

'Fashionable Connections: Alicia LeFanu and Writing from the Edge'

Dr Anna M. Fitzer

Abstract

This article focuses upon Alicia LeFanu (*fl.* 1809–36), author of several poems, six multi-volume novels, a critical biography of her grandmother, Frances Sheridan, and articles for the *Court Magazine*. Descended from an eminent literary family, and since misremembered as a mere 'petticoat novelist', LeFanu complicates ideas of the centre and the periphery in her writing. I explore how this interest is figured in LeFanu's use of the chapter epigraph, developing work I have undertaken as editor of LeFanu's early novel, *Strathallan* (1816). LeFanu's epigraphs persist across her fiction as a dimension in which she not only reflects upon literary legacies, but also contests the boundaries of her own print culture. Through its consideration of LeFanu, as author and reader, the article further reflects upon the significance of her example for a broader understanding of other women writers 'at the edges and borders of Romanticism', and of their literary networks.

Keywords: Epigraph; LeFanu; *Strathallan*; Sheridan; Women's Writing; Seward

I

“Yes, you can write, that I will allow. Take care how you step out of your province, and attempt to please”.

ALICIA LEFANU, *Strathallan*¹

This article's epigraph is derived from Miss Swanley, a character in Alicia LeFanu's

novel, *Strathallan* (1816). Miss Swanley is an aspiring amateur poet who goes by the name of ‘Sappho’ and who performs poems at literary gatherings held in rural Derbyshire. She has been complimented for her verse by the heiress and wit, Arbella Ferrars, but, in these lines, Sappho articulates the note of caution she discerns in such praise. Sappho is both object and vehicle of LeFanu’s satirical reflections on female literary ambition in *Strathallan*. However, LeFanu’s writing also offers serious reflection upon the limitations of women’s education in the late eighteenth- and early-nineteenth centuries, and, at same time, serves to demystify prejudicial assumptions about the inherent dangers of reading. It is in the context of *Strathallan*’s interest in women’s reading practices, preferences and prerogatives that this article focuses upon the step LeFanu routinely takes beyond the conventional province of her page to work literally at its edges with chapter epigraphs derived from a range of writers both past and contemporary. LeFanu was herself a writer arguably on the edge of things, geographically as well as financially, and has, as yet, remained figuratively on the borders of Romantic-era studies. Her first novel, *Strathallan*, was well-received upon publication of the first edition, and in less than two months LeFanu was working upon revisions to the second, trusting that ‘her absence from London will apologize for any remaining errors’ (523). LeFanu’s concern was a practical one; distance from the centre imposing a constraint upon the time for authoritative correction. However, *Strathallan* is a novel in which being positioned on the edge offers other creative freedoms. In acknowledging the myriad of real-life writers whose legacies are entertained across LeFanu’s pages, this article suggests that epigraphs do not serve as mere elegant ornament, but instead persist in complex negotiation with the reader. Establishing the contexts in which LeFanu’s real and fictional readers might be understood, the article examines her particular use of epigraph, and reflects upon its broader significance to an understanding of the woman writer poised at the edges and borders of Romanticism.

The scope of *Strathallan*'s literal engagement with other writing at its edges, and by way of quotations incorporated throughout, is extensive, and preparation of the first modern edition of the novel identified more than one hundred authors drawn from classical antiquity through to the enlightenment and early nineteenth century. As stated in my introduction to the edition, LeFanu crosses national and international borders and incorporates a range of genres: the novel, short story, oriental tale, ballads, songs, and glees are all encompassed in the embrace of this 'unfriended and unpatronized' author (as LeFanu describes herself in the first edition preface (2)).

The four volumes of *Strathallan* together comprise a total of sixty-eight chapters, each of which incorporates one, and occasionally two epigraphs. The majority of these are derived from literature, with a few exceptions excerpted from published correspondence, as well as from sources historical and philosophical. Of the forty authors represented in chapter epigraphs, four are women writers. Up to half of those forty are English, with French and Italian writers accounting for, in approximately equal number, a quarter of the entries, alongside others from Spain, Scotland, Portugal and Ireland. Nearly all foreign language sources are rendered in the original without translation. Verse is the most typical genre, followed by drama, although extracts from the work of the Italian librettist and poet, Pietro Metastasio, predominate. The title-page epigraph to each volume of *Strathallan* is taken from his opera *Demetrio* – first set in 1731. The work of another Italian – the Renaissance poet Torquato Tasso – is given frequent if marginally less expression than Metastasio, as is that of Shakespeare. Quotations from Milton, Robert Burns, and the perhaps less well-known poet, Luís Vaz de Camoëns, are given in equal number. Translations of his lyric poetry, with remarks and notes by the British diplomat and sixth Viscount Strangford had been published in 1803.

