

“To ‘leave my name in life’s visit’”: The Intersection of Age and Gender in the Literary Afterlife of Anna Seward

Francesca Blanch-Serrat

Anna Seward (1742-1809) made detailed plans toward her posthumous legacy in the last decades of her life through the compilation and editing of her poetical works and letter books, as well as the negotiations for their publication. In having her life’s work and correspondence published after her death, Seward challenged societal and literary expectations already subverted by publishing in advanced age and asserted the value of her own production and, by extension, her literary authority, at the end of her career. While this is a known claim, this article aims to go further and examine this material and its reception from the perspective of age studies in order to ascertain what roles gender and old age played in both Seward’s self-presentation in this compilation and in the failure of her act of self-canonization. For this purpose, this article investigates the intersection of gender, marital status, and old age (the triple-layered “old maidism”) in eighteenth-century perceptions of age and aging, and questions how that intersection affected her work’s editorial process and its reception. To do so, the article addresses Walter Scott’s and Archibald Constable’s—her editor and publisher, respectively—treatments of the material and of the detailed instructions Seward left them in her will. Finally, it assesses the reception of the posthumously published works in three periodicals of the time: *The Critical Review*, the *British Review* and *London Critical Journal*, and *The Monthly Review*.

Anna Seward (1742-1809) was fifty-five years old when she began assembling and revising her extensive correspondence for publication. Her decision to embark on such a project came in the last stage of her publishing career, after

having established her reputation with the international successes of her *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780), and *Monody on Major André* (1781). The 1780s were an enormously prolific period for Seward in which she also published an elegiac poem to the Bath Easton hostess Anne Miller, *To the Memory of Lady Miller* (1782), experimented with poetic form in the epistolary novel in heroic couplets *Louisa* (1784), and dedicated *Ode to General Elliott* (1787) to the army officer who defended Gibraltar against Spanish and French attack. In the next decade, she sent to the press the anthology of miscellaneous poetry *Llangollen Vale* (1796), and *Original Sonnets* (1799). The *Original Sonnets*, a selection of a hundred sonnets written throughout her life, hint at the author's desire to both recall her life and writing, and to consider her legacy. The collection shows a preoccupation with loss, memory, and remembrance, in which the verses seem to offer the writer solace in her old age. It is no coincidence that the sonnets were assembled while Seward was reading through a lifetime of correspondence. By collecting the letters for publication, the author intended to provide her readers with an authorized biographical account that would "faithfully reflect the unimportant events of my life" (5: 362). In reality, perusing the published *Letters* reveals them as a record of Seward's reflections on topics ranging from scientific discovery and technological progress, to history and politics, and literary criticism. The image of Seward the *Letters* conveyed to the next generation was that of a well-connected, passionate, knowledgeable writer and literary critic. In such an epistolary exchange, she expresses her interest in a variety of issues, from literature to history, education, medicine, botany, and technology. The letters perpetuate "her political viewpoint and her philosophical, scientific, theological and cultural ideals" (Barnard, *Life* 7); and reveal Seward "as an author with a wide and varied interest in the world and not as a recorder of exclusively female experience" (7). She also appears to be in command of her publishing engagements, negotiating and keeping an eye on her editors and on the reviewers.

Through her compiled works and correspondence, Seward connects Samuel Johnson's generation to Walter Scott's, acting as a bridge between two literary

movements. In the *Letters*, Seward covers a large number of discussions on literary matters with other authors, many of whom are younger versions of future figures such as Henry Cary or Robert Southey, to whom she acted as literary mentor, especially in her old age. She constantly asserts her authority as a “long-lived woman writer” to “provide a retrospective survey of the age” (Culley 83), similar in this respect to Mary Berry (Culley 88). Indeed, Amy Culley’s assertion that Berry offers “a gift to literary posterity in the accuracy and intimacy of her view of writers of a previous generation” (88) also rings true for Seward, whose letters are a testament to her lifelong experience and a constant reminder to friends and acquaintances, especially in her old age, of this authority. Furthermore, the letters prove that Seward wishes her mentoring vocation not to cease with her life, but rather to survive her in the published volumes and to continue offering the younger generation her knowledge and experience. At the same time, by doing so, Seward asserts her authority and reinforces her legacy. Regretfully, the portrait of Seward that emerges from the *Letters* is a distorted one and, yet, that is the image of Seward that has been accepted through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This has only recently been challenged, when knowledge of the censorship the manuscripts suffered motivated the scholarship of Teresa Barnard, Claudia T. Kairoff, and Lisa Moore to retrieve a more trustworthy portrait of the author from unedited manuscript items. Regrettably, the editorial process the letters went through after Seward’s death makes it impossible to ascertain what ideas about herself the author intended her letters to portray.

