"My Stand": Queer Identities in the Poetry of Anna Seward and Thomas Gray

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Abstract:
When we talk of love in our culture, we usually mean sex. When we talk of desire, we usually mean sex. If we are to fall in love with someone we desire, if we wish to dedicate our lives to someone, live with them, share a bed with them – then we better be having sex with them as well. It is one of the fundamental norms of our society that love is intrinsically bound to sexuality. Here we will examine two eighteenth-century poets. Anna Seward and Thomas Gray each fell in love and each wrote poetry about their love. The love each of them writes about, however, is nonsexual: it is even anti-sexual. Anna Seward and Thomas Gray wrote about romantic friendship. Both poets strongly believed in same-sex friendship and opposed opposite-sex marriage, a queer desire for which each was willing to sacrifice their well-being and reputation.

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2 Here we will examine two eighteenth-century poets. Anna Seward and Thomas Gray each fell in love and each wrote poetry about their love. The love each of them writes about, however, is nonsexual: it is even anti-sexual. Anna Seward and Thomas Gray wrote about romantic friendship. Both poets strongly believed in same-sex friendship and opposed opposite-sex marriage, a queer desire for which each was willing to sacrifice their well-being and reputation.

3 It was Aristotle in the 4th Century BC who explicitly outlined and analysed the social conventions surrounding intimate friendship. In the eighth and ninth books of his *Nicomachean Ethics* (350BC) he describes friendship as critical to a happy and healthy life: "… Friendship is not only an indispensable, but also a beautiful or noble thing: for we commend those who love their friends …" (Aristotle, 252). In the *Ethics* Aristotle outlines the three different forms of friendship: those based in utility, those based in pleasure, and those based in mutual regard for one another's virtue: it is the latter to which he pays the most attention, as the 'truest' form of friendship. True friendship, the *Ethics* maintains, is not available to all, as virtue itself is an inherently rare quality. If one were capable, the most vital facets to true friendship were equality, trust, cohabitation, physical intimacy and exclusivity. If friendship, he argues, is not a unique and personal bond, established in openness and both

physical and emotional affection, then it is not true friendship. Equality was utterly crucial, and therefore an equal social status had to be maintained (Aristotle, 293). Of course inter-gendered 'true' friendships were not deemed possible, as women were of a considerably lower social status than men – Aristotle compares the relationship between husband and wife to that of the aristocracy to the masses (Aristotle, 273). Friendship in its purest form, therefore, was a purely same-sex phenomenon. Aristotle goes so far as to describe a true friend as a 'second self', one whose existence is securely tied to another – they should even be prepared to die for one another (Aristotle, 306).

4 Alan Bray's highly influential study into same-sex friendship, *The Friend*, charts the course of friendship in Western Europe over the course of several centuries following the arrival of Christianity. Despite the influence of the pagan Aristotle on the ideals of friendship, it remained a vital institution until the eighteenth century. Friends would share beds, wallets and lives. They would kiss and devoted their bodies to one another – as Bray points out, the practice of platonically sharing a bed in such a bond is the origin of the term 'bedfellow' (Bray, 153).

5 The dawn of the eighteenth century saw fundamental social change. Relations between men started to become taboo, and we see the first cultural references to the 'molly' – the effeminate male sodomite: the historian Randolph Trumbach describes how same-sex sexual contact became tied to gender inversion – that is, it became increasingly associated with feminine men and masculine women (Trumbach, 77). Trumbach points out that – for men - the new effeminate associations to same-sex sexual contact carried a great degree of shame: many of those put on trial committed suicide, something men accused of sodomy had not done in previous decades. As he puts it, "Sodomy was now tied to a deviant gender role" (Trumbach, p. 80).

6 This had a profound impact on both male and female same-sex friendship. The new cultural archetypes of both the effeminate male sodomite and the masculine lesbian prompted the social decline of same-sex platonic love, and it began to gain unacceptable connotations. Slowly living together, sharing a bed and kissing one's friend became taboo. This was coupled with a renewed focus on the institution of marriage and the rise of companionate marriage: a person's spouse was now expected to provide the central emotional interest in their lives. Marriage was therefore placed in direct opposition to romantic friendship.