In a sliding scale of frequency, the Italian tragedian Alfieri, the French satiric moralist Jean de la Bruyère, Jonathan Swift, James Thomson, John Langhorne, and the Orientalist William Jones, are all quoted twice. The remaining epigraph authors – approximately seventy per cent of the total – are given a single mention, and range from Petrarch to LeFanu's more immediate contemporaries, Joanna Baillie, Scott and Byron. Typically, LeFanu identifies her authors, if not always specifically the works quoted. A small number are, at present, unattributed, owing to the limits of literary detective work and possibly to the unacknowledged text contributed by LeFanu herself. Sappho's own verse is taken to be the work of the author. To give a fuller sense of LeFanu's inter-textual adventures it is perhaps worth noting that approximately half of the writers represented across chapter epigraphs are referred to again by way of quotation or allusion in the body of the text; their work, along with that of many others, variously substituting for narrative description and integrating into the speech of characters. With the exception of Hannah More, all three female epigraph sources, namely Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Joanna Baillie and Anna Seward, reappear in this way. The extent to which LeFanu's reader was conscious of re-encountering the same writer across the full scope of the page is dependent upon reading behaviours, and the level of temptation to pass over the epigraph. What is certain is that quotation beyond the epigraph incorporated at least twelve other women writers, including LeFanu's grandmother, the novelist and dramatist, Frances Sheridan, other eighteenth-century forbears such as Sarah Fielding, Frances Brooke, Frances Burney, Ann Radcliffe, Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith, Elizabeth Moody and Anna Barbauld, and LeFanu's near contemporaries Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson and the Scottish poet Anne Grant.

Critical studies of inter-textual connections in writing of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have turned upon those questions of heritage, legacy and legitimacy such a constellation of literary stars is bound to inspire. The gothic elements of *Strathallan's*

subplot arguably suggest LeFanu's indebtedness to writers such as Radcliffe who, in addition to Smith, adopted the chapter epigraph. The form was later deployed by LeFanu's contemporary Walter Scott (who is sometimes credited for its inauguration),² though in other ways, LeFanu's use of the page edge registers her affinity with much earlier pioneers of the paratext, such as Henry Fielding, in whose *Tom Jones*, 'an eagerness to explore the limits of [...] narrative possibilities and [...] form', served 'to agitate and perplex and astonish its complacent habituated readers'.³ According to Deidre Lynch, the purpose of quotation in Radcliffe and the Gothic novelists is the advertisement of 'their bibliophilia. Scarcely canonical themselves they are among the period's chief exemplars of canon love'.⁴ Their writing 'self-consciously offers itself to British readers as the site where they may claim their ancestral birthright' (32). It is a reading which significantly develops Gary Kelly's earlier observations which see Radcliffe interpolating verse quotation 'for *effects* of literariness'. This kind of literariness signals her participation 'in the pseudo-genteel amateur *belles lettres* of the miscellany magazines rather than in the literariness of the Romantic poets of the 1790s'. The beneficiaries of the technique 'Radcliffe made her own' were 'the novelists, especially women novelists, of the Romantic period'. Her use of verse epigraphs to each chapter sees the 'prose – one can say the despised prose – of the novel [...] hedged, framed, or marked off with bits of "serious literature", from Shakespeare, Milton, Thomson, and the Sentimental poets'.⁵ By way of contrast, Walter Scott's 'enormously well-stocked mind enabled him to fill his novels with a rich and sophisticated literary allusiveness [...] including a good deal of "world literature"'. Kelly argues that 'the all-encompassing literariness of Scott's novels made the "modern novel" more acceptable to more kinds of readers than ever before' (18). In view of this, the capaciousness of *Strathallan* sees LeFanu as a modern-novel maker of the post-1800 era, rather than as one of those 'women novelists of the Romantic period'. However, the temptation to assimilate her at all into one group, and resist another

implied to be on its periphery, conspires with a prevailing tendency to adopt questionable taxonomies of fiction. In fact, might not the example of a woman writer less well-known, and therefore largely absent from existing discussions of British fiction, help to revise our understanding of such categories and chronological borders?

II

LeFanu's own particular approach to literariness and in turn to epigraph function might be understood in terms of the contexts of her professional development. The Dublin-born LeFanu belonged to a literary family whose members had invariably experienced life at the edge. LeFanu's paternal grandparents had arrived in Ireland as Huguenot refugees in the 1720s. Her maternal grandmother, Frances Sheridan, saw her participation in London's literary circles come to an abrupt end when she was forced to leave under cover of night for France in avoidance of her husband's creditors. She lived in exile until her death at the age of forty-two. LeFanu's mother, Elizabeth Sheridan LeFanu, also published novels in the early nineteenth century, though she too has been rather edged out of a family portrait which foregrounds, in the minds of most, her brother (and, hence, LeFanu's uncle), the playwright and politician, Richard Brinsley Sheridan. LeFanu would re-inscribe her familial connections in *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mrs Frances Sheridan* (1824), in which she also vindicated the reputation of her uncle, who died the year *Strathallan* went to print. LeFanu's formative years were spent in Bath, a centre of fashion which had the more practical advantage of being the only comfortable destination her mother could afford. LeFanu revised *Strathallan* while staying near Portsmouth and, at the age of twenty-four, had changed direction from the volumes of poetry she had published in the previous decade to engage in a 'more nakedly commercial operation'.⁶