In addition to her correspondence, Seward also prepared a compilation of her published and unpublished poetry that comprised her entire career, from her juvenilia to her old age. Both anthologies were withheld from the press in her lifetime and eventually published as *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward* (1810) and *Letters of Anna Seward Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807* (1811). They were designed to ensure Seward’s reputation after her passing and were a means of retaining control over her posthumous career, fulfilling what, years later, William Hazlitt would aptly describe:

We do not like to perish wholly, and wish to bequeath our names, at least, to posterity. As long as we can make our cherished thoughts and nearest interests live in the minds of others, we do not appear to have retired altogether from the stage. We still occupy the breast of others, and exert an influence and power over them, and it is only our bodies that are reduced to dust and powder. (263)

Exerting “influence and power” beyond the grave, if not in the larger literary landscape then at least over her own legacy, is precisely the underlying motive in Seward’s design. To that purpose, she assembled, re-read, and edited her correspondence, updating the manuscripts to render them “in some degree interesting, from being animated by the present-time sentiments and feelings of my heart” (4: 362). Seward’s word-choice “animated by the present-time sentiments” indicates the role of age, aging, and authorial and personal maturity in the editing process of the *Letters*. The collections are, then, a record of her thoughts and opinions—put to paper in her youth—and of her life-long achievements. They emerge from the author’s desire to look back and reflect on her life from the vantage point of her sixty years of experience. By modifying the letters to better fit her mature self and to bring them “in line with her mature sentiments or to clarify passages she found obscure” (Kairoff 169), Seward is reconstructing her memories to convey not the author she was in her youth, but the author she was at the end of her career; or, rather, the one she wished to be remembered as. The compilations, then, are intended to consolidate Seward’s public image, a public image she is redesigning in retrospect.

In having her works and correspondence published after her death, Seward challenges societal and literary expectations. She asserts the value of her own production and, by extension, that of her literary career, at its end. This article expands on the claim that Seward’s anthologies were intended as “a lasting memorial” (Barnard, *Life* 2) to “consolidate her literary reputation into posterity” (Barnard, *Sermons* 1), and to “conduct her writing career from the grave” (Looser 173). It seeks to clarify what parts gender and old age played in the dismissal of Seward’s act of self-canonization through an examination of the reception of Seward’s posthumously published *Letters* and *Poetical Works*. This places age and aging center stage and allows for a thorough analysis of how

social perceptions of age and aging—and more precisely, Seward’s triple-layered intersection of age, gender, and marital status: “old maidism”—conditioned her posthumous reception. To this end, this article examines the reviews to Seward’s *Letters and Poetical Works* in three widely distributed periodicals of the time: *The Critical Review*, the *British Review and London Critical Journal*, and *The Monthly Review*. Additionally, the textual analysis also includes her last will and testament and the instructions she left for her editors concerning the publication of the material, which provided with accurate detail precisely what, how, and when the collected works should be published. As I contend, these documents should be considered as complementary pieces to Seward’s legacy project and not marginal items. For this purpose, I will investigate how Walter Scott and Archibald Constable—to whom she bequeathed the collections—managed Seward’s textual legacy, to establish how their actions affected its reception, and by extension, Seward’s attempt at self-canonization.

THE “OLD MAID”: INTERSECTING GENDER, AGE, AND SINGLEHOOD

Seward continued to “keep her letter books in good order” as far as 1808 (Barnard, *Sermons* 145), until the very end of her physical and mental faculties and in spite of her declining health. In a letter composed nine days before her death, she noted how her physical ailments were affecting her intellectual activity: “much writing is forbid me, indeed its effect is sufficiently forewarning since the moment I begin to think intensely, the pen falls from my hand, a lethargic sensation creeps over me, I doze” (Seward in Barnard, *Life* 2). Before illness took over her mind and body, she had mused that “it is early, at sixty-six, when the bodily strength has suffered so little diminution, to see the lights of intellect begin perceivably to pale” (Whalley 94). When discussing issues of aging, Seward and her contemporaries often alluded to the disconnection between physical aging and intellectual aging. As Penelope Pennington wrote at seventy: “I do not find my mind get older in proportion to my body. I have as keen a relish for intellectual enjoyments as ever I had” (Knapp 377). Similarly, Elizabeth Carter, who lived until the age of eighty-eight, is said to have had her physical strength “much impaired” while still being in full

possession of her “mental powers” (Carter 15). Seward, Pennington, and Carter were past their sixties when they remarked upon the disassociation between their numerical age and their sense of their own age. Socially, however, they had been considered old for a while, because as women, their aging process was socially determined by questions of marriageability and procreation (Ottaway 41). Additionally, while Pennington was a wife, Seward and Carter never married or had children, and as singlewomen past the age of thirty, they were considered “old maids,” a concept that brings together the identity markers of age, gender, and marital status.

Seward referred to her status of “old maid” in her forties as her “‘single blessedness;’ so Shakespeare calls old-maidism” (3: 30). However, in spite of Seward’s apparent ease with the label, in the eighteenth century “old maidism” had pejorative connotations. Interestingly, while the term did not originate in the eighteenth century, it was redefined then. At the time, marriage was considered “a transformative point in the life cycle ... the gateway to full, participatory adult life, and ... one of the main ways of perceiving and representing differences between people” (Yallop 41). Consequently, singlehood—pejoratively known as spinsterhood,¹ or old maidism—was understood as a key factor in a young woman’s social aging process because aging was not only a “body issue, or a medical issue” but “an aspect of personal identity” (Yallop 3). As such, it not only informed a person’s selfhood but also the way in which they were perceived by others at different ages.

