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978-1-108-05950-3 - Letters Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807: Volume 3

Anna Seward

Excerpt

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**LETTERS**

**OF**

**ANNA SEWARD.**

**VOL. III.**

**A**

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## LETTERS.



## LETTER I.

MRS PIOZZI.

*April 15, 1790.*

THANK you, dearest Madam, for your kind letter ; the attention of those we love soothes and cheers the sorrowing heart. Many were the pangs I felt in an everlasting separation from him, by whose side I lived during so very many years. Let me not, however, damp the glow of your animated and animating spirit, by unavailing descant on the mournful theme. Various consolations begin to insinuate their soft light into my bosom, and to meliorate and change the throbs of anguish into sighs of tender regret, and ever-wakeful remembrance.

Mr Saville has written to me of the polite attention with which you and Mr Piozzi have honoured him. From my earliest youth, I have lived in the habit of observing his naturally fine

talents, cultivated by classic erudition; the generosity of his spirit, and the uncommon benevolence and singleness of his heart. They do credit to his profession, and render him worthy the friendship of the ingenious and the good.

I smile at the excess of my dear Mrs Piozzi's politeness, when she tells me that my observations on Dr Darwin's splendid poem will instruct her. Without a hope so proud, and, if I had entertained it, so vain, I proceed to tell her that it appears to me the masterly result of a creative, elevated, and brilliant imagination, in whose gems no sullyng veins of inelegance are found,—that I think the numbers more highly polished, of more grand and more spirited harmonies even than Pope's; that I apprehend this superior majesty of sound is occasioned by the frequent trochaic accent on the first syllable of the lines, and its superior spirit by their frequently commencing with a verb active; though I confess that what is gained in force and grandeur by these habits, is lost in ease. Simplicity seems the only grace that may not be found in this poem; but the subject, having no natural interest for the understanding or the passions, it was necessary to clothe it in the most gorgeous hues of imagery, and the most studied magnificence of language. They were all at the command of this poet. Being composed of short

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## LETTER I.

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descriptions, and, by its similies and allusions, highly ingenious and entertaining, though not always very apposite, the book may, without injury to its claims upon the attention, but rather to their advantage, be alternately laid aside and resumed. “ The intellectual, like the corporeal eye, is soon fatigued by gazing on eminences, glittering with the sun, and turns aching away to verdure, or seeks repose upon masses of shadow.”— In fine, the riches of the historic, mythologic, and fabulous allusions, the extreme felicity with which the mechanism of the ancient and modern arts is brought to the eye, entitle their master to a very high place in the temple of the British muses.

Though modern novels are, in general, my aversion, yet I find many charms in *Julia*. Certainly Helen’s style in prose bears no proportionate excellence to that of her charming poetry; and this work is barren of incident, her preface anticipating what little plot there is. But the characters are finely drawn. The similies appear to me much too frequent, and to give stiffness to the style. Without metaphor there is no spirit; indeed genius cannot write without it; but set similies, often introduced, do not become familiar and narrative prose. The first ode, to poetry, enchants me; it is often sublime, and everywhere beautiful. The sonnets are sweet and interesting;

they delight me from the ingenuity of the thoughts, even though some of them have the defect of illegitimacy; and though all of them want the characteristic excellence of a sonnet, by the sense being carried on to the end of the line, excluding the varied pause, which, undulating through the lines, produces that impressive energetic grace, the glory of those few best of Milton's sonnets;—and they are surely the models of that species of writing. I wish the linnet and thrush verses had been away,—such subjects are beneath the elevated talents of our friend,—she should leave them to the minor poets. Helen is also a little out in her zoology—the linnet, complimented in this work as the feathered songster latest silent, is, in reality, mute one of the earliest. He is the bird of spring, seldom sings in autumn—it is the robin that pipes his sweet requiem to its expiring graces. She speaks also of the various notes of the blackbird. Mr Piozzi could tell her that they are very few in number, though melodious, soft, and full. It is the lark and nightingale that give us the various songs.

