

CHAPTER 8

‘THINE SACRED FRIENDSHIP’: ANNA SEWARD’S “LLANGOLLEN VALE” AND THE FEMALE ROMANTIC COMMUNITY

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It was 1778 when Lady Eleanor Butler (1739-1829)—the youngest daughter of the Earl and the Countess of Ormond—and Miss Sarah Ponsonby (1755-1831), who lived with relatives close by, ran away from Kilkenny, in Ireland, to England. They dressed in male clothing to avoid unnecessary questions during the journey, and eventually settled in a little cottage close to Llangollen, in North Wales. This was the second time that the two young women, who had met in 1768 and had been engaged in regular correspondence ever since, had attempted to break away from their families, thus contesting, and rejecting, the destiny that their society reserved for women. Unlike their first attempt, however, this second escapade met with a resigned lack of opposition from their relatives. The Ladies of Llangollen, as they were to be known henceforth, established themselves in Plas Newydd—‘New House’ in Welsh— a small cottage which they shared with Miss Ponsonby’s formidable maid, Mary Carryll, and Lady Eleanor’s dog Frisk. They devoted the rest of their lives to intellectual improvement, gardening, and farming—and to each other.

Even though the Ladies treasured their privacy above all else, Plas Newydd and their dwellers became a fashionable subject of conversation in the intellectual and upper-class circles of the 18th century. Poets and journalists echoed what Lillian Faderman aptly describes as “a shrine to romantic friendship in their generation and in later generations” (1981, 121). The Ladies inspired countless magazine articles, mostly travel accounts, as well as several novels, such as Maria Edgeworth’s *Angelina* (1801) or Charlotte Lennox’s *Euphemia* (1790). Upon his first visit to the Vale, William Wordsworth dedicated a sonnet to them, in which he

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describes their dwelling as a “vale of friendship” (1838, 1.10) and the Ladies as “sisters in love” (1.14).

To limit their visitors, the Ladies only welcomed to their house people of rank, both acquaintances or visitors with a common friend. Amongst those were personalities like the Duke of Wellington, Lady Caroline Lamb—a second cousin of Lady Eleanor’s—and writers such as Anne Lister, Robert Southey, Madame de Genlis, Edmund Burke, Hester Thrale Piozzi, or Sir Walter Scott. The publisher John Murray described this phenomenon in a letter to his son:

It is very singular [...] that the ladies, intending to retire from the world, absolutely brought all the world to visit them, for after a few years of seclusion their strange story was the universal subject of conversation, and there has been no person of rank, talent, and importance in any way who did not procure introductions to them. (in Smiles 1891, 304)

Another of these illustrious visitors was the poet Anna Seward (1742-1809). Seward was celebrated in her lifetime as one of the most prominent British lyrical voices. Caught between the Enlightenment and Romanticism, and strongly imbued by the cult of sensibility and Augustan poetic values, her style and themes attest to the cultural and literary transition of her time.

Due to the success of her patriotic elegies “Monody on Major André” (1781) and “Elegy on Captain Cook” (1780), Seward was considered by her contemporaries as a “British muse, spokeswoman for national anguish, pride, and resolve” (Kairoff 2012, 71), which contrasts with the contemporary scholarship on her career as a provincial writer. Seward also held a place of honour at the centre of the intellectual life of her home town, Lichfield, with her blue dressing room acting as the meeting-point of the coterie formed by intellectual figures such as Dr Darwin, Esther Thrale Piozzi, Dr Johnson, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, or William Hayley, among others. Nevertheless, her network of friends and protégés extended beyond the limits of her native Staffordshire, as her six volumes of published letters—out of twelve manuscript original volumes—demonstrate.

In the summer of 1795, while on one of her many medically prescribed trips, this time visiting some friends in Dinbren, Seward received the Ladies’ invitation to Plas Newydd. The writer would later commemorate this occasion in her poem “Llangollen Vale, Inscribed to the Right Honourable Lady Eleanor Butler, and Miss Ponsonby” (1796), a celebration of the Ladies’ seat and of their particular, and exclusive, intellectual circle. From that moment onward, an intimate friendship flourished between the Ladies and the poet. Seward visited them almost every year while her delicate health allowed it, as her physician had recommended sea air. She suffered from several complaints, ranging from respiratory ailments and inflammation of the eyes to concussions aggravated by leeching, prescribed

throughout the later part of her life. Poems, letters, and gifts were exchanged back and forth, including busts, letter cases, engravings, and even trees from the Ladies' famous garden.