Throughout the eighteenth century, England experienced “a contest in which the virtuous and respectable singlewoman is opposed to the dangerous and disgraceful ‘old maid’” (Lanser 304). Both Olwen Hufton and Susan Lanser agree in suggesting that these negative associations were connected to the “growth in numbers of upper-class spinsters and the development of the novel” (Hufton 374), which depicted “archetypical tiresome old women that became the subject of mockery and derision” (Hufton 374). The “old maid” of these

¹ The analogy between spinster and “old maid” was developed between 1700 and 1730: “In parlance and literature (though not in legal records where it denotes the unmarried woman of all levels of society under a viscounty), [spinster] came to connote an aging woman and implied certain pejorative attributes” (Hufton 374).

novels of the second-half of the eighteenth-century is “so lacking in adult authority that even a youngster can mock her openly, so widely reviled that popular theatre can ban her with impunity,” not simply “a personal failure ... but a contaminant, a signifier whose very presence is dangerous” (Lanser 304). She is “not the virulent, physically and morally repulsive old maid” but the “irksome, prattling, and small-minded one, not the castrating ‘she-Cannibal’ but the frugal and inconsequential bore, not a threat to family but a kind of ‘extra’ tolerable insofar as she can be of use” (Lanser 305). This “vicious” depiction of the unmarried woman in contemporary literature reveals “a profound rejection of aging women’s bodies” (Ottaway 41). It has its origin in the development of the “two-sex” model of difference that in turn led to the emergence of scattered and unsystematic first feminisms (Lanser 307). This social hostility, then, responds to a singling out of a social class of women who become the scapegoats for male chauvinism: “discourses critical of women in general did grow more restrained and superficially more respectful as the eighteenth century progressed, ... it is feasible that the denigration and hostility once bestowed verbally on all women became localized within particular scapegoat groups” (308). In addition, singlewomen were targeted in response to “patriarchal anxieties of female economic and social agency” (308). They were considered to have failed in their biological and civic duty to produce sons and daughters for the nation and were therefore accused of being a “deterrent to national enterprise” (312). Scholars suggest that “middle age” for women began at forty whereas “old age” began at sixty (Looser 9; Ottaway 18). Nevertheless, we must not lose sight of marital status as a social marker as singlewomen like Seward were considered to enter into old age as early as thirty years old (Looser 15), before married ones did. Ottaway acknowledges the difficulty, and ambiguity, in setting the threshold of old age: “pinpointing women’s entry into old age is complicated further by the strong association of women with sexuality and procreation in early modern writings” (41). Maternity “was increasingly sentimentalized and centralized—women who were not actively engaged in producing or training children fell outside much of the dominant discourse concerning their gender” (41). Significantly, “the critical

transition for female aging was often tied to middle, rather than old age; to the loss of youth, rather than to the onset of decrepitude” (Ottaway 41), which evinces why Seward would have been perceived as old at a much earlier age than some of her married contemporaries with similar literary careers. This socially conditioned perception of her own age, and of her own mortality, might have been a factor in her decision to begin curating her writing material in her fifties and to consider her career, her legacy, and her public image with an eye to posterity.

Older women writers, like Seward at this stage of her career, “shared anxieties regarding the print marketplace, critical reception, and literary afterlives” (Culley 82). The triple-layers of gender, age, and singlehood embedded into the “old maid” label influenced the way in which they were received by publishers, critics, and readers alike; these had a critical and direct effect on their careers, and indeed, on their posthumous reputations. Consequently, older women writers were often urged to abandon their publishing careers in exchange for “graceful, polite retirement” (Looser 34) in order to avoid tarnishing their reputation by being considered outdated. As Looser indicates, “living to an advanced age may have had a generally negative effect on a woman writer’s posthumous reputation” (Looser 7). In her investigation of the critical legacies of Mary Berry and Joanna Baillie, Culley pinpoints that “collaboration is key to resisting a narrative of decline” (83). Seward was aware of the dangers of not only continuing to publish into old age but, more importantly, of publishing her life’s work; hence, to withhold the manuscripts from publication in her lifetime was a strategic choice that allowed her to resist the prevailing narrative of decline. By waiting, Seward hoped to circumvent the ageism in the reviewing press that would influence the reception of her works. For this purpose, not only did she wait to publish them but also in choosing Walter Scott she left them to an author who was young, male, and famous, presuming that his name and reputation would contribute to their success. Choosing Scott was one of the steps Seward took in her plan to secure her legacy.

POSTHUMOUS LEGACY IN CONTEXT

Throughout her extensive correspondence, and as early as 1787, at forty-five, Seward admitted that she “often” felt “very ardent aspirations” for literary fame (1: 386) and talked to her friends about her hopes for recognition of her literary authority and talent in posterity:

Posterity, which seldom fails, sooner or later, to recall what is worth recalling from the shades of oblivion; in which, for a time, many superior works to any I can produce have been enveloped, by the neglect of that ungrateful age which they adorned. That my writings should ever experience this regeneration, I am far from depending; but I believe they will, if they deserve it. It has long been my wish “to leave my name in life’s visit.” Should the ink in which it is written prove of a fading and perishable quality, there is no help for that, you know. (2: 37)

Seward believed her works were indeed “worth recalling from the shades of oblivion” and would be admired for years to come for their intrinsic merit. More importantly, she “believed her genius and application had earned her a place in literary history” (Clarke 12) and she explicitly declares that she wishes to leave her “name in life’s visit,” to be remembered as the celebrated writer she once was. The collected letters were “key” to her project for posthumous fame, because they evinced her life-long acquired critical acumen and authority “in a form which incorporated other people’s acknowledgement of the significance of her views” a quality which endowed the published letters with the ability to “bequeath to posterity her status as well as her opinions” (Clarke 12). Seward’s desire for posthumous fame anticipates the Romantic preoccupation with fame and posterity. For the Romantics, their “textual afterlives” (Bennett 1) became the utmost preoccupation of the artist: “The poet ... no longer writes simply for money, contemporary reputation, status, or pleasure. Instead he writes so that his identity, transformed and transliterated, disseminated in the endless act of reading, will survive” (2). In order to maintain, or establish their public image for posterity, elderly women writers resorted to posthumous publication. Their wish to survive was in itself an act of resistance: they resisted exclusion from the literary world and took steps to

ensure their literary fame would survive them, challenging a literary market that dismissed them as relics from another age.

