

“I mourn their nature, but admire their art”: Anna Seward’s Assertion of Critical Authority in Maturity and Old Age*

“Lamento su naturaleza, pero admiro su arte”: Anna Seward y su afirmación de la autoridad crítica en la madurez y la vejez

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Abstract: In 1786 an anonymous correspondent appealed to Samuel Johnson’s biographer James Boswell in the pages of the *Gentleman’s Magazine*. Behind the pseudonym Benvolio was Anna Seward (1742–1809), one of the prominent poetical voices of Britain at the time. From 1786–87 and 1793–94, Seward and Boswell engaged in a public and gradually acrimonious dispute over Johnson’s reputation. This article argues that at the core of the debates was Seward’s assertion of her literary and critical authority, and I contend that age and gender played key roles in Boswell’s dismissal of Seward’s claim.

Keywords: Anna Seward; Age Studies; James Boswell; Samuel Johnson; *Gentleman’s Magazine*.

Summary: Introduction. The First Benvolio Debate, 1786–87. The Second Benvolio Debate, 1793–94. The Aftermath of the Debates. Conclusions.

Resumen: En 1786 la revista inglesa *Gentleman’s Magazine* publicó una carta firmada con el pseudónimo de Benvolio, dirigida a James Boswell, biógrafo de Samuel Johnson. Detrás de dicho pseudónimo escribía la celebrada poetisa Anna Seward. Durante los años 1786–87 y 1793–94, Boswell y Seward se enfrentaron en un encarnizado debate sobre la reputación de Johnson. Este artículo argumenta que en el centro de tales debates se encuentra la defensa de la autoridad literaria y crítica de Seward, y sugiere que la edad y el género de la autora tuvieron un papel clave en la deslegitimación de dicha defensa.

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Palabras clave: Anna Seward; estudios de la edad; James Boswell; Samuel Johnson; *Gentleman's Magazine*.

Sumario: Introducción. El primer debate (1786–87). El segundo debate (1793–94). Las secuelas de los debates. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

Anna Seward (1742–1809), once hailed as “th’immortal muse of Britain” (Seward 147), was an eighteenth-century poet, literary critic, and intellectual celebrated on both sides of the Atlantic (Clarke 35; Kairoff 71). Seward held a central position both within her native Lichfield’s blooming cultural life and among a nationwide network of intellectuals, artists, and scientists. Amongst her acquaintances we find Samuel Johnson, Hester Lynch Piozzi, Erasmus Darwin, Helen Maria Williams, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Frances Brooke, Walter Scott, William and Eliza Hayley, Robert Southey, the Ladies of Llangollen, and James Boswell. It was precisely Boswell with whom she engaged in a public argument in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (*GM* henceforth) between the late 1780s and early 1790s. In the first debate (1786–87) the *GM* published three letters addressing Boswell’s *The Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson* (1785) behind the pseudonym “Benvolio.” Boswell refused to engage with this first debate but replied to Seward in the second one (1793–94), in which the latter denounced the former’s exclusion of her contributions to his *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791).

While Boswell’s *Account of Corsica* (1768), re-edited on three occasions, had enjoyed a warm reception and afforded him certain literary renown, it was not until 1785 and 1791 that his reputation was established with the publication of *Tour of the Hebrides* and *Life of Johnson*. On the other hand, Seward—who was in fact two years younger than Boswell—by 1785 had already published three best-selling works. Her *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780) and *Monody on Major André* (1781) had undergone five and eight editions, respectively (*Monody* had three in England and four in America); and *Louisa* (1784) had five. Her knowledge of literature was well-known: “in critical acumen she was always unrivalled, and no latent excellence nor defect could escape her observation—she had the poet’s taste and the poet’s eye” (*The Scots*

Magazine 71: 319). By 1786, when the first debate took place, Seward's national fame was well established. She had the knowledge, skill, and reputation to participate in public debates on literary matters. She was mature, too, not only in terms of career experience, but also in age—she was forty-four in 1786 and fifty-one in 1793. Scholars of Age Studies in the eighteenth century have concluded that, in that period, “middle age” began at forty whereas “old age” began at sixty (Ottaway 18). However, unmarried women like Seward were considered “old” before married ones, their senior years beginning as early as thirty (Looser 15). Seward herself jokingly referred to her marital status as “her ‘single blessedness’; so Shakespeare calls ‘old-maidism’” in a letter written in her forties (*Letters* 3: 30). Consequently, Seward was socially considered older due to her gender and marital status, and being an “old maid,” with all the harmful connotations it had in the eighteenth century, affected the way in which she was critically perceived, and received, by her contemporaries, as the responses to the Benvolio letters prove.