In this article I will examine how Seward celebrates Plas Newydd as an embodiment of her ideal of female friendship and female artistic and literary creation through the analysis of her poem "Llangollen Vale". It is my belief that an examination of the motivations and aims behind this friendly coming together is intrinsically related to the construction of Seward as a professional author. I will, therefore, attempt to establish whether the Ladies' home can be argued to represent an ideal community. To do so, I shall address this question from diverse vantage points, including the divinisation of Llangollen Vale through the communion between the geographical and the architectural features and the exclusivity of the Ladies' retreat. Also, the role of Seward, as a writer, in their community, the female community as a safe space free from heteropatriarchal control, and the 18th-century conception of female friendship, in liminal tension with queerness.

"Llangollen Vale" was published together with ten other pieces in *Llangollen Vale and Other Poems* (1796). The book was sold for one shilling and sixpence, and it ultimately underwent three editions, which attests to its positive reception. Seward's old-fashioned style, prone to seemingly superfluous flattery, cost her being compared to the Della-Cruscans by the *English Review* (Ashmun 1968, 215). Other than that, the reviews were mostly favourable: *The Gentleman's Magazine*, where Seward was assiduously published, as well as the *Monthly Mirror* and the *Analytical Review* praised both its theme and style. On the other hand, the *British Critic* pointed to its "want of perspicuity, sometimes of sense, and more than one mark of affectation" (in Wordsworth 1994, 3).

The poem consists of 174 lines arranged into 29 irregular Spenserian stanzas (eight iambic pentameter lines followed by a final alexandrine) and can be divided into two sections. The first one introduces historical events and two characters that, according to Seward, had imbued the Vale with its epic significance: the hero Glendower and the poet Hoel. The second one presents the Ladies as the mythical figures occupying this legendary space.

The first section is devoted to the battles of the Welsh national hero Owen Glendower against the English King to vindicate and defend his country's independence. This part provides readers with an overview of the vale's Celtic origins. Celtic myths were something Seward was very interested in throughout her career. The poet regarded highly the literature and the history of both Wales and Scotland, and was a staunch admirer of Burns and Walter Scott. Her poem "Rich Auld Willie's Farewell", written in the style of a Scottish ballad, pleased the latter so much that he included it in the third volume of his *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1803).

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Although Seward was known for her heroic poems, it is significant that she would choose such a gruesome event as introduction to a poem dedicated to the Ladies, and that she would use such graphic vocabulary: “The steeds paternal, on their cavern’d floor, / Foaming, and horror-struck, / fret fetlock-deep in gore” (2.6). I believe that her choice can be attributed to a willingness to suffuse the Vale with an epic and mythical atmosphere, as suggested by lines such as “Luxuriant Vale, thy Country’s early boast, / What time great Glendour gave thy scenes to Fame” (1.1). Claudia Thomas Kairoff argues that this introductory segment could be read as a political critique of the British war against France: “Seward’s initial, seventy-eight-line narrative of the Llangollen valley’s medieval history, over half the poem, mirrors her account of English-Welsh warfare of recent and equally fruitless war of British against French” (2012, 115). This is a subject which Seward discussed at length both in her correspondence and her poetry. After all, her most celebrated works, “Monody on Major André” (1781) and “Elegy on Captain Cook” (1780), are poems in praise of patriotic heroes. War, violence and death were, no doubt, subjects she was comfortable dealing with. In Kairoff’s view Seward presents the Ladies as benevolent, peaceful figures who “redeemed” (2012, 115) this barbaric and violent past.

After Glendower, the next two stanzas introduce the bard Hoel, the “Harp of Cambria” (12.3), a figure who, much like the Welsh bards Taliesin and Merlin, exists somewhere between the legendary and historical realms. Hoel, who is celebrated as a love poet, serves as a nexus between the previous grim stanzas, focused on the geographical and historical, and the following, most important section, focused on the Ladies, whom Seward exalts as a model of intellectual prowess and female friendship. Hoel’s appearance might be read as a validation, or a celebration, of the poet’s role as a chronicler, a part that Seward was happy to play: “by his well-sung woes, to purchase deathless fame” (5.12). If with Glendower Seward paints the scene with mythical importance, Hoel allows her to transition from a historical and violent setting into a more creative, romanticised one that is the perfect introduction to the idealised portrayal of the Ladies which the poet envisions.