Seward's case is by no means exceptional. By preparing her works for posthumous publication, Seward became part of a tradition of eighteenth-century writers who relied on the posthumous publication of their life's work as "an attempt to continue the 'living' voice of the author's manuscript writings" (Ezell 128), aware as they were that "contemporary print culture was a fraught place in which to gain and maintain literary credit" (Bigold 200). In her study of the print and manuscript careers of Elizabeth Singer Rowe (1674-1737), Catharine Cockburn (1679-1749), and Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806),² Melanie Bigold has paved the way for the exploration of the posthumous lives of these three authors who, like Seward, envisioned their posthumously published documents as key contributions to their "enduring presence" (68) after death.

Rowe's posthumous *Miscellaneous Works* (1772) contains some pieces in print for the first time, withheld from the public up until then and "published by Her Order," as their complete title indicates. Furthermore, and contrary to her practice when she was alive, they are signed with her name. Bigold explains that in the case of the posthumous works, anonymity was neither "requested or, it seems, assumed" (66) because Rowe saw the compilation as an instrument for the "perpetuation of her image and works" (66) in which the author, asserting her agency in her old age, made a claim for her posthumous legacy. Similarly, Elizabeth Carter "was aware of and an instrumental agent in the construction of the conservative authorial ethos and popular image" (Bigold 202), and her posthumously published biography and letters have an "aura of futurity that is suggestive of her posthumous pretensions" (172). They are the "first act" in the consolidation of "her prescriptive literary afterlife" (202) but they go further. They allow for a reconstruction of her intellectual life that had been barred from the public eye in her lifetime (202). Regrettably, in Rowe and Carter's case, just like Seward, the editorial changes to the original manuscripts distorted the public image they had intended to consolidate. Left "at the mercy of many who could not 'recognise' the coterie performer as distinct from the private

² Of these three authors, only one, Elizabeth Carter, remained single throughout her life. The impact of her marital status on the reception of her posthumous works is beyond the scope of Bigold's book.

individual,” Rowe’s *Miscellaneous Works* became “primarily directed outwards to the buying public,” advertized “as the final text for those wishing to possess the complete works of Elizabeth Rowe” (Bigold 74). In Carter’s case, her nephew’s efforts to memorialize her and consolidate her career resulted in a “problematic and unreliable” account (Bigold 202), leading to a disfigured image of Carter.

In some cases, the publication of a writers’ posthumous works was regarded as a “monumental tribute” (Ezell 128) to their life and career by their friends and family, although examining it as such undermines the efforts and negates the agency of the authors. Indeed, of the authors below, all but Cockburn and Seward bequeathed their manuscripts to their family to fulfill their wishes. Instead of relying on her relatives or lesser-known authors, Seward chose the rising star that was Walter Scott to manage her literary legacy. Her decision is by no means casual but strategic. Seward had a very strong network of relatives and friends, many of whom were published authors with the time and experience to handle Seward’s bequest. Her own cousin, Henry White, often acted as her amanuensis and had played a role previously in her literary career. However, Seward wished for reputed and experienced professionals, rather than family members, to manage her legacy, in an attempt to ensure that her name—and her posthumous fame—were attached to a figure who would be admired in the years to come, as she wished to be, and as she had been in the 1780s and 1790s. Furthermore, by attaching her name to a member of the younger generation such as Scott, Seward resisted the narrative of decline (Culley 83). She also proved that, although her own age situated her on the margins of literary fashion and her own works and style might seem outdated, she had ties with the Romantic generation; she was still relevant.

WALTER SCOTT AND ARCHIBALD CONSTABLE’S ROLE

Seward bequeathed her poetry collection to Walter Scott and her letter books to the Scottish bookseller, Archibald Constable. Seward’s choice of Scott, of all her literary acquaintances, can be attributed to the latter’s fame and reputation at the time, which Seward recognized and decided to use in her favor: “though extraordinarily famous in her day, Seward, clearly, perceived herself not only as

a contemporary phenomenon. Selecting Scott as her literary executor was a deliberate effort to secure her fame” (Wheeler 311). Scott was meant to “play a significant role in the formation of Seward’s posthumous literary reputation” (Barnard, *Life* 3). Indeed, Seward’s friend and lawyer Charles Simpson declared that she had “placed the rank she is destined to hold in poetry under [Scott’s] care and protection” (Simpson in Barnard, *Life* 3).

Seward’s relationship with Scott began in 1802. Colin Mackenzie, Scott’s lifelong friend, had sent her several poems by the author, presumably by his direction, to which Seward replied with lavish praise in April 1799 (5: 200). After learning of her admiration for his work, Scott sent Seward a letter of introduction and the first two volumes of *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, and they continued corresponding until Seward’s death. Robert Mayer has suggested that Scott sought Seward’s acquaintance “for the role of literary mentor” (38) to benefit from her rank (41) and her experience (42). She was, after all, twenty-nine years his senior, a well-established author in the English literary landscape and, therefore, well-connected. In point of fact, Scott benefitted from Seward’s hard-earned influence by having an unfavorable review of *Marmion* in the *Edinburgh Review* rebutted by *The Critical Review*, whose editor was friends with Seward (Barnard, *Life* 164). On the other hand, there is no evidence that Scott relied on Seward for literary advice or that he was interested in the experienced and detailed commentary on his works she provided in their letters. In that sense, Mayer and Barnard contend, and I agree, that Seward’s admiration for Scott was not reciprocal and that his treatment of her legacy shows how little he admired, or even respected, Seward’s literary career.

