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LETTERS
OF
ANNA SEWARD:

WRITTEN BETWEEN THE YEARS 1784 AND 1807.

IN SIX VOLUMES.

VOLUME IV.

EDINBURGH:

Printed by George Ramsay & Company,
FOR ARCHIBALD CONSTABLE AND COMPANY, EDINBURGH;
AND LONGMAN, HURST, REES, ORME, AND BROWN,
WILLIAM MILLER, AND JOHN MURRAY,
LONDON.

1811.

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LETTER XLVII.

MISS WINGFIELD.

Lichfield, July 19, 1796.

I AM hopeless of being able to visit you this summer. Arbitrary disorder shapes for me another course, wide of the Severn banks—but it is not to the sea. No “moon, bursting from a cloud, will brighten for me the foamy side of a wave, amid the dark-heaving ocean.” When it shall again be given me to behold, as you and I once beheld together, that fine description of Ossian’s realized, I shall think of the kind friend whose arm supported my frame, while her gentle spirit shared my enthusiasm, from a sight so sublimely impressive.

You heard me speak of my purpose to have an Eolian harp, made upon the construction of Miss Ponsonby’s, mentioned in my poem, Langollen Vale. She was so good to give me an exact drawing of hers; which, being three times the size they are usually made, and with twenty-two strings, instead of the usual number, six, far transcends, both in the quantity and quality of the

tone, the general order of these airy instruments. Mine is at length finished and strung; but, being made to fit my only eastern sash-windows, no gale has yet blown from that point, strong enough to wake the sullen slumber of its many chords. This line, from *Il Penseroso*, is to be its motto:

“ Most musical, most melancholy.”

Doubtless the airy hand of Eurus will soon awaken those rich harmonies, which so divinely stole upon my ear amid the Vale of Langollen.

And now I must proudly boast to you of Lord Bagot's goodness. He has honoured me with an obliging billet, accompanied by a very acceptable literary present. It is a superb book.—A German poem, entitled *Leonora*, and translated by Mr Spenser. I apprehend the fine poetic talents of that gentleman have done much more than justice to the sublimity of his author's ideas. This tale of despairing love, reaches the *ne-plus-ultra* of horrific greatness. Have you seen, in any of the various translations, the grand equestrian spectre they present? It has either already froze, or it will freeze, your young blood. Before I received this superior version, another, in a simpler style, had impressed me extremely; and I now

think that, in one or two passages, it transcends Mr Spenser's; but, on the whole, there is no comparison. O! yes, it is in his language, aided by the magic pencil of his aunt, Lady Diana Beauclerk, that the grand effect upon the imagination is complete. So very finely has she seized, and presented to actual vision, the most striking moments in this extraordinary poetic scene, as to vie with the best attempts of our great painters, who, with emulative pencil, have embodied the ideas of Shakespeare.

I observed that, in one or two places, I thought the first and simpler version of this poem, transcends Mr Spenser's generally more spirited, more elevated paraphrase—particularly here :

“ It creeps, the swarthy funeral train,
The corse is on the bier!
Like croak of toads from lonely moor,
It slowly meets the ear*.”

“ Black'ning the night, a funeral train
On a cold bier a coffin brings,
Their slow pace measur'd to a strain
Sad as the saddest night-bird sings†.”

* From *Leonora*, a Ballad, from Burger. See *Monthly Magazine* for March 1790. Translator anonymous.—S.

† From Mr Spenser's Translation of *Leonora*.—S.

The epithet *cold* for the bier, adding nothing to the solemnity of the spectacle, rather weakens than strengthens it. It is so with all epithets that do not either strongly paint, or express strength of feeling. This consciousness has induced incompetent and shallow critics to condemn them almost totally;—not aware that frequently all the sublimity arises from the epithet;—as, for instance, “Death on his pale horse,” since an horse is not in itself an object of terror:—but the essential sublimity of this line, “The corse is on the bier,” would have been enfeebled by any epithet, because the human body, lifeless, is in itself an object so dismal, so ghastly, that, once presented to the imagination, all descriptive appellations are superfluous. Also, the simile of the nightingale for the death-psalm, is not in keeping with the general horror of the scene;—that of “toads croaking from the lonely moors” is completely accordant. But the Spenser paraphrase, rich in general superiorities, need not grudge to its rival the transcendence of one or two passages.

I think there is a desideratum in the poem itself, which is not supplied by either of the before-mentioned translations, though finely supplied by the pencil of Lady D. Beauclerk. The poetry, which so sublimely describes the dread appear-

ance of the transformed warrior, leaves wholly to the imagination the effect of such a spectacle on Leonora, except signifying that it was fatal to her, in these lines :

“ Leonora’s heart, its life-blood dried,
Hangs quivering on the dart of death.”

The lines are fine, but give no distinct picture. It appears to me, that a verse, to this effect, is almost demanded, when the skeleton, armed with a death-dart, is presented to the mind and eye at once, by the united powers of the poet and the painter.

“ Back on the maid he turns severe !
She shrieks—and, with arrested breath,
Clos’d eyes, and wild reverted hair,
Falls fainting from the horse of Death.