This article engages with the “Benvolio letters,” their public and private responses, and its aftermath. My argument is two-folded. First, I argue that Seward's Benvolio letters sought to assert her literary and critical authority that was further reinforced by her experience and maturity. Secondly, I examine the role that age and gender played in the dismissal of Seward's assertion and I demonstrate that Boswell's discrediting of Seward's authority is articulated by using her gender and her age against her. In order to support both these claims, this article examines the Benvolio debates through the theoretical framework of Gender and Age studies.

Age Studies is a branch of Gender Studies which takes age into account as a distinctive factor in social, historical, and literary research. It is concerned with larger issues attached to the construction, evolution, and self-representation of identity. The discipline offers to fill a complex critical gap in literary studies through the reassessment of the period's relationship with notions of age and ageing. Age studies allows us to redress the dismissal of Seward's legacy not only by recovering her voice but also, and more importantly, by reassessing and making her intellectual contributions more visible. Age Studies allows us to “discover shared patterns of reception (that is, commonalities in response from readers and critics) and possibly shared features of writing that hinged on distinctions of sex and age” (Looser, “Age and Aging” 176). The Benvolio debates took place at Seward's authorial maturity.

Both debates are essential to understanding Seward's self-awareness of her identity as an author and a literary critic. According to Teresa Barnard, "the controversy was more often than not a delicate balance of intellectual reasoning than the 'invective' it is most usually credited to be. It was the form of literary jousting" (Barnard 139). The debates constitute an exercise in critical insight designed both to assert her claim and reinforce her authority as literary critic and are intrinsically tied to her maturity. Age is, therefore, a double-edged sword that reinforces Seward's claim to participate in the public sphere of criticism and canon-formation, but is also used against her to devalue her contribution.

It has been argued (Barnard 134; Kairoff 243; Wood 35; Woolley 145) that the underlying motive for Boswell's harshness lies in Seward's rejection of his romantic advances towards her in 1784 (Heiland 381), some years prior to the publication of the Benvolio letters. However, I suggest that although this personal aspect might have exacerbated Boswell's rancor, this heated conflict is not due to personal enmity or to Boswell's bitterness at her rejection, but rather to a much larger issue: a clash between two opposing, gendered modes of literary criticism. Seward's public exchange with Boswell in the Benvolio debates had at its core Seward's assertion of her literary and critical authority within the changing, increasingly gendered landscape of late-eighteenth-century literary criticism. The debates represent a conflict between the female and the male Romantic literary aesthetics and can be read as a paper-war between two contending, gender-coded factions of literary criticism, each pushing for dominance. Kairoff describes Seward as being "caught between" (261) two centuries of competing tastes, her standards and style being regarded as equally as outdated as herself. Consequently, her criticism was "expressive of her generation's tastes and concerns" (Kairoff 261), which were losing ground to those of the emerging male Romantics. They repudiated the principles of Seward's generation: "what had been an uncontroversial and shared genteel vocabulary in the 1740s . . . had begun to seem fusty and old-fashioned" (Clarke 44). Although, in fact, Seward was two years younger than Boswell, her marital status and ornate and affected style (Chambers 278) led to her being perceived as older.

Indeed, the Benvolio debates illustrate "the profound cultural shift . . . in the course of which critical authority became gendered as male. Opinion . . . became professionalised and in the process women were effectively squeezed out" (Clarke 38). Indeed, in this cultural shift that

the Romantic movement promulgated, provincial genteel writers such as Seward “lost ground” (Kairoff 52). Clarke connects this shift with the broadening of the gender divide—the further separation of the public/private spheres—that was established in the nineteenth century, a consequence of what Gillen D’Arcy Wood has termed the emergence of the “rhetoric of professionalism” (Wood 35). This new rhetoric highlighted the so-called “natural differences” along the gender binary: “men belonged in public life, women in the home” (Clarke 44). Such an assumption upholds Ann K. Mellor’s claim that male critics “assumed that men were rational and should dominate the public sphere while women were emotional and should be confined to a private, domestic sphere” (Mellor 91). In fact, in the Benvolio letters, the opposite seems to be true: in the first set of letters Seward asks that Boswell’s portrayal of Johnson be not so biased, but rather that he adopt a rational, impartial and truthful approach in his task. She calls him one of Johnson’s “blind idolaters” (*GM* 63.2: 1100) and blames his books for “spread[ing] a veil” over Johnson’s true character (*GM* 56.1: 125). Seward is thus both resisting and challenging the gender dichotomy of the spheres in two ways. First, she points out Boswell’s failure to perform supposedly male rationality and objectivity. Second, she occupies the public sphere of the *GM* with her public letters on literary criticism, not only participating in but in fact disputing Boswell’s critical authority and competence.

At the time, women writers speaking to the nation on matters of politics or literary taste were not uncommon—Seward had been applauded for doing so in her *Monody* and *Elegy*. However, at the end of the century, attitudes towards this phenomenon were changing with the professionalisation of criticism: “what the Victorians were to elevate into an ideology of ‘separate spheres’ was already at work as the institutions of literary criticism began to be professionalised” (Clarke 44). This professionalisation caused a “pronounced hostility to both women and literary amateurism” (Wood 35), which in literary criticism were, incidentally, often synonymous. By confronting Boswell’s authority, Seward resists this shift. These two issues, gender and amateurism, were brought to the public’s attention in the second Boswell-Seward exchange.