7 By Thomas Gray's lifetime many prominent social philosophers were moralising on the subject of marriage, not least Daniel Defoe, who published *A Treatise Concerning the Use and Abuse of the Marriage Bed* in 1727, when Gray was entering early adolescence. Defoe

portrays an idealised vision of marriage, one which presents an idyllic and harmonious union – the one true path for happiness: "… the pleasure of the married state consists wholly in the beauty of the union, the sharing comforts, the doubling all enjoyments; it is the settlement of life; the ship is always in a storm till it finds this safe road, and here it comes to an anchor" (Defoe, 30).

8 And so increasingly the early eighteenth century saw love become the preserve of marriage. Defoe is scathing toward those whom he believes to have ignored the sound advice that marriage must be based in mutual love – particularly with regards to women, comparing them to prostitutes: "What will you do madam? Will you live with a man … you do not love? As I said before, that such a lady must be a fool. I saw now it is worse; it is but a kind of prostitution, in the plain English of it, too gross and wicked to express" (Defoe, 32).

9 Yet to understand the social transition away from platonic love and towards sexual love, we need to turn to the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1976) largely concerns itself with the cultural shifts that comprised the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, particularly with regard to sexuality. Foucault argues that 'sexuality' is not an innate or universal aspect of humanity, but was invented by eighteenth-century discourse: that is, the discourses of the eighteenth century did not 'uncover' sexuality but in fact created it. This historical construct had wide-ranging implications for western society, a process that Foucault refers to as the 'deployment of sexuality' (Foucault, 105). Both the resultant 'veritable discourse explosion' and the creation of sexuality served to sexualise social views on relationships – including those surrounding the tradition of romantic friendship. Both Gray and Seward utilised their written works as a means of escaping this discourse and indeed the very creation of 'sexuality'. Each sought an ideal in the platonic relationships outlined by Aristotle and as such found themselves both outside the boundaries of this discourse and in opposition to it – something which, as it could not be directly articulated, was expressed as an opposition to marriage. In short, Gray and Seward expressed a queer desire contrary to (relatively new) sexual and gender norms and as a result were both revolutionary and reactionary.

10 The late Robert F. Gleckner, whose work *Gray Agonistes: Thomas Gray and Masculine Friendship* (1997) is vital to our understanding of Gray's male friendships, focused mainly on Gray's friendship with Richard West - which he makes clear early on to have been socially transgressive (Gleckner, 6). Gleckner does not, however, suggest that Gray's friendships formed part of a unique social or cultural identity – the possibility that we need to explore here.

11 As a result of the conflicting social statuses of friendship and marriage, the two are inextricably tied in the poetry of Thomas Gray. ‘Ode on the Spring’, written to his romantic friend Richard West, presents the marginalised perspective of those forming an identity in nonsexual love and the unthinking, unaware nature of the social majority:

> Where’er the oak’s thick branches stretch
> A broader browner shade;
> Where’er the rude and moss-grown beech
> O’er-canopies the glade,
> Besides some water’s rushy brink
> With me the Muse shall sit, and think
> (At ease reclin’d in rustic state)
> How vain the ardour of the Crowd,
> How low, how little are the Proud,
> How indigent the Gre
>
> Still is the toiling hand of Care:
> The panting herds repose:
> Yet hark, how thro’ the peopled air
> The busy murmur glows!
> The insect youth are on the wing,
> Eager to use the honied spring,
> And float amid the liguid noon:
> Some lightly o’er the current skim,
> Some shew their gaily-gilded trim
> Quick-glancing to the sun.
>
> To Contemplation’s sober eye
> Such is the race of Man:
> And they that creep, and they that fly,
> Shall end where they began.
> Alike the Busy and the Gay
> But flutter thro’ life’s little day,
> In fortune’s varying colours drest:
> Brush’d by the hand of rough mischance,
> Or chill’d by Age, their airy dance
> They leave, in dust to rest.
> (Gray, Works, I, 1-3)