As a first-novel romance *Strathallan* inoffensively and sincerely traces the slow burn of attraction between the eponymous hero and Matilda, and the language of their love is encoded in a mutual appreciation of poetry and novels. But there is a complex intelligence to LeFanu's mode of story-telling which sees the motivations and situations of other 'minor' characters executed with exceptional wit. *Strathallan* is a very funny novel which defies any realist tendencies already discountenanced by the epigraph with some character names modelled precisely upon those Restoration comic traditions to which her uncle's plays owed an obvious debt. Sophia Mountain is, for instance, the stately cousin of Strathallan to whom he has been betrothed from infancy in a bid to rectify an earlier misappropriation of maternal inheritance. The very 'personification of Hyperbole' (51), Sophia is an avid reader raised upon an unsupervised diet of French romances and Spenserian chivalry, which she supplements in later life with a cocktail of gothic literature. The consequence is a blurring of boundaries. Sophia expects from real life 'the general gallantry and deference' afforded the heroines of fiction (53), and is in turn exploited by the mercenary Miss Hautenville.

Hautenville's literary pretensions are all surface, but impressive enough to dupe Sophia, whose financial assets exceed her intellectual wealth. Sophia and Hautenville are regulars at the salons hosted by Strathallan's stepmother, Lady Torrendale, along with the star-turn, Sappho, and Matilda, who otherwise lives in relative seclusion with her parents a few miles beyond the estate. Heir to his father's Scottish seat, Strathallan is a Peninsular war hero whose initial absence from home allows Lady Torrendale to advance the claims of her son, Fitzroy, to the family money. As such, her interest in Matilda is double-edged: she genuinely delights in her as a clever if rustic curiosity and ornament for her parties while realising that Matilda's beauty might tempt Strathallan to break off his engagement, disappoint his father and forfeit his ancestral rights. Strathallan does fall for Matilda but she respects Sophia's prior claim and is at the same time herself subject to threats of Gothic-

inspired violence from her own besotted cousin, to whom she forcibly swears allegiance. However, the lovers' hopes are derailed but temporarily, and the only casualties are Sophia, and Hautenville who is left the lonely chatelaine of a castle of the real, rather than (to borrow LeFanu's phrase) air-built variety.

In some respects, we might trace in *Strathallan* the influence of Hannah More's popular *Strictures on a Modern System of Female Education* (1791) which endured for a generation of young readers. In a chapter on 'Female Study', More focussed her strident conservatism on the dangers of 'frivolous reading'. 'Sentimental books', as opposed to the 'dry and uninteresting studies' of which 'the rudimentary parts of learning *must* consist', set the feelings 'a going' and, when derived from a circulating library, render any burgeoning signs of genuine female talent 'worthless and vapid'.⁷ Co-conspirators in this process were the compilers of the 'swarms of *Abridgements, Beauties, and Compendiums*' in which

a few fine passages from the poets [...] are huddled together by some extract-maker, whose brief and disconnected patches of broken and discordant materials, while they inflame young readers with the vanity of reciting, neither fill the mind nor form the taste: and it is not difficult to trace back to their shallow sources the hackney'd quotations of certain *accomplished* young ladies, who will be frequently found not to have come legitimately by anything they know. (160–1)

Strathallan's character, Miss Hautenville does have 'an appropriate and distinguishing epithet always ready' (46), but is so pernicious a realisation of More's worst fears as to make it likely that LeFanu is parodying the distortions of More's mind rather than conspiring in her vision of corrupted youth. When denied the opportunity to showcase such talents at Torrendale's salon, Hautenville undergoes a metamorphosis into the instrument least likely to

excite her interest: ‘she sat the picture of malice and discontent, till her features, naturally sharp, absolutely assumed the sharpness of a well-mended pen’ (44).

Of course conservative and radical moralists alike were advocating an improved education for young women, and LeFanu’s Sophia Mountain again, arguably exemplifies the consequences of its neglect. Left to her own devices, Sophia selects Matthew Lewis, Gottfried August Bürger, Robert Southey, Walpole, Radcliffe, Scott, Mary Robinson, and Charles Maturin, all of whom she recites to her female audience in vivid evocation of *Tales of Wonder* (1802), James Gillray’s graphic satire on the vogue for such texts and its consumers. Her judgment is untrained, but, ultimately, it is not inappropriate books which lead to her fall. That, she manages quite literally and fatally, from a horse. This is perhaps a relatively unsophisticated means of dispatching a character obstructive to the hero’s happiness, and, in her Preface to the novel, LeFanu has duly apprised her reader of potential ‘errors of inexperience’ (3). On the other hand, it is a conceit which befits a character written, with some affection, in caricature.

