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Resurrecting the Anonymous: An Introduction To Mary Steele, the Author of Danebury and The Power of Friendship, A Tale with Two Odes by a Young Lady

Amanda J. Holmes

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RESURRECTING THE ANONYMOUS: AN INTRODUCTION TO MARY STEELE,  
THE AUTHOR OF *DANEbury AND THE POWER OF FRIENDSHIP, A TALE WITH  
TWO ODES* BY A “YOUNG LADY”

by

AMANDA HOLMES

(Under the Direction of Timothy Whelan)

ABSTRACT

Published anonymously in 1779 *Danebury, or the Power of Friendship, a Tale with Two Odes*, has retained its anonymity for over two centuries. Evidence found in the Reeves and Steele Collections housed at Angus Library; Regent’s Park College, Oxford identifies the author as Mary Steele, a provincial young woman with a Nonconformist background who was an active participant in a literary coterie that included other published authors such as Mary Scott, Anne Steele, and Hannah More. Drawing upon the work of Marjorie Reeves as well as the original manuscripts contained in the Reeves and Steele collections, this thesis provides the first in depth discussion of Mary Steele’s published work and the role her literary circle of friends and acquaintances and her Nonconformist background played in shaping her poetry.

INDEX WORDS: 18<sup>th</sup>-century poetry, 18<sup>th</sup>-century women, Nonconformity, Friendship poetry, Retirement poetry, Poetry about the American Revolution, 18<sup>th</sup>-century manuscripts and letters, Danebury Hill, Mary Steele, Anne Steele, Mary Scott, Reeves Collection, Steele Collection, Literary circles

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by

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## A NOTE ON THE USE OF MANUSCRIPTS IN THE THESIS

In my thesis, I have used portions of transcriptions from poems and letters taken from the Steele Collection and the Reeves Collection, Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford. In these transcriptions, I have tried to adhere as closely as possible to the original manuscripts. Archaic and unusual spellings, variations in spellings of the same word or name, and typical eighteenth-century capitalization of nouns have not been changed. Occasionally, the “e” in words that end in “ed” has been left out; in some cases, the deletion is noted with an apostrophe, but in several instances the letters have simply been joined together. In what was a common eighteenth-century practice, on occasions a “y” is used in place of “th” and generally accompanied by a superscript letter that completes the word (for example, “ye” for “the”). It should also be noted that many sentences in the letters have no closing punctuation, and normal punctuation patterns are often missing altogether in these letters and poems.

CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

Silently entombed in family archives, tucked away in attics, anonymously encased in age-old bindings, and waiting patiently under a century or more of dust, are the still silent voices of an all but forgotten literary past, a past which scholars and historians have made great strides in unearthing over the last several decades, but one that nevertheless has yet to be fully resurrected. A piece of this past has recently been uncovered at Oxford. The Steele Collection was acquired by Regent's Park College's Angus Library after the death of Hugh Steele-Smith. Dr. Marjorie Reeves outlines much of the collection and its significance to English Nonconformist culture in her book *Pursuing the Muses: Female Education and Nonconformist Culture 1700-1900*, 1997. This collection of archival material is particularly valuable in reconstructing the distinct literary and cultural history of the late eighteenth century because the manuscripts are primarily written by Nonconformist women—one of whom was known (Anne Steele) and one unknown (Mary Steele), though both were published authors. It is the last of the two authors whose obscure publication this thesis attempts to acknowledge and examine at length.

Isobel Grundy makes an eloquent argument for the rediscovery of such early female literary contributions and their value in reconstructing and re-engendering a literary past that has long deserved to be brought to light:

If as students we wish to know, and if as teachers we wish to know something about the workings of gendering society, then we need those

early women's voices. They alone can teach us something of how it felt to live as a woman in a culture (so different from our own, yet sharing so much with it) in which the inferiority and subordination of women was utterly taken for granted. They can teach us something important, too about the impulse to literature, the sources of the poems, stories and so on—something of how to read the work of those who broke into literature from the outside, who in taking up the pen were claiming a privilege which in general was denied to them. (185)

Any reconstruction of the eighteenth century literary canon ought to reflect a more concerted effort to rediscover the still forgotten voices of the age, generations of women who took up the pen and wrote in spite of the social and educational constraints that might have impeded them. Networks of literary friends have thus far played an important role in modern efforts to reconstruct the British literary canon to reflect more accurately the female poetic of eighteenth-century Britain. Collections of letters and manuscripts that pass among the members of such social networks have allowed scholars like Isobel Grundy to glimpse a literary past that has been too long forgotten. Through her work with the Steele and Reeves Collections, Marjorie Reeves uncovered a hitherto unknown group of acquaintances who enjoyed an active and rich correspondence while pursuing their literary aspirations. The literary development and friendships of these women can be traced through manuscripts and personal correspondence that passed between its members, most particularly Mary Steele, whose letters and poetry form an integral part of this collection and whose obscure publication is the focus of the chapters to come. Marjorie Reeves argues that this particular network of young women gives us a “rare

picture of a provincial literary circle—one, moreover, with a strong Nonconformist stimulus which owed nothing to aristocratic patronage which assisted some of their literary contemporaries to fame” (*Pursuing* 59).