The social majority are referenced throughout ‘Ode on the Spring’. The masses are invoked through reference to ‘the peopled air’, and the vain ardour of the crowd, with the dual references to mass activity and the calm of solitude in competition with one another. Humanity is compared to elements of nature, with the fertility of young insects being compared to the expectations of fertility on young men. Youth is associated with lightness, as the poet introduces words such as ‘float’, ‘languid’ and ‘lightly’ to convey the animalistic simplicity of life for the majority, who find themselves able to indulge in sexualised mainstream milestones such as marriage and procreation. This lies in sharp contrast to the

lonely philosopher. In the ode we see Gray's quiet yet firm criticism of sexuality, reducing the majority to the level of insects.

12 The poem ends on a similar note:

> Methinks I hear in accents low
> The sportive kind reply:
> Poor moralist! and what art thou?
> A solitary fly!
> Thy joys no glittering female meets,
> No hive hast thou of hoarded sweets,
> No painted plumage to display:
> On hasty wings thy youth is flown;
> Thy sun is set, thy spring is gone –
> We frolic, while 'tis May.
> (Gray, Works, I, 3)

Here 'Ode on the Spring' provides further critique toward the masses: again the attitude of the youthful majority is imagined by Gray, this time in direct relation to his own circumstances as philosopher. Gray places the voice of the majority into the ode, who see him as alone as he has no wife (the term 'glittering female' once again brings to mind the imagery of mindless insects). The usual rituals for young men of finding a mate are to him morally pointless. Yet his rebellion against social norms was not a joyous or life-affirming choice for Gray, but something more akin to an affliction.

13 Yet Gray's queer devotion to romantic friendship was not without its pleasures, and his companionship with West provided numerous instances of delight and satisfaction in his written works. In a letter from 1735 we can see Gray's reassurance of the importance of West to his emotional life:

> PERMIT me again to write to you, though I have so long neglected my duty, and forgive my brevity, when I tell you it is occasioned wholly by the hurry I am in to get to a place where I expect to meet with no other pleasure than the sight of you; for I am preparing for London in a few days at furthest. I do not wonder in the least at your frequent blaming my indolence, it ought rather to be called ingratitude, and I am obliged to your goodness for softening so harsh an appellation … However, as the most undeserving people in the world must sure have the vanity to wish somebody had a regard for them, so I need not wonder at my own, in being pleased that you care about me. You need not doubt, therefore, of having a first row in the front box of my little heart, and I believe you are not in danger of being crouded [sic] there; it is asking you to an old play, indeed, but you will be candid enough to excuse the whole piece for the sake of a few tolerable lines. (Gray, Correspondence, 34)

There are several areas of this letter which require a closer reading, as with his poems, this correspondence needs to be analysed as a work in its own right. Firstly, Gray's use of the word 'duty' in writing which perpetuates the friendship suggests a moral imperative. 'Duty' is deliberately contrasted by 'pleasure', however, created by his friend's physical presence.

Already within the first two lines we see the poet present both a sober dedication to friendship and the pleasure which results from such a bond. A few lines later and the language shifts to become more self-effacing – use of the terms ‘indolence’, ‘ingratitude’ and ‘appellation’ regarding the author set a hyperbolic moralising tone which is distanced and perhaps ironic. Gray plays on the anticipation of his seeing West and the prospect of intimacy: here the written word (‘a few tolerable lines’) substitutes physical presence.

