Females and Footnotes:

Excavating the Genre of Eighteenth-Century Women’s Scholarly Verse

Eighteenth-century women’s poetry is steadily being recovered and re-assessed through critical projects including Paula Backscheider’s landmark *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre* (2005), Anne Mellor’s “The Female Poet and the Poetess: Two Traditions of British Women’s Poetry, 1780-1830” (1997), Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain’s *Women’s Poetry in the Enlightenment: The Making of a Canon* (1999), and Gillian Wright’s *Producing Women's Poetry, 1600–1730: Text and Paratext, Manuscript and Print* (2013). However, one aspect of women’s poetry has been continually eschewed in these works: the prevalence of footnotes in their poetry and these women’s engagement with intellectual exploration and scholarly discourse by way of these footnotes.

In this essay, I argue that women’s poetry with footnotes and endnotes constructs a small but important canon of women’s intellectual and imaginative literature of the long eighteenth century. Indeed, the prevalence of this genre implores us to consider more carefully the ways that women writers engaged in historical, political, and ecological discourse in a literary mode that was safe or acceptable for female authorship—poetry. In poetry, women could subvert these gendered restrictions by including their own scholarly contributions, but to couch those contributions in the margins. Such poetry presents an ironic reversal of conventions of gender and authority by incorporating the literal margins of the page: the female voice commands the majority of the page, while the masculine voice of empiricism, authority, and scholarly reason is pushed to the margins. The result, I suggest, is the heavily annotated genre of poetry that I term “scholarly verse” (Figure 1). Due its prevalence among women writers, this genre deserves our critical attention.
To buttress my argument for reading this genre of poesy as a unique canon of women's literature, I present two brief case studies of women writers' unique engagement with this poetic genre: Anna Seward's *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780) and Helen Maria Williams' *Perugia*. 

**Illustrious Parr** first rose divinely bright,

*Catherine Parr*, daughter of *Sir Thomas Parr of Kendall* and the sixth and last wife to King *Henry VIII*. She enjoyed the advantages of a liberal education and was a woman of great sense, singular prudence, and a most strenuous friend to the reformation; which she studiously to promote to the extent of her power. She frequently argued with the King on the subject of Religion and urged him, as he had already separated from the *Sect of Rome*, to accomplish the glorious work he had begun; and thorough to refine the Church from the remains of superstition that still contaminated it. Impatient at *Henry* was of controul, such was his opinion of her worth, and such the affection he bore to her person, that he seldom betrayed the least indications of disquiet at her freedom. She was very assiduous in studying the *Sacred Writings*, and books of Divinity, and occasionally had Sermons preached to herself, and such of the ladies of her bed-chamber as chose to be present, by several eminent Protestant divines, whom she retained in the character of Chaplains; for she dared to be the patron of truth at a time when its professors were exposed to the utmost danger: After her death a discourse of her's, found amongst her papers, was published, intituled, *Queen Catherine Parr's Lamentations of a Sinner, bewailing the Ignorance of her blind Life*.

**Figure 1.** Mary Scott, *The Female Advocate* (1774), pp. 3-4.
In the spirit of the critical reviewer who in 1784 claimed that he “set Miss Seward and Miss Williams in contiguous pages…to place the respective merits of both in a more striking light” (“Art. XII” 300), I juxtapose these poems as case studies to illustrate one aspect of a wider generic trend. That is, when read as part of the larger practice of footnoted poetry as a means for intellectual production and literary invention, these poems present a useful foray in the role of women writers and their contribution to the unique, eighteenth-century genre of women’s scholarly verse.

I begin this essay by presenting data that underscores my claim for reading annotated poetry by women as a distinct genre of eighteenth-century poetry.¹ I then turn to the two case studies of Anna Seward and Helen Maria Williams, unpacking how these women incorporated footnotes to impart their scholarly commentary masked by the central text of the poetry and to exert their authority over the text. I conclude this essay by considering the twofold significance of this inquiry by placing Seward and Williams within the wider lineage of women writers contributing to literary generic development and scholarly discourse in the long eighteenth century.