Boswell’s responses to the Benvolio letters show how he alienates and disenfranchises Seward: “She never did me any harm, nor do I apprehend that she ever can” (*GM* 64.1: 33). His replies assume a patronising attitude: “our poetess has made a second attack . . . and in

such temper as must be very uneasy to a gentle bosom” (*GM* 64.1: 32). Most importantly, they are intended to publicly disavow Seward in particular, and women in general, as literary critics: “I was wearied with this female criticism” (Boswell, in Barnard 139). The development of the debates, and especially their conclusion, I contend, epitomise the conflict between the Romantic aesthetics of “professional” literary criticism that Boswell embodies over the Enlightened, “amateur,” and female ones that Seward represents. Boswell saw Seward’s public appeal as an attack to his own male authority and opposed it in two ways: first, refusing to engage; and then with sexist and ageist hostility, knowing that Seward would not be able to respond within the limits of female propriety. Boswell is therefore marking where the boundary of Seward’s—and women’s—public opinion is. In these debates, Seward demonstrates discursive control in the ease with which she molds her arguments in response to the critics’ denunciations, and an absolute management of literary knowledge, both of which showed her to be a systematic and shrewd scholar. More importantly, however, Seward shows awareness and skill in navigating and resisting Boswell’s aggressive replies that sought to undermine her claim to literary authority by using her gender and her age against her.

1. THE FIRST BENVOLIO DEBATE, 1786–87

After Johnson’s death in 1784, Seward refused to participate in the national deification of a man she had described as “sicken[ing] with envy over literary fame,” adding that “his bigotry and superstition pass credibility . . . he exults from the anguish and disgrace of every person . . . from the instant that the slightest opposition is made to his opinions, he exalts his voice into thunder” (*GM* 63.2: 199). Similarly, in her collection of *Original Sonnets* (1799), she published “On Doctor Johnson’s Unjust Criticisms in His Lives of the Poets” (69) and “On the Posthumous Fame of Doctor Johnson” (70). In the former, she described “aweful Johnson” (1), his “insidious ENVY” (10), and his tendency to “lift the *mean*, and lay the MIGHTY low” (14). In the latter, she further condemned the exoneration of his character in his posthumous canonisation:

Well it becomes thee, Britain, to avow
JOHNSON’s high claims !—yet boasting that his fires

Were of *unclouded* lustre, TRUTH retires
Blushing, and Justice knits her solemn brow., (1–4)

With these lines, Seward was emphatically denouncing Johnson's supporters for failing to acknowledge his 'true' character. The notion of truth cited in the last line anticipates a theme on which she would later expand in with her criticism of Boswell. Specifically, she decried the fact that Johnson's biographers were bending truth and objectivity and thus failing the standards of accuracy she deemed essential in literary criticism: "her argument with Dr. Johnson was, among other things, that he was not a close reader and that his judgements were therefore unjust" (Clarke 41). Indeed, "at the heart of the matter was the question of truth, not the truth of biographers . . . but the truthfulness of the subject. If he was not truthful, could he be good? And if he was not good should he be emulated?" (Clarke 43). This "goodness" is, to Seward, moral goodness as opposed to literary merit, which she termed "greatness." The latter is not in dispute; it is the former to which Seward objects.

In 1787 Seward wrote of Johnson, Cowper, and Swift: "I mourn their nature, but admire their art, adore their head, while I abjure their heart" (*Letters* 1: 297). For Seward, as with many women writers, the ideas of truth and moral character were paramount to the exercise of literary criticism. A writer's moral character—in Johnson's case, "envy," "bigotry," or "superstition"—was an essential element in their public recognition and it was not to be overlooked at the service of the exaltation of genius. Eighteenth-century women writers acted as "judges not just of aesthetic taste and literary excellence but also of cultural morality" (Mellor 100); they were the upholders of a literary criticism at the crossroads of "a neoclassical mimetic aesthetic that was limited by its commitment to abstract universals . . . and to an outdated hierarchy of the arts" and a "masculine Romantic aesthetic devoted to celebrating the originality and passionate feelings of the poet" (Mellor 99). Seward's emphasis on morality and her refusal to join in the chorus of Johnsonian canonisation, therefore, was perceived by Boswell as a threat to the masculine Romantic aesthetics.