14 In the final section of the letter the humble tone shifts to one far more grandiose, and Gray uses the language of the theatre as an allusion to his own life and emotional bearings. It is in this context that Gray makes his most open declaration of affection, suggesting West to have a primary (though not necessarily exclusive) place in his heart. Despite the use of metaphor the statement is undisguised and rendered yet more powerful by the phrase immediately following, that there are few who have attained such a position. The humbled sentiment returns by the end as Gray chastises his 'old play', yet Gray suggests their attachment to be emotionally worthwhile for those brief moments of affection: 'a few tolerable lines'. The theatrical metaphor suggests an intention to set a public stage for his emotions which also became manifest in his poetry – yet with West as its true audience. We can see his dedication to the form of love they share, his own benefits from the relationship, his passion toward the attachment and the relative rarity of such a bond in his life. The poet himself barely seems to compare to the subject of his adoration, and the language – though somewhat hyperbolic – is used earnestly and without sarcasm.

15 This is not to say the two always communicated openly, and Gleckner makes a careful note of instances in which the two communicate with one another in Latin, though their exclamations are usually similar to the sentiments expressed in English. The two also shared a considerable interest in Roman poetry during the reign of Caesar Augustus, especially genres such as elegies and verse epistles, used to express male friendship. Crucially, one poem from West to Gray, a translation of Catallus, laments the influence of a hostile society on personal love – obviously of some relevance to the two living so many centuries later (Gleckner, p. 110).

16 Despite their Latin effusions, in a letter from September 1740 Gray expresses himself openly once more, again toward the end of the communication:

> … be assured, that your future state is to me entirely indifferent. Do not be angry, but hear me; I mean with respect to myself. For whether you be at the top of Fame, or entirely unknown to mankind; at the Council-table, or at Dick's coffee-house; sick and simple, or well and wise; whatever alteration mere accident works in you, (supposing it utterly impossible for it to make any change in your sincerity and honesty, since

> these are conditions sine quâ non) I do not see the likelihood of my not being yours ever. (Gray, *Correspondence*, 178)

Here we see Aristotelian 'philos' expressed clearly. Gray (again openly) remarks that he loves West for his virtues (which he explicitly states to be 'sincerity' and 'honesty') – without a regard for which their relationship could not function (Aristotle, p. 283). He goes to great pains to emphasise the lack of importance to West's condition beyond virtue – even his intellectual merits are unimportant compared to them. The extensive use of repetition is a rhetorical exercise designed to demonstrate the depth of his affection, and his reversal in the third part of the pattern (which goes good-bad; good-bad; bad-good) further suggests any condition to be arbitrary in the fact of virtue. Gray then goes on to make a powerful and overt declaration of eternal love, suggesting that he will be West's forever – a bold and open statement of his affection.

17 A lighter side to Gray's queer identity is explored in his letters to his friend Horace Walpole. Gray's letters to his friend were often based in some theme or other, and here Gray uses the imagery of death, imagining himself rotting in a graveyard before hearing from Walpole:

> … when in comes your Letter, which (as I told you before) made me stretch my Skeleton-jaws in such a horse-laugh, that all the dead pop'd up their heads & stared: but to see the frowzy Countenances of the Creatures especially one Lady-Carcase, that made most hideous Grimaces, & would needs tell me, that I was a very uncivil Person to disturb a Woman of her Quality, that did me the honour to lie so near me … in her hurry she had lost her Wedding Ring, which she was buried in; nay, she said, she believed she should fall in fits, & certainly that should be her Death: but I gave her a Rowland for her Oliver, 'i'gad: I told her Ladyship the more she stirred, the more she'd stink … now your arrival only can deliver me from such a state of Seperation; for, as your Soul is large enough for the both of us, it will be ill-natured of you, if you don't reanimate my Corps: at least I hope for a place in your heart … (Gray, *Correspondence*, 11)

Toward the end of the letter we see affectionate language affirming his friendship, yet first we see Gray's fears: fears which are largely centred around the corpse of a married woman. Despite the humour of the letter, it is telling both that Gray is so appalled by the 'Lady-Carcase' and by his using sexual language in her doing him 'the honour to lie so near'. Opposite-sex sexuality is tied to death, and Gray suggests that to make love to a woman is to make love to a corpse. The woman's main concern is her wedding ring and the fact that she is so concerned for a material object is a sign of Gray's misogyny, which is also echoed in his later poetry. Walpole is the only one who can save him from this rancid allegory for marriage, and from thereon, away from the death that is to lie with women, he utilises romantic language - hoping for a place in his friend's heart.

