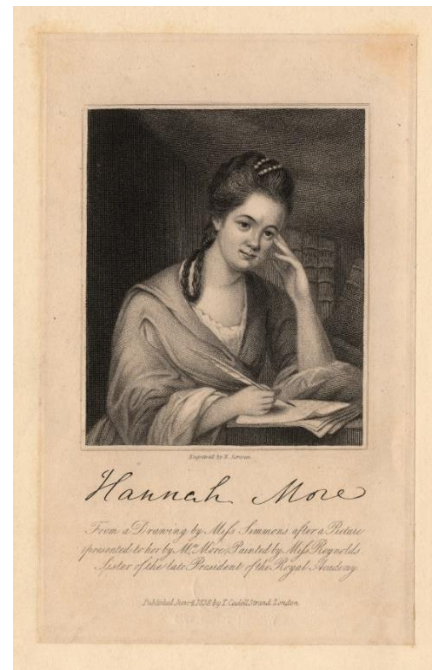
John Fayram, *Elizabeth Carter as Minerva*, circa 1735-1741 (NPG)



James Hopwood Senior, after George Romney, *Serena Reading*, published 1811 (NPG)



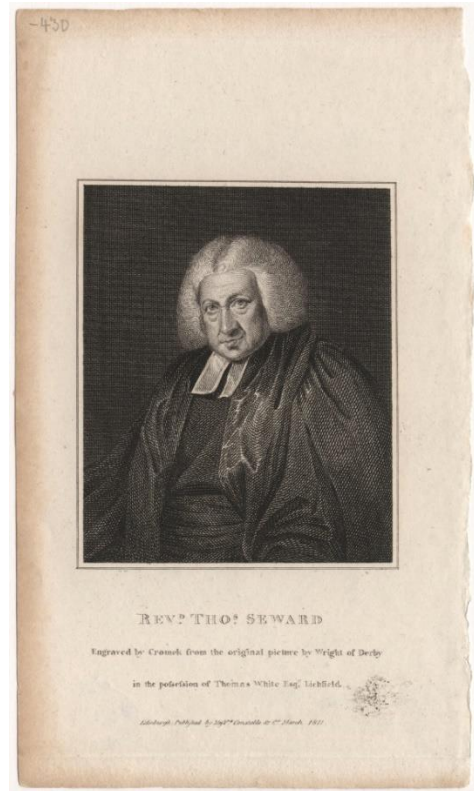
Unknown Artist, *Lady Sarah Pennington (and her Mother?)* Muncaster Castle (photo: Dickson)



Edward Scriven, after Frances Reynolds, *Hannah More* (1780), pub. 1838 (NPG)



Henry Pickering, *Elizabeth Seward née Hunter*, undated  
(Samuel Johnson Birthplace Museum collections)



Robert Hartley Cromeck, after Joseph Wright  
*Rev Thomas Seward*. Pub. 1811 (NPG)

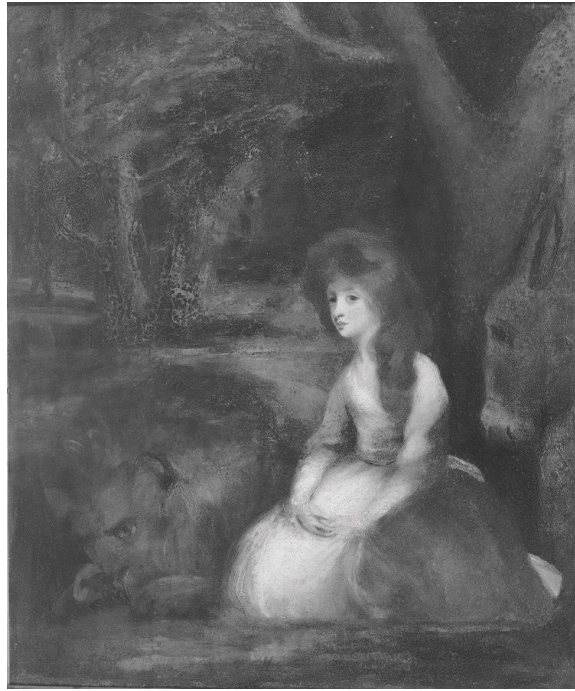


Kettle, *Charlotte Bridgeman* (b.1761), ca. 1766,  
Weston Park, Shifnal (photo: Dickson)



18<sup>th</sup>-century baby's rattle, Weston Park, (photo: Dickson)





Reynolds, *Una and the Lion* (sitter: Elizabeth Beauclerk), 1780, (Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Mass.) first exhibited Spring 1780, Royal Academy, London



Richard Samuel, *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain or Portraits of the Characters of the Muses in the Temple of Apollo*, 1778 (NPG)



