

Anna Seward

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Anna Seward was born in 1742 in Derbyshire, England, though her family moved shortly thereafter to Lichfield, where she would spend most of her life. Thomas Seward, her father, was the canon of the Lichfield Cathedral, and encouraged the young Seward to study literature and theology. Her poetic talents were evident early on, though she would not publish her first poem until 1780 with her “Elegy on Captain Cook.” The “Elegy” was widely acclaimed, and Seward would go on to pursue a highly successful career as a poet, admired for her knowledge of English literature and her powerful, patriotic verse: Henry F. Cary once called her the “immortal muse of Britain.” Seward was also known as a public intellectual and literary critic, engaging in debates with James Boswell and participating in literary and scientific circles with Samuel Johnson, Erasmus Darwin, and Walter Scott. Seward died in Lichfield in 1809. She left behind several unpublished poems, amongst them an unfinished epic titled “Telemachus,” and voluminous correspondence.

Seward’s “Philippic on a Modern Epic” (1797) is a piece of poetic criticism, written in blank verse, critiquing Robert Southey’s epic *Joan of Arc* (1796). A celebration of both French historical triumphs and the ongoing French Revolution, of which Southey was an enthusiastic supporter, *Joan of Arc* blends his politics with the history of the Hundred Years’ War and the military success of Joan of Arc. Seward’s “Philippic” is a denunciation of his radical politics, accusing Southey of besmirching the English participation in the war and the achievements of monarchs such as Edward III and Henry V. Seward celebrates famous English victories such as Agincourt and Crécy, using this nationalistic backdrop in order to vilify France and its revolutionary efforts. However, her criticism is intermingled with an appreciation for Southey’s talent; she regrets his politics, but she calls him a “sun-born Genius” and describes his poetry as possessing “dire splendor.”

Southey responded to Seward’s poem, writing venomously that it demonstrated “an acquaintance with at least the language of poetry.” Though they would trade words about their political beliefs, the two grew to share mutual respect and would later meet in person in Lichfield in 1808. Southey wrote of Seward that she was “not so much over-rated at one time, as she has since been

unduly depreciated,” and claimed that in her writing there were “unquestionable proofs of extraordinary talents and great ability.”

Seward also believed Southey to be an excellent poet, notably after the publication of his epic *Madoc* (1805), which she lauded, and she would later come to respect his character as well as his talents. She later added a footnote to her “Philippic” in which she agreed with some of Southey’s anti-English rhetoric, writing that her government was a “sanguinary system” and claiming that Southey’s *Joan of Arc* “proceeded from benevolence to the human race.” Seward’s footnote provides a powerful alteration to the “Philippic,” and allows for several new readings. Southey also underwent a political change of heart, cooling in his radical thinking as he aged and eventually becoming an ardent English patriot. Southey would come to revise *Joan of Arc* nearly forty years after its initial publication, cleaning up the verse but also significantly softening the fierce Revolutionary commentary which pervaded the text. Though Seward’s footnote is not so complete a revision, it provides the “Philippic” with a similarly new dimension as a poem changed retroactively by its author’s political evolution.

Further Reading

- Blanch Serrat, Francesca. “I mourn their nature, but admire their art’: Anna Seward’s Assertion of Critical Authority in Maturity and Old Age.” *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 40, 2019, pp. 11–31.
- Pratt, Lynda. “Is He ‘Well-Authenticated’? Robert Southey and Anna Seward.” *Literature and Authenticity, 1780-1900*, ed. Ashley Chantler, Michael Davies, Philip Shaw, Routledge, 2016, pp. 25-37.
- Raimond, Jean. “Southey’s Early Writings and the Revolution.” *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 19, 1989, pp. 181–196.