**Females, footnotes, and scholarly verse**

In choosing to read annotated poetry by women at the turn of the eighteenth century as a salient genre, we must attend to the intricacies of literary genre development, as Mellor and Backscheider have offered; we must read annotated poetry within its contemporary context as an established genre itself, not just an outlier that baffles us today with the myriad footnotes. In *Producing Women’s Poetry, 1600-1730: Text and Paratext, Manuscript and Print*, Wright calls for greater attention to be given to women writers, not only to assess their historical position within the literary canon, but also to understand their agency in the production of literary genres:

> One reason why genre is important for the study of early modern women writers is that it offers a means of assessing their gender-inflected relationships with the normative (male-gendered) literary canon of their day…reading for genre offers a means of engaging with women’s poetry which is conscious of, but not circumscribed by, considerations of gender. (19-20)

Similarly, Backscheider remarks, “[v]eiled or indirect as their manner often is, women indisputably wrote to participate in the great public debates of their time, to intervene in the public sphere, to shape mores, and to mold opinion” (20). In other words, we must not only read the poetry of these writers as the unique literary contributions of an undersung chorus of poets; we must also attend to the scholarly discourse of political engagement within the poetry.

Additionally, we must acknowledge the ways in which women writers were mindful of how they intervened in the public sphere, relying on poetry as the means through which to impart their arguments: “[g]enre made a difference,” Deborah Kennedy writes, and “since the acceptance that had been granted to women writing poetry had not as yet been extended to women writing non-fiction prose” (63) at the end of the eighteenth century, many women turned to the margins to impart their commentary. Likewise, Jennie Batchelor and Cora Kaplan write that “[w]here women’s writing was once seen to occupy the margins of literary culture, it now takes centre stage” (4). I take Batchelor and Kaplan’s notion of marginal occupation literally in this essay, and I read the margins of women’s writing in order to more fully understand their engagement.
with scholarly authority within verse forms. Thus, I direct our attention to the role of the paratexts shaping the poetry as an agent for political discourse in the public sphere.

On looking into the works catalogued in Backscheider’s extensive bibliography of *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and their Poetry*, we can readily observe that the number of published volumes of poetry with notes by women steadily rose over the course of the long eighteenth century (Figure 2). We might regard these numbers as indicative of what Clifford Siskin and William Warner have described as the “turn toward more specialized and localized knowledges and practices” (26) within an increasingly empirical and imperial eighteenth century.

Of the forty-three poets surveyed in Backscheider’s critical volume, twenty-four of them produce forty-two volumes of poetry that incorporate annotations. Of course, we must acknowledge that some of the notes are likely the editorial interventions of spouses, editors, or hands other than the author—such as those whose poetry was collected posthumously or otherwise compiled and edited by others. Nevertheless, the increasing prevalence of marginal notation for critical commentary and authorial reflection begs our attention.

Within the forty-two volumes of annotated verse by these twenty-four women, a desire for objectivity and empiricism shapes the content of many of the annotations, with women asserting their roles as poets and as natural historians, literary critics, and political activists. The topics discussed in their annotations fall into nine broad categories:

1. Natural history, as found throughout Charlotte Smith’s poetic corpus, including *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784) and *Beachy Head* (1807).
2. Quotations (most often from Shakespeare and the Bible), as seen throughout Anne Bannerman’s *Poems* (1800).

3. Biographical information, as seen in Mary Scott’s *The Female Advocate* (1774), which devotes its annotations to writing intricate networks of women’s intellectual, literary, and political history.

4. Literary criticism, as seen throughout Anna Seward’s *Original Sonnets* (1799), where Seward pulls no punches in her remarks on the Augustan Poets (Sonnet XXI), and where her sonnet “On Doctor Johnson's Unjust Criticisms in his Lives of the Poets” provides a fourteen-line poetic prompt for a three page treatise railing against the proverbial boy’s club she sees as hindering Samuel Johnson’s objectivity in his literary criticism.

5. Anthropology, as seen in Anna Seward’s *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780) and Helen Maria Williams’ *Peru* (1784), which I discuss at greater length below.

6. Classical allusions, as annotated in Joanna Baillie’s *Poems* (1790).

7. Political history, as seen in Elizabeth Tollet’s “Anne Boleyn to King Henry VIII. An Epistle” (1724), where she remarks on her inclusion of extensive notes: “as I have given this Letter entirely a poetical Cast, it may not be improper to explain some Parts of the History alluded to in it” (82n).

8. Topography, as in Jane Brereton’s commentary on Cambrian and Welsh geography serving as the backdrop to *Merlin: A Poem* (1735).