George Romney, *Anna Seward*, possibly 1780's,  
Fleming Museum of Art, University of Vermont

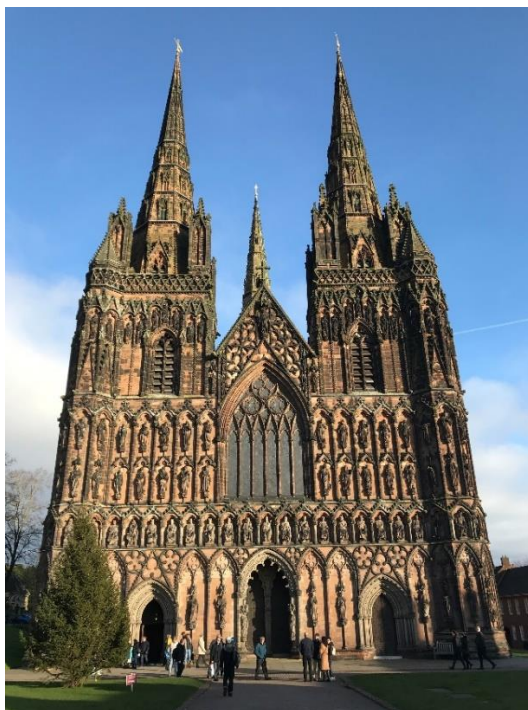




Seward House, Badsey (photo: Dickson)



Bishop's Palace, Lichfield (photo: Dickson)



Lichfield Cathedral (photo: Dickson)



Johnson's Willow, Lichfield (photo: Dickson)



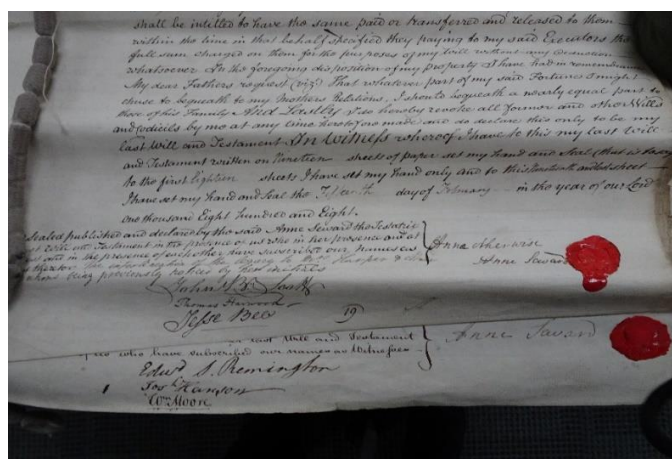
Darwin's mechanical bird,  
Darwin House Museum, Lichfield (photo: Dickson)



'Hodge', Samuel Johnson's cat, Gough Square,  
London, (photo: Dickson)