“Philippic on a Modern Epic”¹

Base is the purport of this epic song,
 Baneful its powers;---but O! the poesy!
 (What can it less when sun-born Genius sings?)
 Wraps in reluctant ecstasy the soul
 Where poesy is felt;---tho’ here it paint 5
 In all the lurid traits of Nero’s heart,
 The high heroic spirit of that prince
 Who graced the crown he wore; Britannia’s boast,
 Harry of Monmouth!² ---he, who ne’er exposed
 His ardent legions on the deathful plain 10
 Where flamed not his broad shield, nor his white plumes,
 Play’d in the battle’s van.---What claim’d he then
 From France, at the sword’s point, but ceded rights
 Howe’er perfidiously with-held, when pledg’d
 For aye to England, after the proud day 15
 Of Cressy’s thundering field?³ Then Gallia’s star
 Sunk, and the planet of the argent shores
 Rose glittering on the zenith’s azure height,⁴
 What time upon the broken spears of France,

¹ First published in 1797 as “Lines Written after Reading Southey’s *Joan of Arc*” and republished later as “Philippic on a Modern Epic.” The text and footnotes I use here are taken from the 1810 edition in *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward; with Extracts from Her Literary Correspondence*. I use the later edition specifically for the inclusion of Seward’s revelatory footnote, and the text has no substantial differences from its earlier publication.

² Henry V, king of England from 1413 to 1422 and known for his military achievement in the Hundred Years’ War.

³ Edward III routed Philip VI at Crécy despite being outnumbered some two-to-one.

⁴ Seward uses an astronomical metaphor in which France is “Gallia’s star” and England is the “planet of the argent shores,” the “argent” or silver shores perhaps referring to the White Cliffs of Dover.

And prostrate helms, immortal Glory stood, 20
 And with the lilies of that vaunting clime,
 Like a gay bridegroom, wreath'd the victor brows
 Of her great Edward.⁵ ---O! unnatural boy!
 O beardless parricide!⁶ thy treacherous Muse
 In the dire splendour of Medusa's charms 25
 Balefully deck'd, an impious task essays,
 Lab'ring to turn to deadliest aconite
 The laurel wreaths of Agincourt;⁷---to brand
 The hallow'd lustre of the British name
 With slavish meanness, with rapacious avarice, 30
 And the wolf's rage. Britain, whose martial fire
 Applauding ages have pronounced adorn'd
 With fair munificence, and temper'd still
 By God-like mercy's sway,---O, dark of heart,
 As luminous of fancy! quit, for shame, 35
 Quit each insidious pretence to virtue,
 To Christian faith, and pity!---Dry thy tears
 For age-pass'd woes, they are the crocodile's,
 And o'er the murder of the royal victims,
 And o'er the Christian faith's apostacy, 40
 Witness'd in France, cry, "Vive la Liberte!"
 Dip thy young hands in her o'er-flowing chalice,
 Brimm'd with the gore of age, infants, and beauty,

⁵ Edward III, who ruled England from 1327-1377 and who started the Hundred Years' War when he laid claim to the French throne in 1337.

⁶ The "beardless parricide" is Southey, though the exact meaning of the phrase is unclear. It may be accusing Southey of "slaying" the "fathers of the nation" in Henry and Edward.

⁷ Henry V scored a famous victory at Agincourt where he defeated a numerically superior French army. "Aconite" is a poisonous plant, also known as monkshood.

And, throwing thy red cap aloft in air,⁸

Laugh with the fierce hyena!⁹

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⁸ The “red cap” is a reference to the *bonnet rouge* or the red Phrygian cap commonly worn by French revolutionaries.

⁹ [Author’s note] Cooler reflection, and a long experience of the mischiefs resulting from the sanguinary system which this government has unwarned pursued through the last 14 years, have justified this Poet's representation of Henry the Fifth's conduct in invading France, and convinced me that the deprecation in JOAN OF ARC of monarchical ambition and rapacity, under that proud and specious term *Military Glory*, proceeded from benevolence to the Human race, and from a spirit of justice too firm to be warped by the vanity of national enthusiasm.



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