9. Social criticism, as in Charlotte Smith’s *The Emigrants* (1793), where the annotations complement the pathos in Smith’s verse.

These annotations offer the writer with a greater range of authorizing maneuvers, establishing authority for the narrator via an editor’s commentary, to set a tone for interpretation—even telling the reader how to read specific passages by pointing out allusions or references to other texts or cultural events—and working to educate her readers by filling in the gaps left within the verse by providing records of names, dates, and lists of events alluded to in the poetry. Such uses of annotation indicate women writers’ engagement with forms of intellectual discourse typically reserved for men. In sum, the margins provided women writers with a space to engage in contemporary (often gendered) critical conversations and to raise their voices beyond the georgic, lyric, and elegiac modes of their verse.

This distant reading of women’s poetry lends a new angle for unpacking Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain’s assertion that “women’s poetry reconfigures a customary epistemological binary, mind and body, revising eighteenth-century philosophical assumptions about mind and body, and probing the implications for a new understanding of social organization” (viii). Likewise, taking note of this paratextual trend offer a new way of thinking about Backscheider’s assessment that “the women poets of the 1790s had inherited and brought to maturity the potential for power in the public sphere” (need page number) as well as for recontextualizing Mellor’s argument for the “relentlessly didactic” and “explicitly political” (85) position of the female poet and the inherently didactic nature of her poetry. Yet, it is no new claim that women writers harnessed their political agency within poetry, and that in their poetry they raised issues of literary, historical, sociological, and political criticism. What is novel in my approach, however, is the attention I give to the margins of women’s writing. Reading this prevalent yet overlooked form of poetry more distantly, while also closely reading the margins, promises to
open up exciting and productive avenues of conversation about the unique ways poetry served as a site of and structure for intellectual exploration in the eighteenth century.

**Anna Seward’s empire of knowledge**

Anna Seward (1742-1809) is a complex character in the history of women’s literature and poetic production in the eighteenth century, as several recent works have attested (Clarke 37, 44; Barnard 20; Kairoff 1-14). She rose to prominence in 1780 with her *Elegy on Captain Cook*, which received great critical acclaim on its publication, deemed as having “a fine glow of fancy” (*Critical Review* 69), rising “far above mediocrity” (*Town and Country Magazine* 435) and setting a standard of “brilliant fancy, correct, harmonious, and spirited versification” for all of her subsequent poetry (*Monthly Review* 154). In more objective terms than Seward’s earliest critics, Norma Clarke comments on her characteristic style of writing:

> Seward highlighted a difference in reading; we might now point to a difference in styles of writing: precise academic criticism which only other academics are likely to read on the one hand, and literary journalism intended for general readers on the other. (41)

This “difference in styles of writing” is most plainly evinced by Seward’s active incorporation of footnotes, literally underscoring her verbal artistry with academic commentary.

In addition to her *Elegy on Captain Cook*, Seward also heavily annotates her similarly geopolitical memorials in *Monody on Major Andre* (1781) and *Ode on General Elliott’s Return from Gibraltar* (1787); even her landmark *Llangollen Vale* (1796) is punctuated with extensive annotations glossing political, topographical, and historical references in the poetry. For Seward, writing poetry was a cultural act that carried great responsibility for refining taste, as Clarke observes (40), in addition to expanding knowledge, as I assert. As the abundance of footnotes in her corpus indicates, Seward’s poetry transcends the boundaries of page and margin and of nationhood, as the scope of her poetry and notes spans the globe. Seward’s corpus of verse is thus both empirical and imperial, both suggesting notions of expansion.