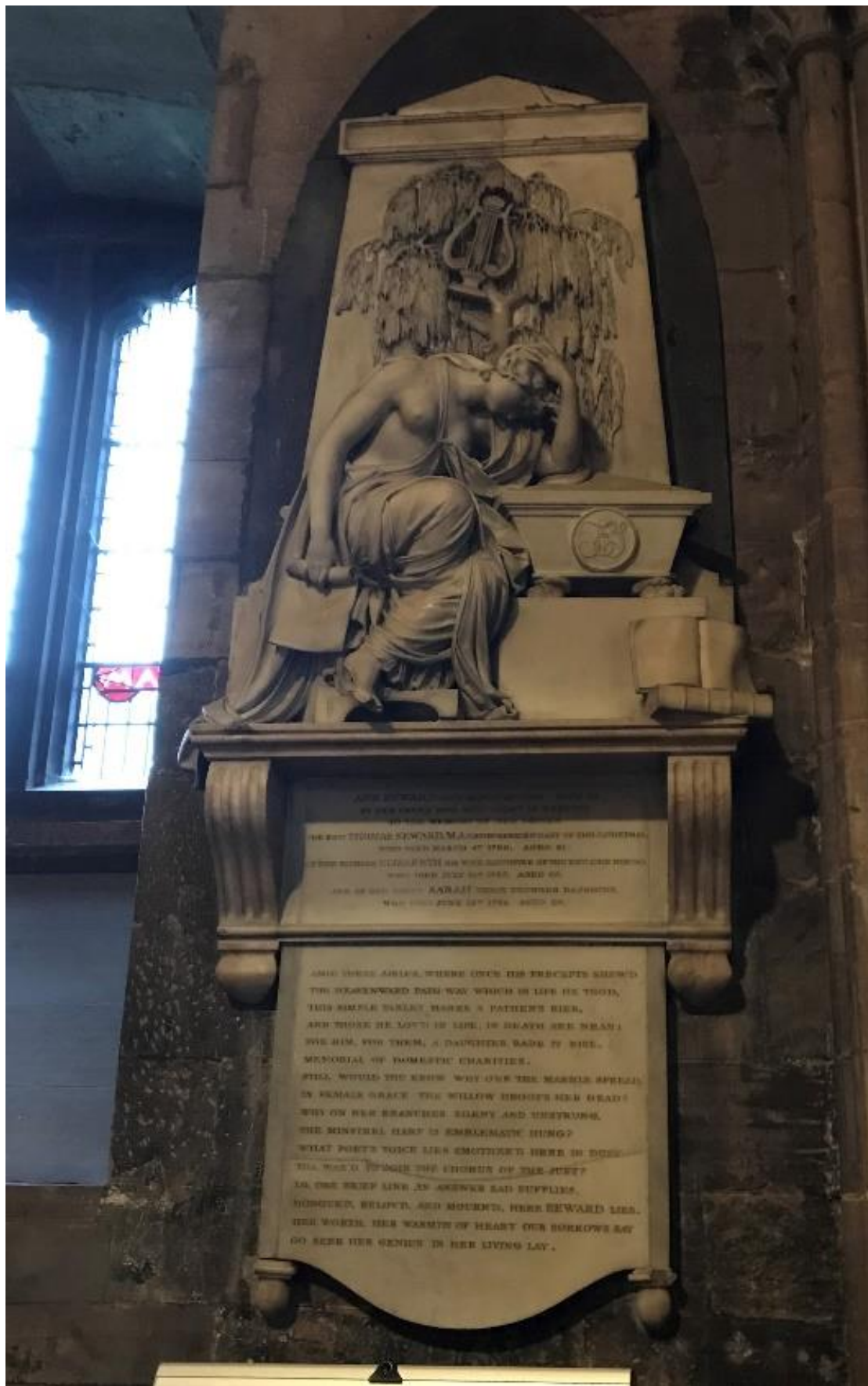


Mourning ring for Sarah Seward (d. 1764)  
Samuel Johnson Birthplace Museum, Lichfield  
(photo: Dickson)



Final pages of Anna Seward's Will with signatures,  
National Archives, Kew (photo: Dickson)





Memorial to Thomas, Elizabeth, Sarah and Anna Seward,  
with epitaph by Walter Scott (1809) Lichfield Cathedral (photo: Dickson)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a considerable debt of gratitude to the many people who have assisted me along the way with this project:

Firstly to my main supervisor, Dr Anne Lauppe-Dunbar, whose sympathetic guidance has been indispensable for the development and construction of both novel and essay; my second Supervisors, Prof Mike Franklin, for research advice, and Dr Alan Bilton, for support, especially with the essay; Jon Gower for advice about the Welsh aspects of my narrative; Ian Glen and the staff of Swansea University Library for assistance with document access and other issues; Dr Caroline Franklin for access to her articles and chapters; Joanne Wilson and the staff of The Samuel Johnson Birthplace Museum, Lichfield; Marie Burbage and the staff of Erasmus Darwin House, Lichfield; Rita Mills, Librarian, at the Bishop's Palace, Lichfield Choir School; Dr Carolyn Scott-Jeffs for her play script, 'Letters to Emma' (performed at the Garrick Theatre, Lichfield, 2017); Philippa Vandome at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon, for her transcription of *Sieur Boaz's Magical, Sterganographical and Sciatoconeratical advertisement of April 1780*; Bryony and staff at the Heinz Archive and Library, National Portrait Gallery; Lynda Tomkins at Derbyshire Record Office; Ivan Friar and Staff at Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham; Mike Rendell, for information about the Seward/Hall connections; Dr Redfern Barrett for his chapter, 'Anna Seward's Queer Ideal' from his PhD thesis, *Queer Friendship: same sex love in the works of Thomas Gray, Anna Seward, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin*, (2010); Dr Carole Hailey for allowing me to read her inspirational PhD critical essay, *God's Threads: the Invention of a Religion* (2020); my son, Andrew Dickson, for advice on eighteenth-century theatre and literature; my critical readers: Sarah Barrett, Anne Evans, Jo Jackson, Lynne Lewis, Michelle O'Gorman, Michelle Rogers, Rosemary Samuel, Dianne Weston, Julie Williams and Bernadette Wilson.

I should really offer special thanks to my little tortoiseshell cat, Cleo, for providing comfort and inspiration. The character of Po Felina owes a lot to my diminutive feline friend.

Finally, I must offer my husband, Peter, heartfelt thanks for his unquestioning support through the difficult times we have faced together while I have worked on my PhD thesis. He tolerates someone who likes to bury herself in the eighteenth century while choosing to ignore the obligations of the twenty-first. This someone has been, and still is, more than grateful for a strong shoulder to cry on, practical advice, and, of course, an endless supply of tea and coffee.