Far removed from the hubs of literary activity, the literary contributions and activities of the Steele coterie of women poets may have perhaps received less attention than those of the more fashionable women poets of London who were publicly lauded for their witty repartee and poetic proficiency. Conversely, much of the poetry contained within the Steele Collection seems intended for private consumption, not publication—indeed, of the more than one hundred manuscript poems in the Mary Steele collection, only four were published. This thesis will provide the first detailed discussion of Mary Steele’s published poetry to date, three poems that appeared anonymously in a thin volume printed in Bristol in 1779.<sup>1</sup> The first chapter will focus on her poem *Danebury*, a historical romance about an incident in the ancient folk lore of Wiltshire, England. The next two chapters will discuss the other poems in that volume, “Spring, an Ode” and “Liberty, an Ode.” Before I begin my discussion of the poems, I will first provide some background on women’s writing in England in the eighteenth century, with special attention to Mary Steele and her coterie of family and friends and the importance Nonconformist culture played in their lives.

## I. Women and Writing in the Eighteenth Century

The last decades of the eighteenth century might be described as a period of great transition for English authors and their poetry. The Age of Enlightenment and Neoclassicism was drawing to a close, and the spirit of Romanticism was beginning to

take shape. The great rhetoricians, satirists, and poets of the first half of the century gave way to authors such as Thomas Gray, whose “Elegy Written in a Church” mingles the traditional eighteenth century style with the burgeoning aesthetic of the early romantics. Published in 1750, Gray’s elegy reflects a number of stylistic conventions which help to define late eighteenth century poetry in general and which are useful in mentioning as a prelude to my examination of Mary Steele’s poetry. The poetry of the final decades of the century exhibits an aptitude for revealing and reveling in moments of profound emotion—whether elation or melancholy—that often lends itself to the effusive and sentimental style of the day. Moreover, the success of James Thomson’s *Seasons* in 1730 altered the treatment of the natural world in poetry. As the century progressed more and more poets composed verse that expressed a deep appreciation of nature, and rustic environs. In the wake of Walpole’s gothic success, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), tales of ancient folk lore and legends and romantic ruins became fashionable. Steele’s contemporaries such as Helen Maria Williams and Hannah More both published legendary tales. This trend continued even into the nineteenth century as is evidenced by the widespread success of Anne Radcliffe (1764-1823). In short, the poetry of the last half of the eighteenth century might best be described a fusion of styles, mingling the forms and figures of neoclassical tradition with the themes and innovations of the early romantics.

The last half of the century witnessed more than an aesthetic change in the literature of the age; it also witnessed a significant change in who was reading and writing literature. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, women accounted for only a tiny percentage of the total works published in England; however, by the end of the

century that percentage would be considerably higher. Historians attribute the dramatic increase in women's publications during the eighteenth century to several cultural shifts, among them a decrease in government restrictions placed on printed material and an increase in literacy rates, especially among the middle class. According to Robert Shoemaker, the rise of a growing middle class readership opened new and various forums through which emerging authors might publish otherwise unpublishable material. It was this access to the mediums popularized by the middle class that contributed to the literary development of middle-class women (282). He estimates that as many as 400 women poets published in England between the years 1760 and 1830 (288). Similarly, Lonsdale points out that more than thirty women had published collections of their verse by 1790—only two women had done so during the first decade of the century (xxi).

Historically, perception of the eighteenth century literary achievement has been largely one-sided, favoring the endeavors of men and relegating to virtual obscurity the ever-increasing contributions made by women. Everything from marriage and friendship to education and social justice and equality among the sexes fell under the scrutiny of the female pen. The fashionable literary salons of eighteenth-century London, where female poets were emerging with increasing frequency, represent only a small portion of the richness of the female poetic of the era. Women in various stations of society and geographic locations were consuming and creating literature with an alarming fervidity, entertaining, instructing and inspiring readers. Nevertheless, only a handful of women poets from the period are widely anthologized, and most of these are aristocratic women. I have already mentioned the productivity of the literary salons in London which produced such noted authors as Elizabeth Singer Rowe, and Anne Finch. Furthermore,

such noted authors such as Helen Maria Williams, Hannah More, Anna Seward, and Anna Laetia Barbauld (all of whom were known to Mary Steele) were active members of the famed Bluestocking circle that flourished during the last half of the century. The Bluestockings were an informal society of intelligent and literary young women (and men) who scorned typical domestic accomplishments, pursuing instead moral, intellectual and philanthropic pursuits. Groups of women who patterned themselves after the famed Bluestockings sprang up all over England. The importance of Mary Steele and her circle of literary acquaintances, however, rests not only upon the fact that they were young eighteenth-century women who, as the Steele collection reveals, were accomplished poets in their own right, but also upon the peculiarity of their rural, middle-class standing and Nonconformist ideology, an ideology noted for its political radicalism and its impressive literacy.