*Elegy on Captain Cook* presents, as the title suggests, an elegiac reflection upon Captain James Cook’s eighteenth-century voyages and his contributions to the expansion of knowledge through his global explorations and imperial agenda. The 238 lines of poetic text are accompanied by nineteen footnotes. The content of these notes can be grouped into three distinct categories: (1) Linnaean classification, (2) anthropologic documentation, and (3) direct quotations from Cook’s published journals. The result of the union of poetry and note—text and paratext—is an introduction to Seward’s pedagogical and political project presented through scholarly verse. In its narrative of Cook’s often-perilous voyages through the South Seas, his interaction with the native inhabitants, and Britain’s collective mourning of his passive, Seward’s poem relies upon the intersection of three recurring concepts: humanity, culture, and the expansion of knowledge. In addition to their ideological presentation in the verse, these concepts are demonstrated textually through the footnotes that reinforce the advancement of knowledge and the cultural betterment of all of humanity.
To illustrate this intersection, we need look no further than the poem’s first footnote. Initially, this note appears to provide a simply gloss of a particular species of bird, the peterel (“a bird found in the frozen seas; its neck and tail are white, and its wings of a bright blue” [6n]). This sort of botanical classification and objective description is commonplace in Seward’s work; however, what is important here is the poetic context building up to the annotation. In the lines of the poem leading up to the call-out of the footnote, Seward praises Cook’s unflagging resolve to sail through “the scorch’d Equator, and th’ Antarctic wave” (26). She heralds him as “the new Columbus” (58), with the sky above the valiant explorer personified as the Goddess of Hope; it is around the head of this Goddess that “the plumy *Peterels soar” (59). The attention to a global scale coupled with the particularity of the footnote of “*Peterels” suggests that Seward’s notion of Cook’s exploration is to expand knowledge—to build epistemology, not just empire. Such level of attention to detail runs throughout Seward’s Elegy: nearly one-third of her notes provide botanical information, describing “leaves of new forms, and flow’rs” (138), “Thin folds of *vegetable silk” (139), and “Strange sweets… / And fruits unnam’d” (141-42), as well as the animal species, which tread “in youthful beauty’s pride” (143): “a playful *Kangaroo” (144), “beauteous *Pois” (145), and “**A Giant-bat” (147), which Seward claims measures “three feet and an half in breadth, when their wings were extended” (12n). This attention to scientific specificity and empirical evidence demonstrates Margaret Anne Doody’s assessment of eighteenth-century women’s poetry as combining “the scientific interests of the period with its poetic interests” (24). More specifically for Seward, I argue, is that this combination of poetic description and prose classification also demonstrates her attempt to make familiar that which would be unknown to Seward’s English readership—to expand readers’ knowledge base by illustrating Britain’s imperial expansion.

Seward aligns her poetic project of knowledge expansion with Cook’s voyages of imperial expansion by drawing upon the perceived common thread of the cultural betterment of all humanity. She asks, “What Pow’r inspired [Cook’s] dauntless breast to brave / The scorch’d Equator, and th’ Antarctic wave?” The answer, as she exclaims in all capitals in the first edition, was HUMANITY! (31, 41); she revises this claim to “benevolence” in subsequent editions. She reiterates this notion of humanity and benevolence, exclaimed and capitalized, twice more throughout the poem, paired with a language of destiny, union, and cultural betterment (31-41). Moreover, this notion of cultural betterment appears in Seward’s poem through the thrice-repeated use of the word “uncultur’d”: uncultured shores (102), flowers (138), and youth (169). These uses of “uncultur’d” are invariably accompanied by footnotes, providing the relevant cultural, historical, or botanical information and thereby textually demonstrating Seward’s poetic project of cultural education and the expansion of knowledge.

Cook had sailed to the “smiling Eden of the southern wave” (173), the “Gay Eden of the south” (193), with the intent of building Britain’s imperial and epistemological expanses: to “Teach Wisdom’s lore, and point the path of Truth” (170). But he died in the midst of completing this project. Anna Seward, it would seem, took up the task of expanding knowledge by advancing the literary form of the scholarly lyric, grounded in her *Elegy on Captain Cook*.

**Helen Maria Williams’ philanthropic imperialism**
Arguably best known today for her writings as an eyewitness of the French Revolution (her 1790 historiographical travel narrative, *Letters Written in France*), Helen Maria Williams (1759-1827) represents another woman writer actively engaged in incorporating geo-political and natural-historical discourse into the paratextual frames of her works. Seward and Williams were acquaintances, thus it might not surprise us to find numerous literary historical and material resonances between their politically charged and heavily footnoted poems. Like Seward’s poetic premier, *Peru* (1784) was the first poem published under Williams’ name; like the critically eschewed notes in Seward’s *Elegy on Captain Cook*, the notes in Williams’ *Peru* are also overlooked in reviews of this work. And, although she was less of an active annotator than her contemporary Seward, Williams’ engagement with scholarly discourse, particularly in *Peru*, is notable for its demonstration of her political and didactic approach to her role as woman writer, wedding the role of poet with scholar through annotation. Moreover, the common alignment of Williams with discourse of sentiment and revolution implores us to read Williams’ marginal commentary in order to bring nuance to how we read Williams’ political leanings.