Strathallan’s complicated response to the proposal that ‘reading must not only be confined to good books but must be concealed, compliant, and devoted to an ideology of service’ is perhaps clarified in LeFanu’s later fiction.⁸ More had advanced such arguments in *Cælebs in Search of a Wife*, her one and only novel which, upon first anonymous publication in 1808, reaped commercial reward. *Cælebs* ran to fourteen editions between 1808 and 1826⁹ and a few months before *Strathallan* went on sale, More ‘estimated that *Strictures*, *Cælebs* and *Practical Piety* had netted her £6 000’.¹⁰ Other novelists were moved to emulate the eponymous wife’s lack of ‘ambition to shine’,¹¹ which exasperated at least one reviewer in the *British Lady’s Magazine*: ‘Passionless themselves’ this ‘new school of heroines’ ‘made it their business to exercise the passions of everyone else’.¹²

LeFanu reflects upon *Cælebs* in 'Fashionable Connexions', published in 1823 as part of *Tales of a Tourist*. The story is set in 'Cumberland' where Mrs Sanderson sallies forth from the milliner with her train of daughters to the 'libery'.¹³ Despite much insistence on her part that the establishment is distinctly and emphatically 'not a circulating library!' (iii, 152), this provincial book-society hosts a shabby and much-depleted assortment of titles purchased through subscription, and reflects the idiosyncratic tastes of its members. On a mission to borrow a book recommended by her daughter, Jenny, Mrs Sanderson declares a love for reading as 'such a gentlewomenlike employment' and, turning to Jenny, asks "'what was the name of the book, love? Oh! Now I recollect, it was *Cyclops in Search of a Wife*'" (151). The milliner, a one-time smuggler from Jersey passing herself off as a Parisian couturier, should not by rights even realise this mistake. But she does, along with Tom Birkit, a disappointed author turned lawyer, for whom *Cælebs* is 'a work, which, with the sour-visaged rigour of Puritanism, condemns our heaven-given taste for the cultivation of the liberal arts' (155).

LeFanu's joke at the expense of *Cælebs* is complex. On the one hand, she comically endorses More's sober opinion on superficial learning, ignorance and female imposture. But on the other, she is questioning the relationship between literary quality and its provenance. *Cælebs*, a 'parodic riposte' to *Corinne, or Italy* (1807), Germaine de Staël's 'mockery of Englishwomen's frigid conventionality and repression',¹⁴ in turn invited derisory imitations and *Cælebs* was, alongside these interpretations, available to borrow from the very libraries More's readers were instructed to avoid.¹⁵ Mrs Sanderson's book-borrowing activity highlights the futility of efforts to regulate a text's moral message and to achieve its implied readership. At the centre of LeFanu's later fiction, then, is a more explicit criticism of those dominant ideological assumptions about female delicacy, and the effects of reading which are incipient in *Strathallan*'s ambivalent portraits of the 'reading lady'. In a return to *Strathallan* I suggest that an associated questioning of the limits imposed upon women's reading choices

can be traced across the sources which make for the inclusive and varied library drawn along its edge.

III

LeFanu's conspicuous inscription of advice to daughters is evident in epigraphs drawn from Milton and Thomson, and inter-textual references to Thomas Gray, James Beattie and William Cowper. All were recommended in Thomas Gisborne's *Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797), as writers whose work in general 'elevates the heart with the ardour of devotion [...], adds energy and grace to the precepts of morality' and 'kindles benevolence by pathetic narrative reflection'. Extracts should be memorised, though 'for the sake of private improvement' rather than 'for the purpose of ostentatiously quoting them in mixed company'.¹⁶ LeFanu read Cowper from an early age, Beattie is the author of her heroine Matilda's 'poor favourite Edwin' (265) in *The Minstrel* (1771; 1774), and Strathallan declares William Collins's *Ode to the Passions* (1746) 'one of the touch stones of true taste' (106). However, the significance of the epigraph taken from Milton's *Paradise Regained* to the chapter introducing Miss Mountain, perhaps resides as much in its emphasis upon the approach to reading as it does in the selection of what is read:

– Many books
(Wise men have said,) are wearisome; who reads
Incessantly, and to his reading brings
Not spirit and judgment, equal or superior,
Uncertain and unsettled still remains:
Deep versed in books, and shallow in himself;
Crude or intoxicate, collecting toys

And trifles, for choice matter. (51)