Between 1786–87, the *GM* published three letters signed by Benvolio: "The Battledoor Kept up for Boswell's Shuttlecock" (56.1: 125–26), "Remarks on Dr Johnson's Character as Given by his Biographers" (57.2: 302–04), and "Strictures from Benvolio on the Character of Johnson in our last" (57.2: 684–85). Seward's authorship

was corroborated by the author herself: “The three letters signed Benvolio in the numbers for February and April, 1786, p.129 and p.302, and for August 1787, p.684, are *mine*; I avowed them at the time they appeared, to almost all my friends, and, I think, to Mr. Boswell” (*GM* 63.2: 1100). Although modern scholarship has regarded the Benvolio letters as a “controversy” (Ashmun 139; Brewer 482), the letters are not designed as an attack on Boswell, but rather as a public call to readers, reviewers, and Boswell himself to reevaluate the ongoing construction of the posthumous portrayal of Samuel Johnson. Seward’s choice of the pen-name “Benvolio” signals that her intention is not to abuse Boswell. “Benvolio” could have been inspired by either Marlowe’s *Faustus* or Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Whereas Marlowe’s Benvolio is derisive and ends up being punished for mocking Faustus, Shakespeare’s Benvolio attempts to make peace between the Montagues and the Capulets. It cannot be a coincidence that Benvolio translates as “well-meaning.”

In the first of the Benvolio letters, Seward argues that Boswell’s *The Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides* (1785) will allow the audience to “perceive” the true Johnson as comprising “genius and absurdity, wisdom and folly, penetration and prejudice, devotion and superstition, compassion and malevolence, friendship and envy, truth and sophistry” (*GM* 56.1: 125). Seward insists that to hail a man as a genius, which are the terms in which Johnson is being celebrated, he must possess artistic greatness as well as moral goodness. Seward’s argument at the core of the Benvolio letters is precisely the aforementioned lack of balance in the posthumous homages to Johnson, which she denounces in Boswell’s *Tour* and subsequent *Life*. She chastises Boswell for “spread[ing] a veil” (*GM* 56.1: 125) over Johnson’s faults and demands impartiality and truth in his posthumous public recognition. In her second appeal, “Remarks on Dr Johnson’s Character as Given by His Biographers” (*GM* 57.2: 302–04), Seward is again both apologetic and conciliatory. She seeks to avoid conflict and concedes “the impossibility of satisfying the captious multitude” (*GM* 57.2: 302), referring to either her criticism towards Boswell’s *Tour* or to the book itself. Seward terms Johnson as “one of the greatest *geniuses*, and certainly the *most extraordinary* being that ever existed” (*GM* 57.2: 302), reassuring the reader that she is not questioning his literary merit. However, Seward insists on accusing Boswell of being untruthful and writes that Johnson’s “stains of malice and irascibility should, by the hand of friendship, no more be concealed

in the pictures of his mind, than the unwieldiness of his limbs, and the deformities of his countenance, should be omitted in those of his person” (*GM* 57.2: 302).

The reasons why Seward, Boswell, and *GM* readers engaged in this public discussion in the first place, surface when considering the reception of Seward's major works in 1780, which is related to her public reputation and authorial maturity. Seward's public antagonism towards Johnson and his biographers was based on her very identity as a writer of renown, and she envisioned her reputation as British muse as a duty towards the nation. For Seward, “Johnson's failure to comment justly on the nation's poets was a moral failure” (Kairoff 243), and the object of her letters is not to stir controversy, but rather to “[enact] her proper role as British muse, exposing Johnson for the glory of British poetry” (Kairoff 243). Indeed, Seward is asserting her “claim to a powerful cultural authority . . . who writes best for the good of the nation” (Mellor 85). Therefore, Seward is fulfilling both her role as an admired and well-regarded writer *and* as a literary critic: “during her lifetime Seward held a position as a woman of letters that was unparalleled . . . she set herself up as an arbiter of taste, a critic” (Clarke 35). Seward was always in contact with intellectual developments and cultural events, as a producer, consumer and reviewer, and ultimately as one of the consolidators of a “unified national culture” (Wood 457). By carrying out her role as writer of the nation, Seward is asserting her claim to literary authority, a claim reinforced by her experience and maturity. Seward believes that it is her responsibility—toward the nation as much as toward the developing literary canon—to publicly interrogate Johnson's posthumous reception. This resolution informs Seward's literary identity and is consistent throughout her career but especially so in her maturity: she is firmly asserting her authority as an experienced writer with an already established career and reputation. However, as a periodical wrote after her death, age influenced the decline of her reception and reputation:

Her first publications had been received with unqualified commendation; her youth, her sex, and the freshness of her fame excited an enthusiasm in her favour. These recommendations were of a nature not to last; and every succeeding poem was examined with severer justice and increased impartiality. (*British Review* 178)

In order to maintain the reputation they were afforded at their prime, mature women usually were required to abandon the public arena. In other words, avoiding a reputation for being outdated “implied graceful, polite retirement” (Looser 34). Seward’s refusal to do so had an effect on how her letters were perceived by Boswell and readers alike, and on how Boswell articulated his response to it.