In its six cantos, *Peru* presents a series of loosely related narrative episodes set in the sixteenth century, including a tragic romance between the native Pervians Ataliba and Zorai and the brutal conquest of Francisco Pizarro. The backdrop for these narratives is a series of sweeping poetic panoramas of an Edenic Peruvian cultural and ecological landscape and its loss of innocence following the conquistador’s invasion. The fluid verse of the panoramas and romances are routinely interrupted with twelve lengthy footnotes containing botanical, anthropological, and historiographical information. These prose notes complement Williams’ politically charged reflections, providing editorializing commentary alongside the textbook-like documentations. Like Seward’s pedagogical project seated in her paratexts, Williams’s footnotes not only contextualize the local and particular references within the poem and make the temporally and geographically distant setting tenable for her eighteenth-century British readers; these notes also present the Williams’s project of unsettling readers. With their complementary and contradictory messages of anti-colonialism and cultural betterment, the notes unsettle readers’ sociological assumptions by inviting readers to sympathize with the native Peruvians in analogy with the sympathy readers should feel towards their contemporaries facing injustice and violence.

The tone of pathos in *Peru* is hard to miss. Kennedy writes that much of Williams’ poetry “speak[s] out against the devastating effects of war” and that her poems, particularly *Peru*, provide “a critique of the violence of imperialism” (35). Yet, I suggest further that instead of merely critiquing violent imperialism, Williams advocates for a more sympathetic model of imperialism prompted by a sense of philanthropy, as indicated through a critical excavation of her footnotes. Unlike Seward who advocates for the collection of information and the production of knowledge as the impetus of imperialism, Williams sees this knowledge as the byproduct of imperialism. Moreover, Williams makes her stance on imperialism more evident than Seward: she calls for a philanthropic imperialism. For Williams, imperialism is predicated by the desire to improve rather than to possess the “primitive” landscape while also drawing upon the innate virtues of this primitivism. Through her notes accompanying the verse, Williams makes this stance unmistakable.

Williams opens her poem in the way that Seward closed hers by placing readers in an alter-Eden in the midst of losing its innocence: “There, lost Peruvia! bloom’d thy cultur’d scene, / The still wave, emblem of its bliss serene!” (3-4). She places readers within the peaceful hills and plains
covered with several varieties of trees, flowers, and fruits, and populated with various species of llamas. But, instead of allowing readers to become lost in this idyllic setting, she disrupts the poetic description with classifying and contextualizing annotations. Williams repeats this rhythm of periodically disrupting the idyllic scenes she poetically paints. This rhythm can be seen, for instance, in her descriptions of the charitable civility of the Peruvian natives, where she comments on the line “While in the lap of age* she pour’d the spoils” (1.46), stating that “The people cheerfully assisted in reaping those fields, whose produce was given to old persons, past their labour” (60n)—a charity that is a far cry from the savagery depicted in several contemporary historiographies. We find a similar disruption in the presentation of an other-worldly grandeur of South America through the description of the Andean Condor. The poetic text “Swift from your rocky steeps, ye condors* stray, / Wave your black plumes, and cleave th’ aerial way” (1.161-62), is accompanied with the annotation “*The condor is an inhabitant of the Andes. Its wings, when expanded, are said to be eighteen feet wide” (68n). All beings of the region are majestic—both human and animal—Williams suggests, but their majesty needs to be tempered, defined, and contained through a proper, philanthropic imperial model.

Additionally, we find in Peru an emphasis on the intertwined nature of imperial and epistemological expansion, again echoing the material and ideological construction of Seward’s poetic project. There is a proper form of imperialism, both poems suggest, and it is one that contributes to knowledge—over strength or subjugation—as the means of improving an “uncultured” humanity. More explicitly than Seward, Williams is critical of imperialism based on shear force and the “impious zeal” of the colonists (2.25; revised to “frantic zeal” in the 1786 edition). In the note accompanying the line “*Sudden, while impious zeal each breast inspires” (2.25), Williams presents a direct critique of the force with which the Spanish colonists encountered the native Peruvians, emphasizing the violence of Pizarro’s actions: “eager to seize the rich spoils,” “the destructive effects of the fire-arms,” and “seizing the Inca by the arm, dragg[ing] him to the ground.” In a confusing shift of perspective, she sites her summary of the brutalities from William Robertson’s History of America (1777); Robertson’s narrative, however, casts an unquestionably sympathetic light on Pizarro’s conquest, describing “the incredible hardships to which Pizarro was exposed in…that part of America in its original uncultivated state” (2.362n). Thus, in Peru we see sympathetic engagement with both the colonist and the colonized, ranging from the pathos towards the Peruvians in the poetic text, the attempt at objectivity and rationalization in the note, and the citation of Robertson’s historiography sympathizing with the Spanish.

