Claudia Thomas Kairoff, *Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Pp. xiii+308. $55. ISBN 9781421403281.

Susanne Schmid, *British Literary Salons of the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. ix+252. £55 (hb). ISBN 9780230110656. Pb. £21 (pb). ISBN 9781137557643.

In the introduction to *Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century*, Claudia Kairoff unequivocally presents Seward, the 'Swan of Lichfield', as a major literary figure from the 'end of the eighteenth century', a particularly apt chronological delimitation straddling the eighteenth century and the Romantic (or even 'pre-Romantic') period. From the outset, Kairoff casts Seward as embodying several of the cultural and literary tensions of this transitional phase through her many roles as a doyenne of cultivated society, a mentor of younger authors, a leading light of provincial culture (though one endowed with national relevance) and a fearless intellectual who mounted an attack on Samuel Johnson in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1786. As a figure of transition, Seward did not understand why Wordsworth had to write about daffodils, yet, at the same time, she wrote a hugely successful novel of sentiment in verse, *Louisa*, and encouraged the youthful literary pursuits of future key Romantic intellectuals and writers such as Walter Scott and Henry Francis Cary.

At over 300 pages, Kairoff's is a substantial critical-biographical study that usefully complements Teresa Barnard's more straightforwardly biographical *Anna Seward: A Constructed Life* (2009). By focusing on literary themes and forms, Seward's connections to her cultural milieu and socio-political environment, as well as the contexts of cultural production and transmission available to her, Kairoff throws light on the 'Swan' as a woman and an author caught up in a period of wide-ranging transformations. Her study both builds and expands on John Brewer's reassessment of Seward in a substantial section of *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1997) – a precedent Kairoff explicitly acknowledges in her opening pages.

Even as she offers an overview of Seward's entire output, Kairoff also carries out detailed textual readings of sizeable portions of the poetry; and this welcome exercise throws into relief the poet's painstaking formal experiments, as well as contributing to explaining the praise her contemporaries lavished on her. Kairoff applies this approach to Seward's use of the sonnet and her famous polemic with Charlotte Smith over 'legitimacy' in sonnet-writing, but also in the case of other forms such as, for example, the locodescriptive 'Lichfield, an Elegy', which is meticulously analysed in the introduction. These textual examinations invariably confirm Seward's committment to the technical aspects of versification, while also bearing out the relevance of formal experimentation within the fraught transition from eighteenth-century to Romantic poetic modes.

Another priority in Kairoff's study is reconstructing the ways in which Seward combined privacy with her public roles, especially in the two chapters on Lady Miller's circle at Batheaston. These contain a detailed account of Seward's debut as a poet within a context of gentility and sociability presided over by a woman who was (or, indeed, aimed to be) a leader of taste. The most valuable contribution of this section lies precisely in its taking the Batheaston circle seriously, instead of treating it as a footnote or dismissing it as a diverting coterie of dilettantes. Here, Lady Miller is not a clueless *parvenue* sponsoring mediocre writers for her own self-aggrandizement, but rather a patroness providing a creative outlet and promoting textual circulation at the meeting-point of national and local cultures. In this

respect, Kairoff offers some sharp discussions of how Seward's compositions for the Batheaston gatherings rework these socio-cultural themes, and the related question of Seward's conservatism and patriotism.

Kairoff depicts Seward as an enduringly relevant poet because of her position within the network of continuities, transitions and transformations that affected her aesthetics and modes of literary production and circulation. And, in terms of Seward's impact, Kairoff sometimes suggests – and on occasion examines – the connections between Seward and Scott, Keats, and Elizabeth Barrett. On the whole, the book succeeds in carrying out a triple operation – assessing Seward's poetry through close readings that do justice to its thematic richness and formal complexity; confirming her as a late-century promoter of earlier literary developments, though also keeping an eye on new developments; and acknowledging her as an historically-aware, aesthetically adventurous representative of early Romantic-period literature.

While Kairoff's interest centres on Seward's links to the Batheaston circle, in her study of literary salons in Romantic-era Britain Susanne Schmid undertakes a wider-ranging and variously groundbreaking investigation, which provocatively begins by invoking Marc Augé's notion of the 'non-place'. Schmid casts salons as virtual spaces or spaces of ideas that were not necessarily connected to a precise physical location. Within this theoretical framework she places her meticulous reconstruction of names, venues, events and texts, which she explores through the categories of sociability, theatricality and conversation. If, as we know, social and sociable 'Romanticism' has emerged as a major theme over the last ten to fifteen years largely thanks to Gillian Russell's and Clara Tuite's landmark *Romantic Sociability* (2002), Schmid's book offers itself as a substantial contribution to this ever-expanding area of research. Its explicit purpose is that of 'restoring British salon sociability to the pantheon of culturally relevant sites' (2) alongside coffeehouses, theatres and clubs, thus awarding British salons the relevance which those of contemporary France, Germany, Italy and Spain have always enjoyed in literary and cultural studies of these national traditions. To this end, Schmid envisages salons within a long-term perspective, as they testify to how the Bluestocking tradition continued well into and beyond the Romantic period; at the same time, she highlights those peculiarities and specificities of Romantic-era salons that were occasioned by the mutating social, political and cultural conditions within which these gatherings, and the women who presided over them, existed and developed.

Besides providing cultural-historical contextualization, Schmid's introduction illustrates several terminological and theoretical points such as the notions of the 'non-place', 'social sphere' and performativity. It is followed by three sections focusing on as many representative salons. The first deals with Mary Berry, whom Madame de Staël called 'the cleverest woman in England' (51), her salon-related activities both at home and abroad, her connections with Horace Walpole and Anne Damer, as well as her activities as a dramatist and an editor. The second section focuses on Lady Holland and her salon at Holland House, the most prestigious and longest-lived of those examined by Schmid. The value of this section lies particularly in the unprecedented degree of attention it devotes to Lady Holland herself – that is, her personality and power in animating the cultural life of Holland House, but also her writings (in this respect, Schmid provides a rare and valuable analysis of her 'Spanish Journal'). Finally, the third section concentrates on the fascinatingly scandalous Marguerite, Countess of Blessington, and her manifold literary activities in the context of the four salons she ran at different times, one of which was the constantly changing group she gathered in several Continental cities (such as Naples, Genoa and Paris) between 1822 and 1829.

The book is refreshingly open about the difficulties of this kind of project and, especially, about the challenges posed by orality, the fleeting nature of conversation in the

sociable practices at the heart of salon life, and the lack of solid textual evidence beyond an occasional 'terse diary entry or a short passage in a letter' (55). Schmid builds her study on a vast array of facts, anecdotes and *dramatis personae*, which, however, never resolve into a chaotic jumble, as the book presents a clear structure based on the arguments and theoretical premisses laid out in the introduction. If anything is missing from this study, it is perhaps a more detailed contextualization of Romantic salons within the broader picture of salon history in Britain between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries, as this would have emphasized even more clearly the cultural fractures between pre- and post-Romantic salons. This possible shortcoming, however, is more than fully compensated by Schmid's careful interpretations of specific materials and episodes, as well as the insights she repeatedly opens up into a sizeable gallery of women who were directly involved in cultural production and diffusion and who must be acknowledged and reappraised as major 'authors of the social sphere' (69). Together with Kairoff's study, Schmid's book confirms the vitality of the ongoing work of rediscovery of the central role played by women in constructing and promoting participative cultural debate in Romantic-era Britain.

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