

Appendix 4.2: from *Letters of Anna Seward* (1811)

Selections are copied from *Letters of Anna Seward: written between the years 1784 and 1807*. 6 vols. Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1811.

from Letter 77, to Humphry Repton,¹ 15 July 1789 (Vol. 2, pp. 309–14)

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Some lines of mine, about fifty in number, had the honour of suggesting to Dr Darwin the first idea of the beauteous poem you mention, the new-risen sun of our poetic hemisphere. I wrote them in a valley near Lichfield, which was a mere morass, till drained, cultivated, and formed into a picturesque garden of botanic science, by the Doctor's forming hand. He had always very great poetic ta-

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lents. Resident in Lichfield till the year 1781, he became a sort of poetic preceptor to me in my early youth. If I have critical knowledge in my favourite science, I hold myself chiefly indebted for it to him. Warned by the malign influence which Akenside and Armstrong's poetic fame had upon their medical practice,² he would never, till now, venture to appear before the world as a bard. When I shewed him the poetic sketch I had made of his valley, in the year 1779, he was pleased with it, and said it should stand as the exordium of a poem, which he, that instant, conceived might be written to advantage upon the Linnean system, and under the Ovidian licence of transforming trees, shrubs, and flowers into fine ladies and gentlemen.³ From that instant he began the brilliant work you mention, which has been the amusement of his leisure hours through all the intervening years. For some reason, inscrutable to me, he publishes the second part first. A friend of his, Mr Stevens of Repton,⁴ I believe, sent my verses, describing this valley, to the Gentleman's Magazine for May 1783, with some change, and some additional lines in their close, made by Dr Darwin, for my verses contain no mention of the nymph of Botany. From that magazine they got into almost all the pub-

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lic prints of that era, with my name affixed to them.

One of the notes to the part which the Doctor has just published,⁵ induces me to believe he retains his design of opening his first part with my sketch of the valley. Surely he judges wrong; so great a work ought not to contain lines, especially in the exordium, which are known to have been written by another.

from Letter 47, to Mrs. Jackson,⁶ 3 August 1792 (Vol. 3, pp. 152–57)

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When Mr Mundy had finished his enchanting local poem, the Needwood Forest,⁷ Dr Darwin wrote three little poetic compliments on the work. To the best he put his son's initials; to the second best his own; and to the worst mine. Not a syllable of any of the three did I see, or hear of, till I saw them in print at the conclusion of Mr Mundy's poems. I did not like this manœuvre, and reproached him with it. He laught it off in a manner peculiar to himself, and with which he carries all his points of despotism. Now he retains, without the least acknowledgement, not even the quotation mark, and places, as the exordium of this his resplendent poem, a copy of verses of mine, which I wrote in his botanic garden, near Lichfield, in the year 1779, when he himself was an inhabitant of Lichfield. My little poem was a mere poetic landscape of the newly smiling valley, which had been a morass till drained, cultivated, and adorn-

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ed by his taste. My verses had the honour of suggesting to the Doctor the first idea of this exquisite composition. When I shewed them to him—after praising them highly, he exclaimed, “Here the nymph of botany and her train should be introduced, together with the whole Linnean or sexual system of plants.”

The disingenuousness of making no mention that the scenic description, with which he opens his poem, was the work of another, had been of no consequence, if Mr Stevens, a friend of the Doctor's, had not sent it to the Gentleman's Magazine for May 1783, where they now stand in my name, and from whence they were copied into the Annual Register,⁸ as I think, and into several other of the public prints at that period. Without consulting me, the Doctor had put some additional lines of his own at the conclusion, introducing the nymph of botany, and this before Mr Stevens obtained a copy. My verses said nothing of any such personage. They introduced the genius of the place, by which I meant the Doctor himself, who had opened that paradise in the wild. There are several more alterations in them, and some few more lines of the Doctor's inwoven with my landscape, as it now forms the above-mentioned exordium—but still four-

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fifths of them are mine verbatim, and mine the whole order of the scenery, so that a charge of plagiarism must rest somewhere.