In a letter to Joanna Baillie dated 18 March 1810, the Scottish writer confessed to feeling guilty regarding how he had treated Seward in life, while admitting that he found her poetry “execrable” and protesting that the letters were so overly sentimental that they gave him a “most unsentimental horror”:

I plead guilty to the charge of ill-breeding to Miss [Seward]. The despair which I used to feel on receiving poor Miss Seward’s letters, whom I really liked, gave me a most unsentimental horror for sentimental letters. The grossest [sic] thing I ever did in my life was to poor dear Miss Seward ... When I did see her, however, she

interested me very much, and I am now doing penance for my ill-breeding, by submitting to edit her posthumous poetry, most of which is absolutely execrable. (Scott, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott* 85)

From a modern perspective, it strikes as surprising that an author of such renown as Scott would have agreed to become involved in preserving the legacy of a writer like Seward. This excerpt helps clarify this question: Scott directly describes his role as editor of the *Poetical Works* as “penance” for his “ill-breeding,” presumably referring to having taken advantage of Seward’s connections and authority while being dishonest about his opinion of her writings.

Scott knew of his future role as Seward’s editor as early as July 1807, when she wrote informing him of the contents of her will: “In my last & lately executed Will, I have bequeathed to you the exclusive Copy-right of those Compositions in Verse which I mean shall constitute a miscellaneous Edition of my Works” (Barnard, *Sermons* xiii). All the while, Seward had been conducting negotiations with Archibald Constable for the exclusive copyright of the letters with Scott’s assistance, who acted as intermediary. The financial aspects involved forestalled the negotiations: Seward asked for a thousand pounds for the copyright of her works but Constable thought the sum was too high and was advised by the English publisher John Murray not to risk his capital on the venture (Barnard, *Life* 161).

Seward’s choice to divide her manuscripts between two different editors was politically motivated: she left her correspondence to Constable rather than to Scott because the letters “fervently avow[ed]” her political disagreements. Seward had written to Scott letting him know he would not be in charge of her letter books as she thought that the opinions expressed in them “are too horrible to your Friendships & Connections with the Belligerent Party, for the possibility of it being agreeable to you to become the Editor of those twelve epistolary Volumes” (Barnard, *Sermons* xiv). Seward explains that she considers the letters would be “*too hostile to Mr. Scott’s political attachments and connections, for the possibility of its being eligible for him to become their editor.*” This is because of “the abhorrence in which, *both in a moral and religious point of view, from the close of the*

campaign in 1793, I have held the destructive system in this country” and this “*is too fervently avowed in the course of these letters*” (Oulton xv).³ This division attests to Seward’s insightful planning, which took into account the consequences that the publication might have for her editors. Regrettably, this level of detail and forethought was not reciprocated by Scott and Constable.

In the instructions in her will, Seward indicated that she had left Constable “twelve quarto volumes; they contain such letters, or part of letters, to numerous correspondents, from the year 1784 to the present day, as appeared to me worth the future attention of the public” (Oulton xvi). On the other hand, to Walter Scott, she left the entirety of her “writings in verse, which have passed the press,” “those which yet remain unpublished,” “a collection of my *juvenile* letters, from the year 1762 to June 1768,” “four sermons,” and a “critical dissertation” (Oulton xiii). These she wished would be published together with “my poems which already have been regularly and separately published” (Oulton xiii). Seward also left thorough directions for the publication of both works in her will and testament: “With the aforesaid poetry will be found, and with which I desire may be published, the three first books of an epic poem, entitled *Telemachus*” (Oulton xiv), “With the above-mentioned verse will be found a small collection of my late beloved father’s poetry, which I desire may be admitted into the said miscellany and succeed my own” (Oulton xiv), “I desire my Juvenile letters may in succession be added ... at all events, I would have the letters succeed the poetry” (Oulton xiv), “It appears to me that it would be eligible to print the said edition of my works in pocket volumes octavo, with an engraving prefixed” (Oulton xv), and “I wish Mr. Constable to publish two volumes of the said letters annually, not classing them to separate correspondents, but suffering them to succeed each other in the order of time, and as he finds them in the volumes” (Oulton xvi).

Although, in the “Preface” to the *Poetical Works*, Scott claimed that he had “in every respect, punctually complied with the wishes of my deceased friend” (*Poetical Works* xxxviii), this could not be farther from the truth. Scott omitted *Telemachus*, disregarded Seward’s wish of having her father’s poetry

³ Emphasis in original.

published with her own, and did not prefix the collection with an engraving. He added her juvenile letters but he placed them before the poetry. Moreover, there is evidence that Scott edited Seward's poetry but the missing manuscript makes it very difficult to ascertain the extent to which any editorial differences were Scott's and not Seward's.⁴ As for Archibald Constable, he published the entire collection in 1811, against Seward's demand that it be published annually. Robert Southey, a close friend of Seward's in her last years, declared that Seward had been "ill-used" by Constable when he published all six volumes of the letter books at once. In 1811, the future poet laureate informed a correspondent that "it was her desire that they should be published in portions, at intervals of two years between each" and remarked that Seward had planned it that way to ensure that "by the time the latter portions were published, some persons there spoken of, would in the natural course of years have dropped off" (Southey 226), which is evidence of Seward's careful planning and attention to detail.