The third and last Benvolio letter, entitled “Strictures from Benvolio on the Character of Johnson in our Last” (*GM* 57.2: 684–85), is a reply to a response by a third party published in the magazine, “Character of Johnson from the Olla Podrida,” and it furthers the arguments on Johnson’s morality. The *Olla Podrida*, or rotten pot, was a periodical consisting of forty-four issues published between March 1787 and January 1788. It was edited by Thomas Monro and published by John Nichols, also editor of the *GM*. In the thirteenth issue of the periodical, dated June 1787, an anonymous correspondent addressed Seward’s comments on Johnson. The anonymous author was in fact Bishop George Horne (*GM* 57.2: 559), fellow and president of St. Mary Magdalen College, dean of Canterbury, and vice-chancellor of Oxford University (Aston). In his essay, Horne argues that, contrary to Benvolio’s arguments, Johnson’s talent outweighed his alleged moral failings: “His eminence and his fame must of course have excited envy and malice: but let envy and malice at his infirmities and his charities and they will melt into pity and love that he should not be conscious of the abilities” (Monro 77). Horne fully engages with Seward’s main argument when he argues that “his genius, his learning, his good sense, the strength of his reasonings, and the happiness of his illustrations” are “once good, and always good” (Monro 74). The essay was reprinted in the *GM* (57.2: 559) and prefaced by a short communication signed “A.D.” In this brief note, the author protests that “many very unfair attacks have been made on Dr Johnson’s character” (*GM* 57.2: 559) which demanded a response. A.D. also characterises the Benvolio letters as a “malevolent attack” (*GM* 57.2: 559), to which Seward’s answer is curt and firm. She insists on her objectivity: “The author of the letters signed Benvolio had neither obligation nor enmity to Dr Johnson: and has therefore a better right to *retort* the charge upon himself.” She adds that

of him who has calumniated the moral and religious character of . . . Milton; —who has bestowed the name of scoundrel upon the royal protector of the Protestant religion; —and who has tried to brand the whole

poetic fraternity it cannot be malevolent to say he was *malignant*. (*GM* 57.2: 685).

The most interesting part of the letter prefacing the “Olla Podrida” is its allusion to Seward’s gender. A.D. mentions that the “malevolent attack” (*GM* 57.2: 685) to Johnson in the *GM* was produced by “a lady with the misapplied signature of *Benvolio*” (*GM* 57.2: 685). To which Seward responded: “be it remembered that souls are of no sex, and their effusions therefore may, at pleasure, assume a masculine or feminine appellation” (*GM* 57.2: 685). With this answer, Seward resists being gendered by arguing that intellect and knowledge itself are genderless. Seward demands that her critical acumen be considered regardless of her gender. Her response can be understood using Susan Wolfson’s argument in “Gendering the Soul,” where she postulates that when women write of sex in souls they “confront a literary tradition in which the female soul is contained by paradigms that mean to serve male privileges and interests” (67). Wolfson writes that Seward’s contemporaries’ legacy laid the groundwork for challenging the idea that intellectual skill has to be masculine: “the persistent tensions of [Romantic women writers] texts generate an important cultural legacy” by “ungendering” their souls (68). In this sense, in this letter Seward is bringing both male—and female—coded paradigms together, and proclaiming that intellectual acumen is genderless and can be harnessed by men as well as women; and, by this logic, so is literary and critical authority. Moreover, the anonymity of the letters is used by Seward in an attempt to eschew gender altogether in order to protect herself from attacks that would belittle her literary and critical authority as well as her literary and social reputation.

In this first exchange, Boswell did not deem it relevant to address the issues raised by Seward publicly, but he wrote privately to Seward a few months after the last *Benvolio* letter was published. In this letter from April 1788, Boswell protests that “there has now been a long and lamentable cessation of our epistolary intercourse” and requests “a renewal of which and to inquire after you and your Reverend Father, and my other friends at Lichfield.” Notably, he mentions the *Benvolio* letters: “I do not fail to trace your writings in the Gentleman’s Magazine when your name appears, and sometimes (if I guess right) when it does not.” He then proceeds to comment, in an amiable, subdued tone, on Johnson’s posthumous reception: “What a variety of publications have there been concerning Johnson. Never was there a Man whose reputation remained

as long in such luxuriant freshness, as his does.” He then adds, pointedly, what seems to be a reference to Seward’s letters: “how very envious of this do the little stars; of literature seem to be, though bright themselves in their due proportion.” Furthermore, Boswell calls Seward his “charming friend” and “dear madam,” and himself her “faithful humble servant,” which with the general sarcastic tone of the letter has a rather paternalistic hue. Boswell does not engage in bickering of any kind, but rather ignores her criticism, while acknowledging Seward’s authorship of the letters. By ignoring her criticism, Boswell dismisses her authority as a literary critic.