Conduct book literature had defined a young lady's 'judgment' as that 'delicate and quick sense of propriety' essential to the desired state of 'perfect politeness',¹⁷ and yet, as Milton's Eve would seem to prove, this judgment cannot be properly exercised without a fuller, perhaps transgressive experience. In the epigraph, situated as it is beyond the main body of chapter content, can be read an advocacy of reading 'many' books in addition to the few prescribed by educationalists in the interests of conservative principles and prejudicial attitudes toward female capabilities. LeFanu's female readers may have been rehearsed in the kind of superficial knowledge afforded the Bertram girls in Austen's *Mansfield Park*; learning by rote the kings and queens, 'the Roman emperors as low as Severus; besides a great deal of Heathen Mythology, and all the Metals, Semi-Metals, Planets, and distinguished philosophers'.¹⁸ In *Strathallan*, they are invited to explore through epigraph the range of what might be construed as choice *and* trifling matter. The reader is encouraged to encounter at their will the familiar and the new at the edges of the novel, while remaining at liberty to find instructive examples of the integrity of female conduct and understanding by way of the contrasting fictional female (and male) readers who occupy its centre.

Strathallan incorporates writers least expected to adorn a respectable lady's bookshelf, including Rousseau and Goethe. The inclusion of Byron's *Giaour* in epigraph invokes the wretchedness Matilda feels at losing Strathallan to Sophia, while the fact of his eventual return to her with a 'heart unhushed, although his lips were mute' (455), is supplied with a line from the *Corsair*. The temptation to parade a standard line-up of approved eighteenth-century classics is further resisted by inclusion of those written out of that period's literary legacy. John Langhorne, the 'charming and disreputable' chief contributor to the *Monthly Review*, had edited the poems of *Strathallan* regular William Collins (1765),

translated *Plutarch's Lives* (1770) and generally 'enjoyed the company of clever women' (Stott, 19). Lines quoted in epigraph from his *Owen of Carron* (1778) affectingly resonate with Matilda's grief at the death of her father, though belie the derision with which the disappointingly 'studied obscurity' of this ballad was greeted upon its publication. Written by a poet 'well known to have once had a pretty namby-pamby kind of genius for this style of writing', the *London Review* could not 'recommend it, with a due regard for our own credit, to any reader of real judgment and true taste for poetry'.¹⁹ In respect of such range, *Strathallan* is a text significant to Rainier Grutman's conceptualisation of 'mottomania' as 'a case study for the analysis of [the] processes of re-canonization' occurring in the wake of Romanticism's emphasis upon 'discontinuity and rupture, or breaches and breakthroughs.'²⁰

Grutman's argument that for some, 'weaving a web of intertextual references' encouraged a concomitant 'social network' of writers 'who met in the literary salons of the day' (285), applies to LeFanu at least on an abstract level; her work was in circulation with that of virtual writers invited to her pages, and connecting with that of her contemporaries. But the epigraph also serves a range of other functions, some of which might further shape reading practices. There are many instances of direct correspondences of epigraph and chapter action or theme in *Strathallan*, though there are variations. Sometimes LeFanu exploits a straightforward contradiction through epigraph; unattributed lines musing on the importance of simplicity, for instance, open a chapter in which nearly every character is duplicitous or at least self-deluded. Conversely, the recurrence of the same epigraph author in the service of particular characters in the novel fashions in its readers the sense of a reliable connection. A chapter epigraph derived from Metastasio or Tasso often typically heralds the return of the martial hero Strathallan to its pages, or at least further contemplation of the nobility and valour of his love for Matilda. However, readers should beware overly trusting to any conspiracy of understanding this seems to forge with a novel writer who also

appropriates the elevated sentiments of recognised sources for the purposes of ironical reflection upon characters for whom the association is less obviously fitting. This more particular though pervasive interest in the inherent tension between the epigraph source and its apparent object is evidenced in *Strathallan*'s first chapter. Rendered in the original Italian, lines from Alfieri's tragedy *Saul* propose that it is better to die than to pass a savage's life in solitude, where you are dear to nobody and you care about no-one. Alfieri is Strathallan's 'favourite Italian poet' (141), and a writer from whom Romantic culture arguably 'co-opted a sense of Titanist individualism intolerant of social conventions and political proscriptions'.²¹ However, the epigraph refers to the petulant resistance of an indolent minor aristocrat to the charms of rural seclusion: Lady Torrendale, a one-time 'reigning beauty of Bath' startled by the incongruity of real country life and 'the fine description given in novels, of rural innocence and sensibility' (3). LeFanu flatters the reader fluent in European languages to explore the joke, and extends an opportunity to those who are not to move beyond the boundaries of their immediate reading experience in search of the narratives by which it is intelligently and entertainingly informed.