Furthermore, Constable allowed the correspondence to be "ruthlessly edited" and "picked apart and twisted out of shape" (Barnard, *Life* 4). He not only reduced the original thirteen letter books into six volumes, "approximately half the original collection of letters that Seward wanted Constable to publish was removed" (Barnard, *Sermons* 165), he also removed all names, passages, and reflections that were uncomfortable to him or his acquaintances. The publisher "allowed Scott and several others to scour the letter books for indiscretions, local anecdotes, and political comments. They turned their attention to anything, in fact, which was personal or either deprecated the literary establishment or was not considered appropriate from a woman writer" (Barnard, *Sermons* 4). After the publication of the *Poetical Works* in 1811, Southey disclosed that Constable feared the *Letters* would be badly received by

⁴ Several scholars have attested to Scott's editing Seward's original manuscript (Barnard, *Life* 3; Moore 1: xxxvi) and, indeed, there are evident differences between certain poems when comparing earlier published versions and their final version in the *Poetical Works*, and the same is true of the *Letters*. A conclusive analysis of the *Poetical Works* in order to ascertain which changes were Seward's and which were Scott's would only be possible if the original manuscripts Seward bequeathed her editors were to be found, so the different hands could be identified and the changes tracked. Regrettably, while Seward's manuscript belonging to Scott can now be found at the National Library of Scotland (MS.879 and MS.880), the only pages that survive are the ones he neglected to include in the published work, the rest are presumably destroyed or in a private collection.

Francis Jeffrey's *Edinburgh Review*—and, by extension, not sell well. Additionally, Scott also feared that Seward's letters to himself would betray his derogatory comments against the powerful Jeffrey and wished them deleted. Seward was not afraid, as were her peers, of Jeffrey's power over their careers because she had no involvement with the Edinburgh publishing world, so she openly criticized him in the original correspondence. This put Constable and Scott in a difficult position, which Constable solved by allowing Jeffrey's brother-in-law, Mr. Morehead, to censor any passages uncomfortable for Jeffrey. In a note to the bookseller (presumably composed in 1809 and written in the third person singular), Scott notes that he returned Constable "twelve Volumes of Miss Seward's correspondence," indicating that he had "markd with pencil a few passages in letters addressd to himself from Miss Seward" ("Letter to Archibald Constable," 273). He demands these not be printed because "some of them reflect severely upon living characters & others have reference to opinions expressd by Mr. Scott in the confidence of friendly correspondence & which he would be unwilling should come before the public as it were by informer through Miss Swards reply" (273). Indeed, Scott "excised almost two thirds of the correspondence prior to publication, sometimes discarding entire letters" (Barnard, *Life* 3), rendering the edited manuscripts unrecognizable.

Southey complained that because of the editorial decisions made by Constable and Scott, the *Letters* contain "some of the hastiest and most violent expressions, which now pass for her settled judgment, because the letters in which they were qualified or retracted do not appear" (226) and, consequently, they fail to represent an accurate portrayal of Seward. The issue of the unreliability of Seward's letters has been a matter of scholarly attention. In his 1941 article "The Authenticity of Anna Seward's Correspondence," James Clifford argues that "the 1811 edition cannot be implicitly trusted for facts or contemporary opinions" (122), he contends that they "do not represent what Anna Seward originally wrote but rather what she decided in late life would better enhance her reputation" and denounces that "the published letters are late revisions, made from copies of the originals, and as such cannot be trusted

as evidence in controversial matters” (113). Indeed, private letters are regarded as being “uniquely placed to reproduce the intimacy of familiar speech ... to leave on the page an unusually unguarded view of the writer’s mind and of his immediate responses to the world” (Keymer 4), a purpose that is defeated in the editing process the author put them through years later. Although, as previously indicated, this is an argument I could concede, Clifford attributes the unreliability of the letters to Seward’s editing and does not take into account Constable’s. He complains that “the phraseology throughout has been materially altered; and long passages containing new ideas or amplifying old opinions have been added” (118). However, in the examples provided by Clifford, the changes he criticizes are merely stylistic. In one instance he highlights how “grace, as well as force” (115) becomes “majesty and force” (116). A comparison between the original manuscript letters and the published *Letters* would provide valuable information about the double-editing process (Seward’s and Constable’s) that Seward’s material endured. Nevertheless, the lack of conclusively original documents (i.e., never revised or edited) makes it nearly impossible to accurately determine which changes can be attributed to whom.