18Indeed, Gray's rebellion against sexuality in favour of romantic friendship was based in a stern distaste for women, both in form and intellect. This was, of course, reflected in his poetry. Prompted by Walpole's modest upset at having lost his favourite feline, Gray sent him 'Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes'. Despite the overtly humorous nature of the poem, the reality of their relationship impacts heavily upon the piece, and Gray's views on women are revealed halfway through:

> The hapless Nymph with wonder saw:
> A whisker first and then a claw,
> With many an ardent wish,
> She stretch'd in vain to reach the prize.
> What female heart can gold despise?
> What Cat's averse to fish?
> (Gray, *Works*, 4)

Both cats (a symbol of selfish sensuality) and women are presented as feeble and helpless in the face of their own desires, be it for gold or for fish. Gray's stance draws on traditional enlightenment critiques of effeminacy / femininity and luxury. The misogyny present in this poem is clear and his graveyard letter to Walpole is echoed in this poem: women are simple, base, and materialistic.

19 The poem goes on:

> Presumptuous Maid! with looks intent
> Again she stretch'd, again she bent,
> Nor knew the gulf between.
> (Malignant fate sat by, and smil'd)
> The slipp'ry verge her feet beguil'd,
> She tumbled headlong in.
>
> Eight times emerging from the flood
> She mew'd to evr'y wat'ry God,
> Some speedy aid to send.
> No Dolphin came, no Nereid stirr'd:
> Nor cruel Tom, nor Susan heard.
> A Fav'rite has no friend!
> (Gray, *Works*, 5)

Gray's love of antiquity is once again invoked with his poetic pagan personification of fate and his polytheistic reference to the divine ('evr'y wat'ry God'). In stating 'A Fav'rite has no friend' the poet hints both pets and women to be incapable of real friendship (echoing the viewpoint of Aristotle). The ode ends:

> From hence, yes Beauties undeciev'd,
> Know, one false step is ne'er retriev'd,
> And be with caution bold.
> Not all that tempts your wand'ring eyes

And heedless hearts, is lawful prize;
Nor all that glitters, gold.
(Gray, *Works*, 5)

This final stanza returns to Gray's view of women, somewhat patronising and traditionally misogynistic. Returning to the human the rhyme is tighter, though it could certainly be argued that his comparison of human females to female felines calls into question his view of women as fully human at all. Though Gray's misogyny is unmistakable in this Ode, it is not unique to it, yet forms a part of Gray's wider beliefs and desires: as we have seen in his letters, these beliefs and desires are based around attachments to men, rather than women.

20 It would have caused Gray some surprise to find his poetic devotion to romantic friendship taken up by a woman: specifically, the poet Anna Seward in the second half of the eighteenth century. Like Gray, Anna Seward devoted herself to a queer ideal. She shunned the prospect of sexual love and marriage in favour of an Aristotelian mode of friendship, one grounded in equality, esteem for virtue and need for cohabitation. Unlike the misogynistic Gray she had friends of both sexes, though she only pursued true romantic friendship with other women.

21 This has prompted many of those who have worked on Seward to label her as lesbian, yet at no point does she infer her relationships with women to either have erotic potential nor does any sexual behaviour form an identity or socio-political position on the part of the poet. Seward's romantic friendships were first (albeit briefly) explored by Lilian Faderman. Faderman was the first to use the term 'lesbian' in relation to Seward in *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1985), and though she neither confirms nor denies the possibility of an erotic connection in female romantic friendships, she utilises a term ('lesbian') which connects her to twentieth-century sexual identities and in an eighteenth-century context implies transgression (Faderman, 'Who Hid Lesbian History', 75). Since Faderman's work the poet has become a marginalised fixture of the lesbian poetic canon.