Other textual encounters are complicated by bathos, and occasionally, scandal. The shift from the dynastic rivalries of Shakespearian kings heralded at the top of the page and the domestic entanglements of the Derbyshire families below rebalances perspectives. Alternatively, an intriguing epigraph from *The Winter's Tale*, in a chapter focussing on Matilda's gloomily reclusive cousin Harold, foreshadows the later transformation to the living of his mother whom his abusive father had incarcerated, then given out for dead. It is eventually revealed that Harold had rescued his mother, but kept her sequestered in the grounds of his estate. If missing a 'key' such as this re-doubles the reader's efforts to identify when an epigraph is poised to unlock the novel's undisclosed secrets, a different kind of reward is sometimes there for readers conversant with the broader context of selected lines.

Chapter XV's epigraphical observation on 'true filial love' (272), for instance, is directly acknowledged by the narrator as pertinent to the good, strong friendship between Matilda and her mother, but the familial ties of the politician Thomas Hervey, from whom the fuller quotation is derived, were strained by the fact of his having eloped with his godfather's wife. Their affair was notoriously publicised in LeFanu's source, a pamphlet Hervey published in 1741 and which he prefaced with an apology for the incidence throughout of quotation. Some of LeFanu's contemporary readers were likely unaware of the epigraph's scurrilous origin, though those determined to follow her lead might infer from it LeFanu's recognition of the flaws and compromises which beset most family histories, not least of all her own.

IV

Nineteenth-century print versions of 'A Portrait', a manuscript poem R.B. Sheridan dedicated to his mistress, Frances Crewe, include his apparent reference to the salonnière Lady Anna Miller who, in the 1770s, held winter-season breakfast assemblies at her villa at Batheaston, near Bath. Her perceived efforts to emulate the London Bluestocking hostesses was very publicly trivialised by the press of her day, and by others considered as a particular affront to the intellectual prerogatives of a privileged class. For Horace Walpole, who was equally contemptuous of Miller's earlier *Letters Written from Italy* (1776), 'the heinous fault lay in the presumption [...] to literary reputation'.²² Miller had inherited her wealth from eminent Irish ancestors, and adopted the courtesy title of Lady when her husband, a retired army captain turned philanthropist, was created Baronet of Ireland. Like Walpole, Frances Burney appeared more concerned with the provenance of the hostess, than with the integrity of the verse her salon encouraged: 'Lady Miller is a round plump, coarse looking dame of about forty, and while all her aim is to appear an elegant woman of fashion, all her success is

to seem an ordinary woman in very common life, with fine clothes on [...] her air is mock-important; and her manners very inelegant' (6).

Miller aimed at Bath's fashionable connections with poetry contests inspired by the French practice, *bouts-rimés*, in which participants composed a six-line verse in accordance with a pre-supplied sequence of rhymes. Though the rules were later relaxed to include poems written upon designated subjects, entries were placed in a Roman urn – an ostentatious centrepiece the Millers acquired on their continental tour – and the judged winners were bestowed with a myrtle wreath. The questionable quality of hastily-written verses restricted by the demands of the form inevitably invited criticism, if not unwarranted condescension. However, for the-then unpublished Anna Seward, who became a regular participant, Miller's parties provided an opportunity to 'perform and receive sociable critical feedback, and signify as a valuable part of the continuum spanning from manuscript circulation to print'.²³

Seward, 'the Swan of Lichfield', died in 1809 when LeFanu, aged seventeen, made her literary debut with *The Flowers; or, the Sylphid Queen: A Fairy Tale. In Verse. Strathallan*, I argue, develops a connection to Seward which traverses the page edge – where she is rendered in epigraph – to serve the debates entertained at its centre about women's literary engagement. Seward was born in Derbyshire, though earned her appellation having lived for most of her life, as the daughter of the canon of Lichfield, in the bishop's palace in the grounds of the cathedral. Versed from a young age in Shakespeare, Milton and Pope, she was encouraged to write poetry by the physician and natural philosopher, Erasmus Darwin, whose *Memoirs* she completed in 1804. Like her patron, Miller, Seward presided over a literary coterie during the 1770s, her visitors to Lichfield including Robert Southey and a young Scott, though it was not until the next decade that she began publishing poems, and *Louisa: a Poetical Novel in Four Epistles* (1784). Seward appointed Scott as her literary executor, but while he published three volumes of selected poetry with a biographical preface

in 1810, he described much of it ‘as absolutely execrable’ in a letter to Joanna Baillie that year.²⁴

Seward is explicitly encountered in *Strathallan* in epigraph, when her *Monody on Major André* (1781) opens the chapter in which Strathallan is rejected by Matilda and precipitately joins the field of war at a time ‘extremely disadvantageous to him’ (iv, 458). John André’s fatal decision to pursue a military career had been directly connected in some circles to his own disappointment in love when his fiancée (and Seward’s close friend, Honora Sneyd) left him for another man. However, an earlier specific and more central allusion to Seward is given by the narrator, with reference to the fictional amateur poet, Miss Swanley, more often referred to as Sappho:

Of Sappho, it was not easy, immediately, to form any decided opinion. That numerous body to whom Miss Seward has so happily given the appellation of the Proserps, would have determined the question in one word, by saying, Miss Swanley was ‘not like other people:’ but, as this charge, besides being too vague and general, has the added disadvantage, that it may be applied, for different reasons, to several very different objects; such as the Venus de Medicis, a modern Esquimaux, or an ancient Pigmy; it may not be unnecessary, in order properly to appreciate her character, which was an energetic and singular one, to be, at some future time, somewhat more detailed and particular (126).