The celebration of the Ladies’ cottage as the physical embodiment of a female intellectual community is the central element of “Llangollen Vale”. Seward represents and acclaims Plas Newydd as the symbol of the ideal of female friendship, also of artistic and literary creation. The cottage is described in legendary terms, as arising from a timeless plane, immortal and sheltered to preserve the Ladies and everything they represent, which further emphasises the glorification of the all-female community:

Then rose the Fairy Palace of the Vale,
The bloom’d around it the Arcadian bowers;

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Screen'd from the storms of Winter, cold and pale,
Screen'd from the fervors of the sultry hours,
Circling the lawnly crescent, soon they rose,
To letter'd ease devote, and Friendship's blest repose. (7.7).

By using pastoral imagery, Seward is connecting the architectural (the human) with the geographical (the natural and divine): Plas Newydd and the Vale are one, and the Ladies, presented almost as semi-divine, are the matriarchs of this fairyland. At the heart of this “fairy palace” there is the “dear, minute Lyceum of the Dome”, the library where the Ladies received their visitors, further described by Seward in a letter to her friend the Reverend Henry White:

This saloon of the Minervas contains the finest editions, superbly bound, of the best authors, in prose and verse, which the English, Italian, and French languages boast, contained in neat wire cases: over them the portraits [...] of the favoured friends of these celebrated votaries to that sentiment which exalted the characters of Theseus and Perithous, of David and Jonathan. (1811, 4:98)

Kairoff suggests that the Ladies represent a model of socio-political self-management which Seward admired. She remarks on the poem's emphasis on “women's superior reason and on friendship as the basis of a domestic partnership that is, in turn, the ideal model for government” (2012, 15). Seward's conservative vision of gender difference does fit within this idea of superiority. For the poet, women are “designed for peace, and soft delight/ For tender love, and pity mild” (1810, 1.1). Although it cannot be known to what extent Seward's comments are meant to be taken seriously or whether she intended to shake the balance between female passivity and its subversion, the praise of these values as found in the Ladies is made evident from lines such as: “in this Cambrian Valley, Virtue shows/ Where, in her own soft sex, its steadiest lustre glows?” (23.5).

It has been argued that in Llangollen Seward found the intellectual atmosphere she yearned for: “a sharing of cultivated, intelligent taste and fine, unrestrained feeling” (Backscheider 2005, 304), perhaps because the male-dominated Lichfield cultural circle left her unsatisfied. Seward herself once wrote that “Longollen [*sic*] Vale is my little Elysium. It is nowhere that my understanding, my taste, and my imagination luxuriate in such vivid and unalloyed gratification” (1811, 4:190). The author, who, like the Ladies, never married, lived her whole adult life in Lichfield, comfortably supported by her inheritance. In the village, she enjoyed the social amenities of the time, and the company of a rich and select group of individuals of taste and science. However, Seward—who had lost first her sister Sarah, then her mother, and finally her sister Honora at a young age—had always

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expressed a fondness, a passion even, towards the female figures in her lifetime. She might, therefore, have yearned for this lost female companionship which she saw the Ladies enjoy.

Whether either of these relationships may be considered heterosexual or queer—platonic or otherwise—is beyond the scope of the present article. Limited length and the emphasis on intellectual communities rather than on female friendship as a central element of this paper keep me from dwelling on it. Other academics, including Lillian Faderman—who put Seward on the map of queer literature—Teresa Barnard or Paula Backscheider have dealt with this subject in the past, and their contributions remain paramount in our understanding of Seward’s poetry.

It is interesting to see how and why Seward not only celebrates but also romanticises the theme of female friendship among equals, which the writer considered higher and purer than any other kind of relationship. This is the case in her juvenile letters, which open with a long monologue on “ideal friendship”, but also in her later production, where the celebration of friends, both individual and in community, is a recurrent theme. In the poem under discussion here, this idea is embodied by the actual cottage of Plas Newydd, which she described in a letter as “the shrine of friendship” (1811, 4:190) and which she compares to Elysium, Arcadia and Fairy Land (in the poem), as well as Eden in a letter (6:50). Accordingly, Teresa Barnard writes that, in her juvenile letters, “Seward sought to express a spiritual notion of friendship, believing that it should have stronger bonds than marital love” (2009, 12). She certainly exalts friendship as superior to romantic infatuation: “Friendship, less influenced than love by the intoxication of the eye, is less apt to lead the soul out of her bounds” (2010, xlv). These letters, which form a private journal written in the style of correspondence between Seward and an imaginary friend, Emma, open with a notion Seward would always remain faithful to: “there is surely, my dear friend, a certain magnetism which attracts dispositions to those which resemble them, and, in some sort, supplies the place of long experienced good qualities” (2010, xlvi).