22 Yet Seward was not homosexual. Nor, as many scholars have ascertained, was she heterosexual. The argument in favour of Seward's heterosexuality has most recently been put forward by Teresa Barnard. Barnard's biography of Seward directly challenges the viewpoint that Seward's emotional motivations were toward women rather than men. Her work suggests that such an interpretation is the result of 'misreading' Seward's poetry and ignoring her unpublished letters (Barnard, 5). Barnard uses letters stored at the Johnson Birthplace Museum to support her assertion that the letters suggest Seward to have in fact been in favour of marriage, as she initially approved of the union between her friend Honora Sneyd and Richard Edgeworth (which we shall focus upon shortly) (Barnard, 15). However, in this

article we shall also examine archival research (from unpublished letters by the poet stored in London and at Yale University) to demonstrate the exact opposite: that Seward intensely opposed the institution of marriage, as well as fervently supporting same-sex friendship in her correspondence.

23 Throughout her poetry and elegiac works she violently rejects social norms on relationships and seeks to establish an alternative, idealising friendship and nonsexual love. The poet seeks to distance herself from mainstream institutions with a vigour she consciously recognised – it was a social and political position she referred to as her 'stand'.

24 It was in Anna Seward's sonnets - amongst the best-known of her works - that we find some of the most obvious poetic expressions of her radical views. Many of her sonnets centre around her friendship with Honora Sneyd, who had joined the Seward household as a child. The poet's love for her was all-encompassing, and she would have a profound impact on her emotional life and her writings. When Sneyd's father was later to withdraw her from the Seward's home, after many years of their living together, Seward felt a profoundly painful sense of loss. After leaving the Seward household Honora Sneyd was to betray her by marrying and becoming Honora Edgeworth. This loss was more terrible than the last, and whilst in her letters she adopts a comparatively moderate tone in describing the arrangement, her sonnets from this period are wild and dramatic, and untempered in their use of highly emotive language:

> HONORA, shou'd that cruel time arrive
> When 'gainst my truth thou should'st my errors poise,
> Scorning remembrance of our vanish'd joys;
> When for the love-warm looks, in which I live,
> But cold respect must greet me, that shall give
> No tender glance, no kind regretful sighs;
> When thou shalt pass me with averted eyes,
> Feigning thou see'st me not, to sting, and grieve
> And sicken my sad heat, I cou'd not bear
> Such dire eclipse of thy soul-cheering rays;
> I cou'd not learn my struggling heart to tear
> From thy lov'd form, that thro' my memory strays;
> Nor in the pale horizon of Despair
> Endure the wintry and the darken'd days.
> (Seward, *Original Sonnets*, 12)

Seward's loss represents a failure to adhere to the Aristotelian ideal of sharing a home and therefore a life with one's intimate friend. The sonnet is addressed to Honora, though whether she actually read it is difficult to ascertain. As the sonnets were not published until many years afterward it is likely they were intended as a means of private self-expression. Seward utilises strong imagery to signify the cooling of her own emotional landscape with the

departure of the warmth of her friend's presence: the poet's comparison of her subject to the sun grants her a centricity which lights all aspects of her life – physical, emotional and spiritual. The poet both conveys a fear of loss and the sense that she has had something worth holding on to. The positive language relating to Sneyd is both romantic and above bodily desire (with reference to their souls having connected). From this sonnet we see the emergence of a state of separation far more grievous to the poet – one which was not only physical, but also emotional.