This is perhaps a wilfully literal interpretation of Seward’s opinions on those ‘who have no taste for poetry’, as expressed in correspondence Scott published in *Poetical Works*:

It is not the rhymes or measures of poetry which are either unintelligible or disgusting to the tribe of the prosers; but it is the imagery, whose strength and grace they can no more perceive than they can discern the beauty of Raphael's, or the force of Michael Angelo's figures. It is the resemblance between objects, which, when shadowed forth in metaphor, they cannot not trace.²⁵

Seward did not rebut prose writers or readers *per se* – 'no poetry is more lavish in the use of imagery than the prose of Samuel Johnson' – but distinguishes those whose 'pens always remain in the higher latitudes of abstract ideas, of ornamented and figurative language. The comprehension of the prosers have neither respiration, nor inspiration on these mental heights' (lxxv).²⁶

The narrator's step to one side of Seward and Sappho, reminds us of LeFanu's affinities with the experimental comic prose novelists of the eighteenth century whose disruption of narrative conventions pre-figures post-modern tendencies. But in the textual proximity of the 'Swan of Lichfield' and Miss Swanley, managed by a writer who is, throughout *Strathallan*, urging the reader to test and to expand the perceived limits of their comprehension as they trace meanings 'shadowed forth' in epigraph, there is a connection for them to explore between the real-salon poet and her fictional counterpart. The resemblance maybe points to the preciousness of Seward, and the faintly absurd affectations of Sappho who, having been told 'she resembled the best descriptions of her illustrious namesake, adopted a good deal of the costume she is usually represented to have worn, in order to favour the illusion' (223). However, the fact that 'Sappho' was also the name Seward gave to her pet dog (with or without irony), is a minor distraction from the significance of LeFanu's fictional Sappho as a

mostly sympathetic study of the kind of female literary ambition Seward was more successfully negotiating from the edge.

Sappho, ‘the sober daughter of a country clergyman’ (156), practises her craft, as did Seward, in the poetic contests which routinely take place at the provincial literary salon where she is its most gifted and celebrated contributor. Seward apostrophised Anna Miller as ‘Laura’ in her verse tributes, and the latter’s Bath ‘Parnassus’ is figured in Lady Laura Torrendale’s *Caverna d’Aurora*, a name casually borrowed from Tasso, and the Derbyshire setting for Sappho’s passionate recitations of Collins, and her own verse. Miller was likely an inspiration for LeFanu’s fictional and provincial ‘Blue’, Torrendale, in part because of the self-serving aspect of the enterprise. Miller evidently took pleasure in verses written in her honour, and Torrendale desires to rival the salons of the neighbouring Lady Lyndhurst whom, it turns out, is ‘the dupe of flattering dedicators and necessitous poets’ (4, 486). Lyndhurst is eventually bankrupted by her generosity. But, in spite of her flaws, Miller seems to have provided an environment conducive to developing Seward’s confidence as a poet, whatever posterity’s verdict on its merits. It is possible that *Monody on Major André* was written for Batheaston and Seward’s work was included amongst the 235 poems in *Poetical Amusements at a Villa near Bath*. Published in support of her husband’s charitable causes, three volumes appeared under Miller’s anonymous editorship between 1775–7, with a fourth in 1781.

Sappho is confident in her own merits, intuitive and essentially, to adapt Burney’s phrase, an ‘ordinary woman’ for whom the provincial salon, though rendered through satire, offers a competitive environment geographically and socially within her reach. LeFanu did not have a lot of time for literary pretenders, as is clear from her later journalism, and in *Strathallan*’s portrait of the poet and plagiarist Mr ‘Alcæus’ Spring, with whom the witty and more talented Sappho regularly engages in verbal skirmishes. Ultimately, it is not the salon

which prevents Sappho from enjoying celebrity beyond its edges, but her own inability to conform to the standards required of the proper woman writer:

Believing every mind pure and ingenuous as her own, repeated disappointments had not taught her that necessary lesson of caution and reserve, which alone could make her uncommon endowments ensure respect to herself, or advantage to others. As it was, those distinguished talents were only (to borrow Madamé de Staël's forcible expression) *d'une noble inutilité* – or served at most to enliven the social circle, or to contribute to the acquisition of an ephemeral literary reputation (158).