RECEPTION IN THE REVIEWING PRESS

According to the private correspondence between John Murray and Archibald Constable, the *Letters* sold well,⁵ from which we infer that the bookseller, at the very least, covered costs. This piece of data, however, does not reveal how the books were critically received. Analyzing the reviews of Seward’s *Letters* and *Poetical Works* in periodicals will evince whether or not her project for posthumous fame had a positive response in the reviewing press, which had an undoubted influence on the readership and, therefore, was instrumental in the success of her writings. My analysis will also show how the literary critics managed their perceptions of age, gender, singlehood, and authorship in the articulation of their criticism. For this purpose, I have selected

⁵ See National Library of Scotland MS23233 “Apparently a proof copy of a book titled ‘Correspondence between John Murray, London, and Archibald Constable and A. Constable & Co., Edinburgh.’”

three magazines: *The Critical Review* (1756-1817), *The Monthly Review* (1749-1845), and the *British Review and London Critical Journal* (1811-1825). The importance of the first two publications in the founding of literary criticism cannot be overstated: *The Monthly* and *The Critical*, led by Ralph Griffiths and Tobias Smollett, pioneered modern literary criticism (Feather 96), reinventing reviews and rescuing them from puff pieces into actual works of intellectual exchange and journalistic accuracy, a trend—in quantity and in quality—that would only increase during the Romantic period (Wheatley 1). As for the *British Review*, mockingly nicknamed by Byron “my Grandmother’s Review” (*Don Juan* 46), it was founded by the evangelical lawyer John Weyland, and by William Roberts, future biographer of Hannah More, and published by the Tory John Hatchard. The reviews, quite lengthy, quote extensively from the letters: *The Critical Review*’s piece was 12 pages long, the *British Review and London Critical Journal* 17, and *The Monthly Review* a remarkable 28.

In his 1844 *Cyclopedia of English Literature*, Robert Chambers recounted that “the applauses of Miss Seward’s early admirers were only calculated to excite ridicule, and the vanity and affectation which were her besetting sins, destroyed equally her poetry and prose” (278). This idea of “vanity and affectation” was echoed by several critics. *The Monthly* qualified the collection as Seward’s “triumph of vanity” resulting from her “thirst for posthumous reputation” (66: 114) and they described her as “sitting on her throne of self-sufficiency in a provincial town” (114), being “vain of her talents, and both pedantic and arrogant in the display of them” (115). Moreover, they offer that the volumes “might have been entitled ‘The Opinions of Anna Seward in Various Subjects’” (225). *The Critical* was also adamant in criticizing Seward’s “vanity,” clarifying that their disapproval was not limited to her gender: “We do not allude to those vanities common to her sex, we mean the vanity of authorship” (1: 353). The *British Review and London Critical Journal* insists on this same idea, writing that “we will not say the vanity of the sex but we may say the vanity of authorship” (2: 171).

Although both periodicals adamantly underline that their criticism is not directed towards so-called female vanity, Iona Italia has connected the “vanity

of authorship” to the ingrained prejudices against singlewomen. Italia describes the “Female student”—an *eidolon* in Christopher Smart’s periodical *The Student* (1750-1751)—as the embodiment of the association of “old-maidism” with learning. The “Female student” is a “frustrated spinster” who turns “to scribbling for income when her sexual charms lose their force” and whose writing is motivated by spite against amorous rejection, to “revenge herself on those who have rejected her” (Italia 170). Interestingly, Italia considers the vanity of authorship as being on an equal footing with the vanity of the singlewoman: “The ‘Vanity’ which leads the old maid to flirt with men until it is too late to receive an honorable proposal,” she writes, “is the same sentiment which leads her to value herself upon her education and her literary abilities”; and, therefore, in the popular imagination, “the female writer is more likely to be an old maid than any other woman” (170). The insistence on vanity is certainly compelling, but it does not come as a surprise in the context of autobiographical works at the time. Writing about the increase of the autobiographical genre in the nineteenth century, James Treadwell has observed that, in review periodicals, “accusations (or at least mentions) of egotism appear everywhere, attached to autobiographical writing like its shadow” (63). Treadwell recounts that the accusation of “vanity” against autobiography was “directed specifically at the character of an author,” in other words, “self-exposure” was considered “a flaw in its author’s moral constitution” (65). For an autobiographical work to be welcomed by critics and readers alike, it required its author’s indisputable eminence (social rank) or talent (genius). At the time, the increase in the number of autobiographies by authors who lacked either eminence or talent—or both—was received as a “sign of decay in the public sphere” (Treadwell 74). It is not strange, then, that the critics reacted dismissively to Seward’s authorial assertion in publishing her correspondence and compiled works, as they perceived it as an overstepping of the boundaries of propriety and modesty assigned to her gender, class, and age.

Just like *The Monthly* and Scott in the “Preface,” the *British Review and London Critical Journal* believed Seward’s later writings to be of inferior quality, characterized by “shining absurdities and ambitious faults” (174). In fact, they

praise her earlier compositions and attribute her success to her youth because, according to them, reviewers were more lenient towards young lady writers than older ones: “Her first publications had been received with unqualified commendation; her youth, her sex, and the freshness of her fame excited an enthusiasm in her favor. These recommendations were of a nature not to last; and every succeeding poem was examined with severer justice and increased impartiality” (178). They insist that “her powers declined as age advanced, and by all her attempts at composition, which were many during her later years, she was writing herself out of reputation” (178). The review adds:

By consulting the ease of her faculties, she would have consulted the interests of her fame; but to live in unison with time and nature is the happiness of those, only, who have learned to put a sober value on the pleasures of a fugitive being, and to resign with cheerfulness what if we struggle too long to retain must at length be forfeited with disgrace. (179)

By asking Seward to “resign with cheerfulness” her literary career before it has to be “forfeited with disgrace,” the *British Review* is evincing the press’ disregard for elderly women writers, confirming Looser’s assertion that “to continue to publish into old age” was not an option for many female authors because they risked “lowering a once-high reputation” (7). Scott repeats this same idea in the “Preface” to the *Poetical Works*, arguing that all of Seward’s productions after the *Sonnets* (1799) were “unequal to those of her earlier muse,” which he suggests was due to her advancing years: “age was now approaching with its usual attendants, declining health, and the loss of friends summoned from the stage before her” (xxi), an idea that would eventually be echoed by the reviewers of the collections. Both Scott and the reviewers are admonishing Seward for not having had the good sense to “resign with cheerfulness” her public writing career. Consequently, Seward’s later corpus exists in defiance of societal expectations of how an old, unmarried, woman should occupy her time. She, and her career, are belittled because of her age, gender, and marital status.