25 The deep sense of fear conveyed in this poem was realised, and the friendship between the two was ended forever when Sneyd left for Ireland to be with her new husband. Though Barnard's evidence may suggest Seward to have been initially supportive of her companion, it was certainly not to last. The fear in her sonnets transforms into rage:

> INGRATITUDE ,--how deadly is thy smart,
> Proceeding from the Form we fondly love!
> How light, compar'd, all other sorrows prove!
> Thou shed'st a night of woe, from whence depart
> The gentle beams of patience, that the heart
> 'Mid lesser ills illume.--Thy Victims rove
> Unquiet as the Ghost that haunts the grove
> Where MURDER spilt the life-blood.--O! thy dart
> Kills more than life, e'en all that makes it dear;
> Till we the "sensible of pain" wou'd change
> For Phrenzy, that defies the bitter tear,
> Or wish, in kindred callousness, to range
> Where moon-ey'd IDIOCY , with fallen lip,
> Drags the loose knee, and intermitting step.
> (Seward, *Original Sonnets*, 16)

The sonnet opens with the cry 'INGRATITUDE', suggesting rejection to be the most miserable of circumstances: "How light, compared, all other sorrows prove!" Seward compares the betrayal of friendship to murder. Seward literally presents herself as a victim (line 6) condemned to a ghostly nocturnal existence. This sentiment is carried on into the nineteenth sonnet in the collection, where Seward refers to Sneyd as a 'false friend' and even states that she has broken a vow to her.

26 Honora Sneyd was to perish eight years following her wedding, and the two never spoke again. The sonnets go on to display Seward's grief at hearing of her lost friend's death, and the anger is shifted to the husband, whom the poet blames both for Sneyd's actions, and even for her death itself: 'Sonnet XXXII' displays a theme of hostility, directed at the male rival but also at the faithless friend herself:

> Behold him now his genuine colours wear,
> That specious false-one, by whose cruel wiles

I lost thy amity; saw thy dear smiles
Eclips'd; those smiles, that used my heart to cheer,
Wak'd by the grateful sense of many a year
When rose thy youth, by Friendship's pleasing toils
Cultured; - but Dying! - O! for ever fade
The angry fires. - Each thought, that might upbraid
Thy broken faith, which yet my soul deplores,
Now as eternally is past and gone
As are the interesting, the happy hours,
Days, years, we shared together. They are flown!
Yet long must I lament thy hapless doom,
Thy lavish'd life and early hasten'd tomb.
(Seward, *Original Sonnets*, 34)

Faderman uses the poem as an example of Seward's intense hatred toward Edgeworth, asserting that she blamed him for Sneyd's death (Faderman, *Surpassing*, 136). In these sonnets, however, he as a subject is responsible not only for Sneyd's death, but also her betrayal of female friendship. Sonnet XXXII opens with an invitation to Sneyd and the reader to join in the author's judgement of the subject: 'Behold him now', for the poet refers to her in the second person when she states 'I lost thy amity'. The author appears to be referring to a fictional and idealised version of the subject, as imagined in her own mind after her friend's early death. Once again the language points the melodramatic contrast between the female victim Sneyd and the false villain Edgeworth, one being 'dear', the other 'cruel'.

27 'Sonnet XXXII' has another contrast, one which extends beyond the two individuals: that of friendship and of marriage. Seward would not only mourn Sneyd, but the prior destruction of their friendship, which is referred to directly as 'cultured' by the years and a source of great pleasure in the past. Even after Honora's death, the speaker has to quell her rising resentment at her beloved's 'broken faith', presumably as a result of prioritizing her marital vows. Here Seward presents friendship as a higher form of love, one which also entails vows and fidelity. This elegy ends on a bleak note, with the final rhyming couplet of 'doom' and 'tomb', terms which cannot spare her, however 'cultured' and 'lavish'd' the subject may have been. For the time being, both Friendship and Sneyd are in the grave.

28 However, Seward was not to be deterred indefinitely. Her letters share the same commitment to friendship and aversion to marital vows we have seen in her sonnets. In a letter from her youth Seward states:

> "It is true, the chances are extremely against a woman ever marrying, who resolves not to approach the altar of Hymen without she is led thither by a man she prefers to all the rest of his sex. But, to a female mind, that can employ itself ingeniously, that is capable of friendship, that is blessed with affluence, where are the evils of celibacy?" (Seward, *Poetical Works*, cxciii)

Seward's near-worship of celibacy here – especially via Hymen – establishes her desires as outside of the scope of sexuality. Though Seward is careful not to refuse all marriage outright, it is a theme she repeats many times throughout her published letters, and one which is amplified in her unpublished, unedited ones.