As it turns out, Strathallan's own fate is not presaged by LeFanu's epigraphical reference to Seward's *Monody*, as any reader familiar with – or motivated to read – the fuller version of André's demise might readily expect. Strathallan defies death because he is 'not like' André who, in all likelihood, did not enact the connection favoured by gossips between a spurned lover and the call of the battlefield, and who died at the hands of the executioner on a discredited charge of espionage. The epigraph confounds its perceived limits and the reader acquires a further lesson in exercising judgment. *Strathallan's* concluding chapter has two epigraphs; one derived from the reputable Thomson, the other from the less-well known Thomas Tickell: a Sheridan connection positioned on the outer branches of the family tree. Tickell's lines celebrate the rural bliss in which *Strathallan's* Matilda, and good friend Arbella, are left to reside, while implicitly questioning if a life lived in shade is such a waste. LeFanu continued to live by her writing in the spa town of Leamington, and in Birmingham, to the north of which by some twenty miles is Seward's (and Johnson's and Darwin's) Lichfield. LeFanu has been a writer in the shade who complicates her reader's perception of writing on the edge, but might be reconsidered as one who, like Seward, has the potential to

challenge conceptions as to where the edges of cultural centres and literary movements might
be drawn.

¹ Alicia LeFanu, *Strathallan*, ed. Anna M. Fitzer (London, 2008), 158. All subsequent references are to this edition.

² For a discussion of Scott's usage see Dieter A. Berger, "'Damn the Mottoe": Scott and Epigraph', *Anglia*, 100, (1982) 373–96.

³ Ian A. Bell, *Henry Fielding: Authorship and Authority* (London and New York, 1994), 169.

⁴ Deidre Lynch, 'Gothic Libraries and National Subjects', *Studies in Romanticism*, 40.1 (Spring 2001), 29–48, 31.

⁵ Gary Kelly, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789–1830* (London and New York, 1989), 54.

⁶ E. J. Clery, Caroline Franklin, Peter Garside, 'Introduction', in *Authorship, Commerce and the Public: Scenes of Writing, 1750–1850* (Basingstoke, 2002), 1–26, 7.

⁷ Hannah More, *Strictures on a Modern System of Female Education*, 2 vols (London, 1799), i, 157–160.

⁸ Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain 1750–1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge, 1999), 91–2.

⁹ William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2007), 621–2.

¹⁰ Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford, 2003), 305.

¹¹ Hannah More, *Cælebs in Search of a Wife*, 2 vols (London, 1809), i, 186.

¹² *British Lady's Monthly Magazine, and Monthly Miscellany*, 4:24 (Dec. 1816), 387–91, 388.

¹³ Alicia LeFanu, *Tales of a Tourist. Containing The Outlaw, and Fashionable Connexions*. 4 vols (London: 1823), iii, 151.

¹⁴ Caroline Franklin, *The Female Romantics: Nineteenth-Century Women Novelists and Byronism* (London, 2013), 25.

¹⁵ *Cælibia Choosing a Husband; a modern novel, in two volumes. By R. Torrens Esq. and Cælebs in Search of a Mistress. A Novel, in two volumes* appeared in 1809 and 1810. For library records see P. D. Garside, J. E. Belanger, and S. A. Ragaz, *British Fiction, 1800–1829: A Database of Production, Circulation & Reception*, designer A. A. Mandal <<http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk>> 1808A081.

¹⁶ Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, 5th edn (London, 1801), 231.

¹⁷ Hester Chapone, *Letters for the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed a Young Lady*, 2 vols (London: Printed by H. Hugh, for J. Walter, 1773), i, 96.

¹⁸ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (London, 2003), 19.

¹⁹ W. Kenrick and others, *The London Review of English and Foreign Literature*, vol. 7 (London, 1778), 102–7, 102–104.

²⁰ Rainier Grutman, ‘Quoting Europe: Mottomania in the Romantic Age’, in *Time Refigured: Myths, Foundation Texts and Imagined Communities* (Prague, 2005), 281–95, 284–5.

²¹ Piero Garofalo, ‘Italian Poetics in a Romantic Context’, in *A Companion to European Romanticism* (Oxford, 2005), 238–55, 240.

²² Ruth Aveline Hesselgrave, *Lady Miller and the Batheaston Literary Circle* (New Haven, 1907), 6. The ensuing description of Batheaston activities is indebted to this source.

²³ Claudia Thomas Kairoff, *Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth-Century* (Baltimore, Md. 2012), 40.

²⁴ Quoted in Kairoff, 9.

²⁵ W. Scott (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward. With Extracts from her Literary Correspondence*, 3 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1810), i, lxxiv.

²⁶ Further elaboration of ‘proser’ is given in the next chapter. Arbella finds herself the subject of a satirical novel in circulation, written by Alcæus, sanctioned by Torrendale, and

cruelly annotated. When Matilda counsels restraint, Arbella concedes on account of not wishing to give 'triumph to the prozers' (143) who, jealous on account of their exclusion from Torrendale's salon, would delight in its fracture.