2. THE SECOND BENVOLIO DEBATE, 1793–94

The second debate with Boswell took place six years after the Benvolio letters and began as a response to Boswell’s “The principal Corrections and Additions to the first Edition of Boswell’s Life of Dr. Johnson” (1793), in which he mentions Seward: “in my first edition I was induced to doubt the authenticity of this account, by the following circumstantial statement in a letter to me from Miss Seward” (Boswell 50). The debate differed with the first one in three essential points: first of all, because she had been mentioned by Boswell, Seward eschewed the pseudonym and signed with her name. Second, Boswell replied publicly. And, finally, this debate was much more aggressive and personal than the Benvolio letters ever were. Boswell’s reply attacks Seward on two fronts: on the one hand, it dismisses Seward’s claim to literary authority on the grounds that she is a woman and, on top of that, an old maid. On the other hand, it mocks such a claim coming from someone whom he describes as an ignorant amateur writer, discrediting the critical skill and authority of Seward in particular and women writers in general. Examining Boswell’s replies elucidates the role that both gender and age played in the dismissal of Seward’s assertion of literary and critical authority. However, Seward’s various responses to Boswell’s attacks demonstrate great skill in navigating the gendered boundaries of propriety as well as her resistance to Boswell’s dismissal.

Seward began the second debate in 1793 and Boswell ended it in 1794. There were four letters in total, two by Seward, and two by Boswell (dated October, November, and December 1793 and January 1794). In his first reply, Boswell admits that Seward sent him Johnson’s anecdotes, and he justifies his decision not to publish them arguing that

they were “not only poetically luxuriant, but, I could easily perceive, were tinctured with a strong prejudice against the person to whom they related. It therefore became me to examine them with much caution” (*GM* 63.2: 1009). In this statement, he openly questions Seward’s credibility and accuses her of bias. He lists several anecdotes Seward included in her sheets and claims that he fact-checked them and they proved not to be true. Boswell writes, with corrosive irony, that “as my book was to be a real history, and not a novel, it was necessary to suppress all erroneous particulars, however entertaining” (*GM* 63.2: 1009). Thus, Boswell disqualifies Seward as a biographer. Boswell finishes his retort hoping that “the fair Lady will be convinced that I have neither been impolite nor unjust to her.” He adds that “from the veneration and affection which I entertain for the character of my illustrious friend, I cannot be satisfied without expressing my indignation at the malevolence with which she has presumed to attack that great and good man” (*GM* 63.2: 1010). In choosing these adjectives, “great and good,” Boswell scornfully references Seward’s main idea in the composition of the Benvolio letters, adding that “Dr Johnson's strict, nice, and scrupulous regard to *truth* was one of the most remarkable circumstances in his character” (*GM* 63.2: 1011). Boswell accuses her of envy, reducing her arguments to personal feeling, and references the Benvolio letters once more by saying

it is unnecessary to take up any part of your valuable miscellany in exposing the little arts which have been employed by a cabal of minor poets and poetesses who are sadly mortified that Dr. Johnson, by his powerful sentence, assigned their proper station to writers of this description. (*GM* 63.2: 1011)

With this final retort, Boswell once again dismisses Seward as an amateur by calling her a “minor poetess,” an epithet that was both hurtful and inaccurate. As aforementioned, Seward’s fame had crossed the Atlantic in 1781, as the many editions of her most celebrated works demonstrate. However, Boswell’s comment is interesting. It is based on the idea that age negatively affected women’s earlier publications and altered their reputations: “gradual neglect or devaluation of their earlier contributions seems to have made posthumous notice that much less likely. A number of aged women writers saw their reputations and fame diminishing before their eyes” (Looser 7). In fact, Seward was accused of

“writing herself out of reputation” (*British Review* 2: 179) by continuing to publish in advanced age.

Seward did not take long in offering a vehement and firm reply. In “Letter from Miss Seward in Answer to Mr. Boswell” (*GM* 63.2: 1099), Seward deems Boswell’s letter “too insidious not to require some comments” (*GM* 63.2: 1099). Not surprisingly, Seward takes offence at Boswell’s attack on her literary identity and skill and proclaims him “the foe of her whom he has so often called friend” (*GM* 63.2: 1099). She accuses him of being one of Johnson’s “blind idolaters who perceive not in its bitterness the disappointed ambition, and, consequently, envious spleen, of Johnson” (*GM* 63.2: 1100), and thus of being biased—her main argument in the very first letter—and incapable of presenting a fair, balanced, and accurate portrayal of Johnson. In other words, she asserts that he does not have the skill nor the moral character for literary criticism. She continues by saying that

[i]t has been my lot to contend equally with Dr. Johnson’s enemies and with his worshippers. Against the prejudice or envy of those who call his admirable style florid, turgid, stiff, and pedantic, I have ever maintained that he is the finest prose-writer in our language; and, against the indiscriminate blazon of those who pronounce him equally *good as great*, I have protested, from ingenuous indignation at his injustice to *others*. (*GM* 63.2: 1099)