Ah! no, my dear Madam, Bath or London would be much too gay a scene for me. The local spells of the Close of Lichfield, formed by the remembrance of past happiness, are too powerful for me to break. My extreme attach-

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## LETTER II.

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ment to this house, in which I have lived since I was thirteen years old, and the generous moderation of my episcopal landlord, tempt me to try if I cannot remain in it. It will require my utmost frugality to make my moderate income, not quite amounting to four hundred pounds per annum, support the inevitable expence of so spacious a dwelling. Bath and London journies are ill-calculated to such a plan. I must content myself with admiring and loving you all at a distance.

Sophia expressing a desire, in her last, to know my opinion of our Helen's novel, I take the liberty of leaving this letter open for her perusal; from the, alas! severe scarcity of my leisure.

Adieu, dear Mrs Piozzi! My best regards to him you best love. Believe me always yours.

## LETTER II.

MISS WESTON.

*April 9, 1790.*

JUSTLY, dear Sophia, do you term my late sufferings the pangs of nature. They were most

keen, and might have been fatal, had not a plentiful effusion from my temples, by leeches, assuaged the new and intolerable shooting pains which had seized my brain. I believe bodily, succeeding to mental anguish, is often of use to the latter; and I think it proved so to me. Since my mind has recovered the power of employing itself, business has, in some degree, dispersed the shades of dejection—yet still there are hours!—Time will, I trust, more and more assuage the selfish regret of my deprivations, assisted by that blessed hope which draws the sting of death, and robs the grave of its victory.

Though, during those hours in which this stroke was descending, and through some which elapsed after it had fallen, my heart longed for the consolation of Giovanni's sympathy, yet I soon became thankful that he was spared the participation of circumstances which must have borne hard upon his sensibility. He writes to me with thankful pleasure for your late kind attentions to him.

You know I always alike divest myself of personal partiality, and of personal dislike, to authors, when I comment upon their works. Solicitous for the literary honour of the age in which I live, I open every new publication that I think it worth



## LETTER II.

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while to open, with a warm desire to be pleased ; prepared to admire and to object, as my abstracted feelings shall be impressed, and as my unbiassed judgment shall dictate.

Unwilling to believe it possible that a novel should be written by Mr Hayley, without bearing a much higher reputation than seemed possessed by Cornelia, and having no time to waste upon novels which are not very first-rate, I did not seek this with assiduity. Last week, and not till then, chance threw it in my way. It appears to me a work often illuminated with rays of wit and picturesque imagination ; evidently written by a person of learning, from its richness in classic allusions, and in poetic quotations ; but the author is so much a mannerist, that every different personage of the novel writes and speaks in precisely the same style—a style loaded with epithets, and in everlasting recurrence—“ the dear, delightful, dainty widow ;”—“ the lively, interesting, enchanting Seymour ;”—or “ the rash, devoted, abominable Seymour ;”—“ the dear, feeling, heroic little William ;”—“ the delicate, devout, incomparable Guliana ;”—“ the muscular, luxuriant, glowing Caroline.” In short, scarce a name mentioned through the work, without three epithets prefixed—which all the characters bestow, as if by compact, upon each other.

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The exalted conduct of Cornelia required that every possible dignity should be thrown around her. I lost all patience at the impertinent familiarity with which alike the lover and her friends talk of the dear *dainty* widow, in disgusting application of the foolish song's burden,

“ O she's a dainty widow—widow.”

That a love-sick miss should give her swain the romantic epithet *enchanted*, would be nothing strange; but that the grave and reverend Audley; the philosophic Edward, and indeed every soul of them, should talk for ever about the *enchanted* Seymour, is surely very unnatural;—most of all, when Edward, conveying the dead body of Seymour back to England, observes—“ the enchanted Seymour, even in his coffin,” &c. How ill that gay enamoured appellation suits the mention of the solemn receptacle, every heart, I should suppose, must feel.

The only part of this novel, often so ingenious, yet, on the whole, so tiresome—the only part that took strong hold upon my passions, was Guliana's solemn visit to the buried corpse of her lover. It is very fine.

Three times, in the progress of this work, is expectation excited violently, and sees its labour-