Building on this range of rhetorical appeals, Williams cites Abbé Raynal’s A Philosophical and Political History (1777) to annotate her description of Peruvian holy days. Her poetic text presents the religious landscape of Peru as “creative” and “majestic”:

She [Virtue] smiles in Mem’ry’s lucid robes array’d,  
O’er thy creative scene* majestic moves,  
And wakes each mild delight thy Fancy loves (6.306-08)

The note accompanying this passage, however, casts a slight shadow over this tranquil scene of “mild delight” when she quotes directly from Raynal’s History to describe the rare but documented occurrences of Spanish colonists being slain during a festival commemorating the death of Atabalipa, sovereign emperor of the Inca Empire:
The Peruvians have solemn days on which they assume their antient dress. Some among them represent a tragedy, the subject of which is the death of Atabalipa. The audience, who begin with shedding tears, are afterwards transported, into a kind of madness. It seldom happens in these festivals, but that some Spaniard is slain—Abbe Raynal’s History. (92n)

Williams omits Raynal’s derisive tone towards the Incas (he characterizes them as having “profound stupidity” and “a listless and universal indifference”) and instead presents a poem sympathetic towards Peruvians’ noble savagery. However, the pathos in the poetry is tempered with a more objective tone in the annotations—a form that itself suggests objectivity—in her attempt to both champion for the humanity of those colonized while still heralding the merits of European imperial (and epistemological) expansion.

As these two examples from Peru illustrate, Williams’s poetic text attempts to provide an alternate approach to imperial history. This revised history representing cultural equality culminates in Williams’s final note—a note that is not a citation, nor a mere gloss on South American ecology, but of a plea for social justice. Williams glosses her poetic expression, “The flag of freedom rears on Chili’s * plain” (3.325), with a statement of hope:

An Indian descended from the Inca’s, has lately obtained several victories over the Spaniards, the gold mines have been for some time shut up, and there is much reason to hope that these injured nations may recover the liberty of which they have been so cruelly deprived. (176n)

The timbre of hope in this note anticipates that of the poem’s closing lines:

Again on soft Pervuia’s fragrant breast
May Beauty blossom, and may Pleasure rest
[...] Bright on some living harp’s immortal frame!
While on the string of exstasy, it pours
Thy future triumphs o’er unnumber’d Shores. (6.345-46, 354-56)

Thus, throughout the poem—from the initial notes classifying the Andean pack animals to this closing remark advocating for the recovered liberty of colonial lands—Williams presents a complex array of attitudes towards objectivity, imperialism, and epistemology.

In Peru, Williams spans the space of the entire page, with a poem spanning the expanse of the globe, to juxtapose sympathy with rationality, poetry with prose, personal reflection and political commentary. When we attend to this juxtaposition, we might realize that for Williams, the political is personal and the margins are at the center of her philanthropic imperial agenda.

**Conclusion**

It is, perhaps, all too simple to dismiss such footnotes as pedantic ornamentation or as merely the hallmarks of an esoteric genre—one censured for “introducing…rather too much of an affectation of science” (Cabinet 41) and for perpetuating the “modern fashion of encumbering a
[text] with a body of notes, swelled by quotations, which nobody reads, and everybody must pay for” (British Review 306). Yet, for women writers like Seward and Williams among dozens of others, the act of including an extensive “body of notes” was not an engagement with a “modern fashion” but an act of exercising authority in the gendered sphere of literary genres. For these writers, the incorporation of footnotes within literary works is more than a marker of historiography, in the tradition of Edward Gibbon or of satire, in the poetic tradition of Alexander Pope. Moreover, the use of the footnote to contain, critique, and classify the information in the central poetic texts showcases these women’s engagement with typically masculine intellectual discourses.