¹ Humphry Repton (1752–1818), one of the most significant landscape gardeners of the period, who published several books on the subject. Later, in 1794, he would participate in the controversies on the picturesque with Richard Payne Knight (1751–1824) and Uvedale Price (1747–1829).

² Mark Akenside (1721–1770), poet and physician, best known for *The Pleasures of Imagination* (1744), a three-book philosophical poem in blank verse with notes. He finished his medical studies at Leiden a few months after it was first published. He had difficulty establishing himself in a medical practice, but there is no evidence his having published poetry was to blame. He went on to hold positions at St Thomas's Hospital and Christ's Hospital, and in 1761 became physician-in-ordinary to Queen Charlotte. John Armstrong (1708/9–1779), poet and physician, best known for *The Oeconomy of Love* (1736), a poem of sex advice, and *The Art of Preserving Health* (1744), a medical poem in blank verse in four books about air, diet, exercise, and the passions, respectively. There is no sign that publishing poetry actually had a negative effect on his medical career, but Armstrong perpetuated the idea in a

sarcastic third-person retrospective on his career at the end of *Medical Essays* (1773), where he writes, “But for that distempered excess of sensibility he might have been as much renowned as almost any *Quack*--- notwithstanding even his having imprudently published a system of what every body allows to be sound Physick--- only indeed that it was in verse” (p. 38), and “His having written a Poem upon a subject reckoned of no inconsiderable consequence to the health of mankind was, as some say, sufficient alone in this age and meridian, to have ruined him as a Physician” (p. 39). When Armstrong’s medical career was destroyed in 1765, it was due to the College of Physicians summoning him for practicing without a license.

³ Cf. *LOTP*, Proem

⁴ Presumably William Bagshaw Stevens (1756–1800), friend of ED, who was a schoolmaster at Repton School in Derbyshire, and also a minister in the Church of England. He published two books of poetry, and his journal was published posthumously in 1965. He wrote commendatory verses for *The Botanic Garden* which appeared in Part 1, *The Economy of Vegetation* starting in 1791 (see Appendix 1.5).

⁵ *LOTP* IV:11n.

⁶ Presumably the wife of John Jackson who printed *LOTP* 1789, *A System of Vegetables* (1783), and *The Families of Plants* (1787), and Seward’s own *Louisa: A Poetical Novel in Four Epistles* (1784). Mrs. John Jackson published *Dialogues on the Doctrines and Duties of Christianity: intended for the Instruction of the Young, and to lead them to the Study of the Sacred Scriptures* in 1806, on which Seward congratulates her in a letter (Seward, *Letters* Vol. 6, p. 265).

⁷ Francis Noel Clarke Mundy (1739–1815) published the poem *Needwood Forest* to oppose the felling of its trees. See *LOTP* I:161–74 and note, IV:33–6 and note, and Additional Notes. Needwood Forest was located in East Staffordshire, not far from Lichfield where Seward lived all her life, and where ED lived from 1756 to 1781. *Needwood Forest* was privately printed in Lichfield along with the verses Seward refers to here, credited to ED (“Address to Swilcar Oak”), Seward (1742–1809) (“A Rural Coronation”), Brooke Boothby (1744–1824) (“Sonnet”), and Erasmus Darwin, Jr. (1759–1799) (“On Mr. Mundy’s Needwood Forest”). In a 1777 letter, Seward claimed that *Needwood Forest* itself was a collaborative composition: “I dress’d the Furies, [ED] gave them their music [...] The description of the witches, all but the last couplet, and that of *Murder*, are *mine*”, and she also wrote the description of Lichfield as seen from the forest (qtd. in Teresa Barnard, *Anna Seward: A Constructed Life* (2009), p. 110).

⁸ The poem does not appear in the *Annual Register* for 1783, the year in which it was published in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, nor can it be found in the *General Index to Dodsley’s Annual Register from its Commencement in 1758 to the year 1819* (1826).