The theme and style of “Llangollen Vale” are reminiscent of Aemilia Lanyer’s “The Description of Cook-ham” (1610), which celebrates a “feminocentric *locus amoenus*” (Guimarães 2012, 162) in the house of the author’s patroness, Margaret Clifford, Countess of Cumberland. Lanyer was employed by the Countess as companion and tutor for her daughter, Lady Anne Clifford. In the poem, allegedly commissioned by her patroness, she conceives Cook-ham as a semi-divine place, a quality bestowed by the coming together of identity, community and nature. Lanyer, much like Seward, celebrates the private space devoted to artistic women in pursuit of intellectual improvement. Paula Guimarães, writing about Lanyer’s poem, argues that it “speaks volumes about Lanyer’s desire to use poetry to create

a place for herself and for women in the highly stratified, gender-conscious world of Jacobean society” (2012, 162).

Llangollen Vale would differ from this definition for its exclusivity. The Ladies’ fame was something unsought and accidental, and although they were happy to receive their friends, they never envisioned their home as a site of pilgrimage. This safe space was not open to others, it was safe precisely because of its privacy; it did not protect women as a category but only two women (and their guests). The Ladies were happy to welcome visitors, but they prized their privacy, and proof of that is that they did not hesitate before refusing to receive anyone who appeared without an invitation or without claiming mutual acquaintance. Seward was invited by the hosts to enjoy that Elysium and, so, she could boast of it. However, unlike in Lanyer’s case, and as far as scholars know, her poem was not commissioned by the Ladies, but rather composed out of thankfulness. Be as it may, and given the popularity of the friends in the sociocultural circles of the time, in composing it Seward acts as a mediator between the Ladies and the world outside: she tells their story and describes their life, which is inaccessible for her readership. She writes of the cottage as an observer, an admirer, but not as an active participant. The poet is simply a guest in a home that was conceived as refuge by two women escaping the ties of conventionality.

Cook-ham, just like Plas Newydd, exists in isolation from heteropatriarchal control, although the Ladies received male guests and had no problem accepting donations from male friends, even from King George himself, from whom they received a pension (for causes unknown, it must be added). Therefore, it is difficult to define the Ladies’ project as a feminist utopia, an interpretation that is further problematised if we take its exclusivity into account. The Ladies’ life can be considered an alternative for upper-class women who did not wish to become wives, much in the line of nuns, but it cannot be celebrated as a feminist scheme, like Cook-ham, because it is not open to all women. The Ladies were not only very selective of their visitors but also perfectly aware of their privileged social status, which they used as a safeguard to keep their rejection of patriarchal heteronormativity within the socially acceptable.

Faderman argues that their social circle accepted and respected their situation because they were regarded as “the embodiment of the highest ideals of spiritual love and the purest dreams of romantic friendship” (1981, 122). Likewise, Susan Lanser argues that the Ladies were protected from social contempt through their class status: “a gentry class held in place a range of conventions dividing irreproachable female intimacies from dangerous ones and bifurcating friendship and sapphism along class lines [...]. In other words, it was the extent to which they could be defined as ladies that saved the Ladies of Llangollen” (1998, 184). However, returning

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to the idea of the female community, Lynette McGrath’s suggestion that, in Lanier’s poem, the writer “turns to women as a source of spiritual protection and poetic inspiration” and that it is precisely in a female community where a “process of mutually enhancing self-discovery, articulating and enabling connections [...] among women in several ways” (1992, 337) takes place, does fit both Seward’s role in “Llangollen Vale” and the Ladies, who found in their cottage a safe space in which to carry out their studies and passions. Consequently, Seward not only fulfils the role of chronicler, but also of defender of their privacy: “Thine, sacred Friendship, permanent as pure;/ In vain the stern Authorities assail” (15.2).

To conclude, in Anna Seward’s poem “Llangollen Vale” the location, along with the Ladies, is elevated to a mythological, quasi-divine plane, as is their relationship. Moreover, Seward’s applause, and her role as chronicler and defender, further emphasise the author’s high regard of the coterie, not only as an intellectual Elysium but also as a form of all-female self-management. However, the exclusivity and zealous privacy of the Ladies’ retreat makes it impossible to describe it as a community, which further romanticises Llangollen Vale as a female intellectual utopia. At Plas Newydd, the Ladies found a shelter where to live their lives in seclusion, intimacy and intellectual freedom, and Seward found two women who shared her taste and ideals. Although she had very close relationships with the male artists of her circle, both at a personal and a collaborative level, Seward’s fascination with the community of sorts created by the Ladies speaks of her yearning for a coming together of female minds, a place where to develop their abilities and relationships in equal terms, one that she did not find in Lichfield, her closest cultural circle.

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