Indeed, with such emphasis on particularity, objectivity, and authority, such poetry could, in fact, be an engaging substitute for a textbook for the fair and gallant reader alike. Not unlike women writers using the form of the novel to engage with historical, political, and scientific discourse, women poets engaged with scholarly verse to impart their own political perspectives in a literary form that would have been acceptable. Lisa Kasmer observes that “by the end of the eighteenth century, history writing’s specialization prohibited women from taking part fully in formal history writing” (7). By the latter decades of the eighteenth century, history and history writing had become separated from the romance forms with which it was associated in literature earlier in the eighteenth century and had taken on what Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob recognize as a “modern form as an organized, disciplined inquiry” (52). This inquiry would have been accessible only by men, because, as Bonnie G. Smith writes, only they “had the time to engage in the activities (archival research, teaching in universities) on which the founding of professional history depended” because women were thought “incapable of reaching the requisite profundities of either history or self-knowledge” (3). Accordingly, in Seward’s Elegy Captain Cook and Williams’ Peru, we see women writers exercising their authority over empirical knowledge, but doing so in a genre that is appropriate for women conducting scholarship.

Such poems and their marginal paratexts represent an important canon of women’s intellectual and imaginative literature. This genre of annotated, scholarly verse, as I have suggested, flourished as a haven for women writers to advance historical, ecological, and political thought in literary arenas that were not reserved for men—and that the genre, with its interplay between verse and note, was perfectly suited to provide a panoramic view of the familiar and the strange, domestic and imperial, Us and Other. Understanding these intersections can allow us to better understand the complexities of female authorship and authority throughout the eighteenth century.

1 Although a few women writers continued working within this form into the nineteenth century (most notably Felicia Dorothea Hemans and Mary Russell Mitford), the scholarly lyric was coopted by male writers working more explicitly within a Romantic milieu, including Walter Scott, Robert Southey, and Byron. Accordingly, most scholarship treats annotated poetry as an esoteric and Romantic genre rather than as one having deep roots and wide acceptance in eighteenth-century women’s writing (see the scholarship of Alex Watson, Jacqueline Labbe, Dahlia Porter, Theresa Kelley, Judith Pascoe, Noah Heringman, and David Simpson).
The annotated volumes consist of Joanna Baillie’s *Poems* (1790) and *Fugitive Verses* (1840), Anne Bannerman’s *Poems* (1800) and *Tales of Superstition* (1802), Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s *Poems* (1773), Mary Barber’s *Apollo’s Edict* (1725), *Poems on Several Occasions* (1734), Jane Brereton’s *Merlin* (1735) and *Poems on Several Occasions* (1744), Elizabeth Carter’s *Poems on Several Occasions* (1762), Mary Chandler’s *A Description of Bath* (1733), Hester Chapone’s *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* (1775), Mary Whateley Darwall’s *Original Poems* (1764) and *Poems on Several Occasions* (1794), Sarah Dixon’s *Poems on Several Occasions* (1740), Anne Finch’s *Miscellanies in Verse* (1713), Mary Jones’s *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* (1750), Lady Catherine Rebecca Manners’ *Poems by Lady Manners* (1793) and *Review of Poetry* (1799), Mary Masters’ *Familiar Letters and Poems* (1755), Amelie Opie’s *Poems* (1803), Clara Reeve’s *Original Poems on Several Occasions* (1769), Mary Scott’s *The Female Advocate* (1774), Anna Seward’s *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780), *Monody on Major Andre* (1781), *Louisa. A Poetical Novel* (1784), *Ode from General Elliott’s Return from Gibraltar* (1787), *Llangollen Vale* (1796), and *Original Sonnets* (1770-99), Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784-99), *The Emigrants* (1793), and *Beachy Head* (1806), Ann Thomas’s *Poems on Various Subjects* (1784), Elizabeth Tollet’s *Poems on Several Occasions* (1724), Eliza Dorothea Tuite’s *Poems by Lady Tuite* (1796), Helen Maria Williams’s *An Ode on the Peace* (1783), *Peru: A Poem* (1784), *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1786), and Ann Yearsley’s *Elegy on Marie Antoinette* (1796), *Stanzas of Woe* (1790), *Poems on Several Occasions* (1785), and *Poems on Various Subjects* (1787).
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