Scott’s preface in the *Poetical Works* set the tone for subsequent critics and biographers. In fact, all biographical references to Seward from the nineteenth

century and up until very recently are largely based on Scott's account. Consequently, they repeat his anecdotes and perpetuate his prejudices. In addition, while Seward is mentioned alongside the major British women writers in a number of minor newspapers and magazines throughout the nineteenth century in both England and the United States; she all but disappeared in literary criticism. The interest in Seward was reawakened in the early twentieth century with E.V. Lucas' *A Swan and her Friends* (1907), Martin Stapleton's *Anna Seward and Classic Lichfield* (1909), Margaret Ashmun's *The Singing Swan* (1931), and Hesketh Pearson's *The Swan of Lichfield* (1936). However, these are both poorly researched and focused on Seward's biography, reflecting an anecdotal, if ongoing, interest in the writer as a relic of another time and, therefore, they cannot be considered scholarly either in intent or execution. On the other hand, since the 1990s, there has been an increase in scholarly interest in Seward that began with her inclusion in women writers' anthologies. In the last two decades, Seward's writings and her impact have been gaining recognition, making her the subject of multiple articles, three monographs, and a critical edition.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the failure of Seward's attempt to secure her literary legacy and how eighteenth-century social perceptions of gender and age conditioned the reception of her posthumously published *Letters and Poetical Works*. It has situated Seward within a larger tradition of eighteenth-century (elderly) women writers who envisioned their literary afterlives and made plans for posthumous publication. Seward's attentive planning for the publication of her compiled works and correspondence denotes her authorial agency. This is evident in the choices she made: aware as she was of the dangers in publishing as an older woman, she withheld publication to avoid a direct dismissal by the reviewing press; she bequeathed her works to two younger and very influential names of the Romantic literary world—Walter Scott and Archibald Constable—; both steps were intended to ensure a favorable reception for the *Letters and Poetical Works*. In addition, she left detailed instructions with her manuscripts that would help the posthumous publications consolidate Seward's

public image and literary fame in the years to come. Seward began her planning in her fifties, which, in the context of the eighteenth century and in the case of unmarried women, stripped of the social status and domestic and reproductive role that accompanied married life, was considered an advanced age. This social conception of gender and age may have prompted Seward to revisit her life at this point and to construct an image of herself looking back from her maturity and experience. Furthermore, Seward's plan for posthumous fame itself challenges the prejudices and social scorn attached to the figure of the old-maid that she embodies at this stage. She, therefore, resisted societal expectations by reinforcing her literary authority and her role as experienced writer and mentor.

The findings raise important questions about the critical afterlife of Anna Seward and suggest that an understudied factor in her exclusion from literary discussion was the editorial decisions made by Archibald Constable and Walter Scott. While this study cannot offer a conclusive analysis of the extent of the editors' disfiguration of Seward's original manuscripts, it suggests, from the available evidence, that Scott and Constable's failure to adhere to Seward's instructions, and their censoring of the manuscripts, misconstrued and distorted the public image Seward had been so careful to prepare. Consequently, their editorial decisions were the first step in the failure of Seward's project for posthumous fame.

Seward's exclusion from the literary landscape—in her old age, but especially after her death—was the result of a series of critical processes, an essential element of which was the reception of her posthumously published compilation. These critical processes were articulated through prejudices against gender, age, and singlehood, embedded in the cultural consciousness of the time and inbred in the reviews of the *Letters* and *Poetical Works*. Seward's posthumous publications are dismissed as an exercise in vanity, and she is punished for challenging a critical press that undervalued older women writers' contributions. The reviewers argue that her later career writings were inferior in quality and that by not retiring from the literary world she had been “writing herself out of reputation” (*British Review* 179). Accordingly, and answering the question that was the point of departure of this analysis, age and gender played

an instrumental part in the critical dismissal of Seward's posthumous career. Therefore, the failure of Seward's project for posthumous fame is consummated in the reviewing press. By reproducing eighteenth-century society's biases against elderly women writers, the reviewers contributed to the poor reception of her compiled works, which had a long-term negative effect on Seward's posthumous reputation, seriously impacting her critical reception in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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Francesca Blanch-Serrat is a PhD candidate in the Department of English and German at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, where she also teaches at undergraduate level. She is a predoctoral researcher at the ERC-funded Project WINK: Trans-Genre Writing and the Gendering of Intellectual Value in Early Modernity, where she specializes in eighteenth-century women-authored texts in English. Her research primarily concerns women's literary history and old age and aging, and her current focus is on assertions of literary authority and self-presentation in the later-life writings of Anna Seward. Her research has been published in the *ES REVIEW: Spanish Journal of English Studies* (2019) and in the anthology *Persistence and Resistance in English Studies: New Research* (2018). She authored the revised entry for Anna Seward in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2019). She may be contacted at Francesca.Blanch@uab.cat.