In this remonstrance, she reminds her interlocutor that her criticism is primarily aimed at his moral character. Seward ends this epistle refusing to engage further “into paper-war with a man, who, after professing himself my friend, becomes causelessly my foe” (*GM* 63.2: 1101). She demands that Boswell not reply to this letter, ending thus the dispute: “New instances of Mr. Boswell’s heroic attempts to injure a defenceless female, who has ever warmly vindicated *him* must ultimately redound more to his dishonours than her, and will, I trust, produce *no future* intrusion upon Mr. Urban’s publication” (*GM* 63.2: 1101). By describing herself as a “defenceless female,” Seward is signaling her awareness that her gender, class, and the necessary protection of her literary and social reputation prevent her from further engaging in her defense, and asks Boswell, who is similarly aware of it, to leave the matter.

Nevertheless, Boswell did reply. In "Mr Boswell's Reply to Miss Seward's Second Attack," dated January 1794 (*GM* 64.1: 32), Boswell insists on the "malevolence with which that fair lady had presumed to attack the great and good Dr Johnson," using almost identical diction and argumentation to those of his previous letter. In this piece, Boswell makes constant mocking attacks to Seward in order to further discredit her criticism and her literary authority: "I am sorry to find that our poetess has made a second attack, at great length, and in such temper as must be very uneasy to a gentle bosom" (*GM* 64.1: 32). Moreover, he refers to her using her family's pet name, "*Miss Nancy Seward*," alongside a sarcastic "*my old friend*" (*GM* 64.1: 33), an overt reference to her age, which, together with "miss," signal Seward's status as an "old maid." He gets once again indecorously personal when he resorts to a veiled reference to Seward's rumoured improper relationship with her close friend John Saville: "My fair antagonist's fertile fancy has men and things enough to employ itself upon, without vainly aspiring to be the judge of JOHNSON" (*GM* 64.1: 35). I agree with Kairoff in characterising Boswell's attitude in this letter as an "outright insult" and a "breach of manners," his "gross familiarity" intended to "reduc[e] her from a worthy to a trivial antagonist and their contest from a public debate to a private quarrel" (Kairoff 253).

Boswell knows that he can stoop low and resort to petty disqualifications in order to bring Seward down because his authority, unlike hers, will not be questioned or harmed in the process. He insists that she, a woman, cannot possibly be at his level: "why should I be my fair antagonist's foe? She never did me any harm, nor do I apprehend that she ever can" (*GM* 64.1: 33). He further claims that there is no conflict between the two, as Seward wrote, because that "is not what I wish to have with the ladies" (*GM* 64.1: 33). Ironically, given the time and effort he has invested in disqualifying Seward as a writer and a critic, he insists on being above discussing such intellectual matters with a woman and references the Psalms: "She will permit me, in perfect good humour, to call to her recollection a verse in very ancient poetry: 'I do not exercise myself in great matters, which are too high for me'" (*GM* 64.1: 35). At this point, it is evident that Boswell's rejection is gender-coded:

Boswell shifts from defense of Johnson's personality to an attack based on gender. He questions the legitimacy of Seward's very participation in the

public literary debate . . . He [marks] a clear line between professional men of letters, such as himself and Johnson, and Seward. (Wood 36)

Indeed, Boswell dismisses Seward's literary authority by ridiculing and questioning her critical capacity, writing that she is unreliable and negligent: "Miss Seward would not boast of *all* her communications concerning Johnson, as 'conveying strong internal evidence of their verity from characteristic turn of expression,' nor would it be any disadvantage if she should sometimes distrust the accuracy of her *memory*" (*GM* 64.1: 33). He recasts her critical authority as vanity, a woman's vice, while slandering her with unfounded accusations of impropriety in her relationship with Saville, thus turning Seward's defence of moral goodness against her. This letter marked the end of the public Boswell-Seward exchange. It was not answered by Seward, though she went on to receive the public support of some of her friends in the pages of the *GM*.

3. THE AFTERMATH OF THE DEBATES

Seward did not reply to Boswell's last letter, but she did take to the private sphere to discuss it in her correspondence. She thanks Henry Cary for this "truly friendly and generous indignation you have felt and expressed" over Boswell's epistle, which she characterises as "unprovoked and malicious insolence" (*Letters* 3: 346). As for her silence, she writes that "It would be contrary to the declared intention, expressed in my last letter to Urban, and certainly beneath me, to pursue this controversy farther" (*Letters* 3: 346). Similarly, she writes to Anna Rogers Stokes saying that "all my friends unite in thinking it utterly beneath me to pursue a controversy with an ungrateful and impudent man" (*Letters* 3: 353). She also comments on the limited options her gender affords her to defend her own honour after Boswell's attack: "Defenceless against such a being is every woman, who has neither father nor brother to awe the assailant" (*Letters* 3: 353). However, Seward refused to be quieted altogether by Boswell's remarks, and found creative ways to manage the situation within the limits of what was proper for a woman of her class with a reputation to maintain.