And, as she falls, the barbed spear
Eternal makes her clay-cold swoon.—
The dark grave yawns ! a coffin near !
Its white plates glimmer to the moon !”

I do not apologize for these remarks, even if you should have previously seen this tremendous composition. People who have mind, cannot soon be weary of a theme at once so novel and sublime. Adieu !

LETTER LXIII.

THE RIGHT HON. LADY ELEANOR BUTLER.

Lichfield, Feb. 19, 1797.

WELCOME as dear Lady Eleanor's letters always are, I am not so selfish to desire she should honour me with scriptures so precious, when other of those numerous claims, which press upon her time, render the indulgence inconvenient to herself.

Mr Roberts of Dinbren is now here, and I hope to prepare my packet to travel back to Langollen by him. His account of the health and cheerfulness of my charming friends, apparent in an interview with which they recently honoured him, charmed me. I was, however, concerned to hear him say you had lately been distressed by the illness, and alarmed for the life of your good Euryclea. That she is recovering I rejoice. The loss of a domestic, faithful and affectionate as Orlando's Adam, must have cast more than a transient gloom over the Cambrian Arden. The Rosalind and Celia of real life give Langollen valley a right to that title.

I returned some ten days ago from an excu-

sion to Nottingham, with Mr S. and his daughter, to the house of a mutual friend. Entering my blue region, after a nine days absence, I found your Ladyship's obliging letter on my table.

Many were the social pleasures of that visit, and sweet the harmonies which request called forth from the musically-endowed lips of my Lichfield associates. Poetic readings also formed part of our amusements. Mr Saville, who reads finely, as you well know, gave us the extracts, with which the Scottish ladies of your neighbourhood favoured him, from that sublime paraphrase of Burger's *Leonora*, the yet unpublished work of their friend. It is not near so close as the four rival translations, which I have seen, of that wild and violent poem; amongst which four, Mr Spencer's, with its happy engravings, is so very pre-eminent in poetic merit.

Many ideas and images are in the extracts Mr Saville had obtained, which cannot be found in Burger's poem; but they vie, and in some places transcend those of the original in well-imagined horror. Chilling, grand, and horrific is the shrouded corse, rising from the bier, and the half-perished body of the murderer, swinging and creaking in the winds and rain, descending from the gibbet, at the call of the equestrian spectre, and joining the ghastly train on that impetuous journey.

I read Mr Spencer's translation, exhibiting those sublime plates. That version was new to the party who listened to us. In another circle, I went through the principal scenes in Macbeth, by request. I will not tell you how much I was flattered on that arduous attempt, nor with how great a name my powers of reciting were brought into competition.

Thus passed our evenings; but I sighed frequently to miss my relations and friends of that town, whose place may be nowhere found—whose countenances and voices, till then the actual and constant associates of my residences at Nottingham, were mournfully combined in my imagination, with the streets, the houses, the people I saw. Inseparable, as I am sure you have observed, is the affinity between local and human objects, till long habits of seeing separately what we had been used to see united, dissolve, in a great degree at least, the magic chains by which, on their first actual disunion, they seem still ideally linked. Never, perhaps, can that disunion become complete. Congenial impressions will return, though fainter and less continued. The resemblance comes back upon the local object at intervals, like the shadows of trees and hedges upon the field, when a burst of sunshine pervades the clouds, which had for

a period rendered them invisible. Time, and the new custom of seeing the inanimate objects without their former vital accompaniments, are the clouds,—affectionate recollection the gleaming sun, that acts like that which restores the leafy landscape; and, as it strengthens with the increasing power of the solar rays, so strengthens, as meditation grows intense, the image of days and of forms that are fled.

I am crippled with the rheumatism at present, in consequence of a violent cold, taken at our last ball, where the dancers threw open the windows. Thus am I disabled from walking, as is my custom, half an hour, morning and afternoon, in the apartments of this large old mansion,

“ When the chill blustering wind and driving rain
Prevent my willing feet”

in their out-door wandering. I fear the losing all power of pedestrian exercise. Riding has ever been too dangerous since I fractured my knee at three-and-twenty. Post-chaise-airings are to me no exercise, and insufferably stupid, since I cannot read in a chaise; and my health, I am sure, would sink in total inaction—but away with this querulous strain! My bosom-pains continue their comfortable remission, and I ought to be con-

tented, especially since I have the satisfaction of seeing Mr Saville's more valuable life less oppressed by nervous debility this winter than during the softer sway of the last. Of the indulgent, the thrice-gratifying words, "our friend," in your Ladyship's last letter, he feels the high honour, and, what is more than honour, the sterling value. Superiority of rank may confer the first; from virtue and from talents results the last;—and from whose virtue, whose talents, can they more intensely proceed!

LETTER LXIV.

MRS ADEY of Norfolk.

Lichfield, March 21, 1797.

YOUR letter, written beneath the final glances of the departing year, reproaches my silence. It could not have existed through the recurrence of unpledged hours, on which no necessary employment presses, and in some of which you desire me to write to you. Ah! were I never to write to you but in periods of such ambiguous indolence, my silence would be eternal; they come to me