29 One such letter – stored at the British Library – shows her to lose yet another friend in circumstances similar to the ones which lost her Honora Sneyd. Seward writes: "Since I opposed Mrs. Smith's wish a year ago to marry with ruinous imprudence, she has never deigned to come near me - & resisted all her father's requests that she wd. accept the offers of reconciliation wh. I made …" (Seward, MSS Add. 46400 f. 305). This undiscovered detail is a rare instance of Seward directly and clearly detailing such a dispute, and proves that she would never withhold her opposition to the women around her becoming wedded – even if it meant a mortal wound in her relationship.

30 Seward's most overt and startling letters, however, are to be found in the archives at Beinecke library at Yale, addressed to a figure almost entirely overlooked by those investigating the life of the poet – a woman named Sophia Weston. In the Seward-Weston letters the poet firmly and unapologetically announces her opposition to marriage, her expectations on her female friends and even her previously unacknowledged reputation as a dangerous hazard for young women.

31 One of the first letters at Yale was written six years after Honora Sneyd's death, and gives a great deal of insight into the scars her desires had left on both her emotional state and her reputation:

> But O Sophia can you wonder if I wish to steel my heart against its native tenderness, when ever friendship seeks to engage it? – Consider how bitter have been my disappointments – that soreness and jealousy are their natural consequences – You must not wonder that I say to myself – Why shou'd I follow the [illegible word] fire of professed amity, which have so often led my peace into whirl-pools, & quicksands? … From the time that the world began to say ill-natured things of me, & to judge harshly of a conduct, whose motives they cou'd not adequately know, I never sought the Friendship of any body … my very soul revolted from the idea that others shou'd suffer the most [illegible word] species of mortification on my account … You say, Sophia, that you have purchas'd my amity by sacrifices. There is extreme pain in for me in this idea. (Seward, MSS OSBORN C202)

Seward's private assertion as to the damage done to her reputation is astonishing in a figure widely regarded in our own time as having been well-respected and inoffensive. Seward had established her queer views and had to endure the resultant gossip and slander. In the letters Seward describes her decision not to marry as a: "Nice & hazardous state!" (Seward, MSS OSBORN C202) Seward's queer desire was not applied on an ad-hoc basis to whichever

women gained her trust. It was an active and conscious socio-political position. In another of the letters stored at Yale she demonstrates the fundamental incompatibility of friendship and marriage, and makes clear her own position:

> These horrid Men, with their humors, & their pride, are so continually the annihilation of their wives' former friendships, that when first Miss Rogers sought mine, I confess'd to her an unwillingness to pledge my amity from that unpleasant consciousness. Few women are generous enough to make my stand for the Friend against male-caprice. (Seward, MSS OSBORN C202)

This statement directly reveals Seward's belief that marriage was always an impediment to friendship and that she was unwilling to befriend those who were likely to betray her or put her second on account of the priority of their marital vows: all of which she acknowledges as 'my stand'. This statement shows a political devotion to friendship manifest in social identity. The Yale letters go on to show the breakdown of the friendship between Seward and Weston, and they indicate that history in fact repeated itself: Weston betrayed Seward for a sexual relationship.

32 Commitment to queer friendship came at a high price, and both Gray and Seward suffered damage to their reputations and – as we have seen – even lost the love of those closest to them. The decline of nonsexual love was something each fought bitterly against, but it was not a battle they could win - their identities remained marginalised and each would be continually disappointed. As Seward states in a letter she wrote as a young woman: "We swear eternal truth – but say, my friend / What day, next week, th' eternity shall end?" (Seward, *Poetical Works*, xlvi).

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