Although she had no father and no brother to "awe the assailant," Seward did have a cousin, Henry White; even if Seward could not engage further in the public debate, he could. This cousin, whom Seward once

described as “my literary huntsman” (*Letters* 4: 292), published pieces on at least two more occasions that conveniently echoed her principles—his letter on the Miltonic sonnet in the *GM* (1786), for instance, was later quoted in Seward’s preface to the *Original Sonnets* (1799). The two cousins’ closeness and similarity of opinions suggest that Seward might have composed the letter and White had signed it, or at least that they had discussed its contents prior to publication. If this were the case, Seward would be shielding herself behind her cousin’s gender to continue the conversation and defend her arguments. White’s letter responds to an anonymous missive hinting that Seward’s motives behind the Benvolio letters were produced out of filial duty. This letter is entitled “Extract from Mr. Boswell” (*GM* 64.2: 814) and is signed by “Æ.V.” In it, the author claims the discovery of “a ruling cause of Miss Seward’s being so highly provoked against both Johnson and Boswell” (*GM* 64.2: 814). Far from seeking this cause in the textual evidence provided by the letters and acknowledging Seward’s authority, he argues she was moved by filial duty to write them: “may it not with reason be attributed to the Doctor’s having, in language grossly contemptuous, exposed to his friend the failings and infirmities of the lady’s father, and to the Biographer’s having unwarrantably spread and perpetuated them?” (*GM* 64.2: 815). The author continues with an appeal to the readers:

Must not the fine feelings of a dutiful and truly affectionate daughter have been tremblingly alive on the perusal of this display of the character of her father in a book that was generally read, and a prevailing topick of conversation? (*GM* 64.2: 815)

As well-intentioned as this letter might be, it disqualifies Seward’s arguments and invalidates her critical authority by the same means used by Boswell: by dismissing her reasoning based on her gender. In White’s letter, Seward wants to ensure the readership knows that her arguments are those of a literary critic, not of a wounded daughter:

Miss Seward requests me to assure your readers that, however friendly to her the paragraph might be in p.815 of your last magazine, it is a mistaken suggestion. *From no individual instance of false representation, from no wound of personal feelings, arose her conviction of Dr. Johnson’s propensity to defame; but from a countless number of imputations concerning the characters of others, groundless as that which Mr. Boswell*

has *generously* recorded concerning her father, at whose house he had been entertained with the most friendly hospitality. . . . The letters signed Benvolio, in the Gentleman's Magazine for February and April, 1786, and for August, 1797, she has acknowledged, and they were written several years prior to the appearance of this stigma of her father. *They evince that her convictions were not the offspring of filial indignation, though she must have been lost to natural affection if it had not arisen over that accumulated proof of the justice of her opinions concerning Dr. Johnson.* (GM 64.2: 876; my emphasis)

In the letter, Seward does not relent in her accusations towards Johnson. Even after Boswell's retaliation, Seward stays true to her principles and manages to continue the conversation. In spite of having had her literary authority belittled, she replies within the limits of propriety, thus safeguarding her reputation. With this, Seward manages to have the last word.

CONCLUSIONS

The Benvolio debates are one of the most significant events in the expression and consolidation of Anna Seward's literary and critical identity. They served as a platform for Seward to assert her authority as a writer and a literary critic, firstly in exposing her opposition to Johnson's posthumous reception, and secondly in standing her ground against Boswell's abuse in response to this opposition. By disputing the adulation of a literary titan such as Samuel Johnson, Seward confronted writers and readers alike, as well as the notion of literary genius itself. She emphasised moral virtue and goodness as requisite character traits for an author to be held as a model of literary merit, and in doing so she both enacts and reinforces her role as a public voice and establishes her claim to critical authority.

Seward's arguments at the heart of the Benvolio debates were regarded as representative of a female, amateur and outmoded literary criticism being rebutted by the male, professional and current criticism Boswell represents. Nevertheless, throughout the debate Seward resists Boswell's dismissal, remaining cold-headed, objective and fair in her assessment, whereas Boswell's response is heated and insulting. Significantly, Boswell focuses his attack on Seward's gender and age. Although she was two years younger than him, her literary style and

critical approach are dismissed as outdated and obsolete, and by extension, so is her career. However, the opposite is true; Seward published on four more occasions after the Benvolio debates: *Ode on Elliott's Return from Gibraltar* (1787), *Llangollen Vale* (1796), *Original Sonnets and Odes Paraphrased from Horace* (1799), and *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin* (1804). They were generally well-received, with the exception of punctual reviews where the critique on Seward's so-called old-fashioned style persisted. The implication that the author was writing herself out of a reputation shows the close ties between reputation and age, which continued until her posthumous publications. However, these publications were successful. *Llangollen Vale* and the *Original Sonnets* underwent several editions, and Seward's career extended itself into her fifties and sixties.

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