## II. 18<sup>th</sup> Century Baptist Nonconformity

The religious culture of eighteenth-century England was dominated by the Anglican Church. The minority of English citizens who chose to worship outside of the Church of England were known as Dissenters. The monikers “Nonconformity” and “Dissent” are often used interchangeably to indicate a tradition of Protestant Christians who chose to worship “outside the established Church of England,” though the term “Nonconformity” did not necessarily indicate separation from the Church of England until the latter half of the seventeenth century (Watts, *Dissenters* 3). Historically Protestant Dissenters have trodden on the outskirts of social and political acceptance in England, and until the nineteenth century, were subject to numerous social, political, and educational restrictions. Early Dissenters suffered harsh religious persecution during the

late sixteenth century and, though the punishments for Dissenters were somewhat more tolerant in the centuries that followed, there were still a bevy of severe consequences for those who chose separation from the Anglican Church. Legislation such as the Clarendon Code of 1661-65, for example, “excluded Protestant Nonconformists from any role in central or local government, imposed oaths and subscriptions among them and levied penalties for attendance at non-Anglican services” (O’Gorman 7). Thus, even late into the seventeenth century Nonconformists were faced with prohibitive legislation that marginalized them both politically and socially. It proved, however, “impossible to silence the Dissenters or to close down Dissenting meetings, even in the years of stringent persecution” (7). In spite of the harsh penalties, restrictive treatment, raids on meeting houses and the intimidation they suffered, the Dissenters did not disband. According to Michael Watts, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, Nonconformists accounted for a “significant minority” of England’s population, comprising 6 per cent of the total population of England and Wales, a percentage that would continue to rise both in Great Britain and the British colonies as the century progressed (4). Nonconformity was certainly present in London, but it flourished as well in more remote areas. Provincial towns like Norwich and Newcastle upon Tyne became major centers of English Dissent, as were many of the villages and towns in the West Country of England where we find Mary Steele and the other members of the Steele coterie (O’Gorman 7).

The 1770’s brought hope for the reform of Parliamentary exclusion of Nonconformists; however, their support of the French and American Revolutions cast them in a suspiciously subversive light with governmental supporters, often equating Dissent with political radicalism. Dissenters saw something of their own struggle for



religious freedom in that of the Americans, and though there were almost certainly exceptions, they rallied to the call for American liberty.<sup>2</sup> Pro-government newspapers and pamphlets created a wave of “anti-Dissenting sentiment” that did not abate until the early years of the nineteenth century, and quelling any hope for political and social equality for the Nonconformists during the last decades of the century (O’Gorman 308).

The restrictions Dissenters faced were not relegated to the political sphere, however, as they were also excluded from English universities and from any degree of social prominence within the mainstream. It was, Michael Watts argues, this “exclusion from the established centers of influence and power [that] encouraged them (Nonconformists) to make a distinctive contribution to the nation’s educational, scientific, industrial, and commercial progress” (4). This desire for education led to the establishment of noted Dissenting academies during the eighteenth century, and as we will see, perhaps influenced William Steele’s ideas about his daughter’s education. The Nonconformists’ attraction to education was no less evident than their particular talent for the written word. Consequently, it was not unusual for Nonconformists to be particularly attracted to literary endeavors and publication. Marjorie Reeves argues that English Nonconformity possesses an inherent “stimulus to the pen” and a powerful instinct to preserve its own identity through its history” (*Pursuing* 5). Moreover,

[t]he culture of Dissenting groups does, indeed, seem to have made them (for members of their social class) unusually articulate, theologically aware, and ready with their pens. Their surprisingly wide vocabulary is often attributed to their reading, not only of the bible, but also of

other devotional works...The literacy of Nonconformists  
has frequently been noted. (5-6)

Similarly, Paula Backscheider notes the surprising literary awareness and literary ambition in Nonconformist women of the eighteenth century, suggesting that they exhibit a certain favor for the pen, “often using religious verse fearlessly for social and political protest” (147). Such is certainly the case with Mary Steele and her network of literary friendships and associations, whose letters and poetry reveal much not only about the female poetic aesthetic of the age, but also the deep sense of piety and the political consciousness of Dissenters. Thus, steeped in the cultural and theological traditions of Nonconformity, it is no wonder that Mary Steele was drawn to the pen and that her distinct literary voice was shaped by it.

## CHAPTER 2

### MARY STEELE AND HER LITERARY COTERIE<sup>3</sup>

The correspondence contained in the Steele collection includes many letters between Mary Steele and her social counterparts. Most of them were young women linked with Nonconformist families, and several were authors in their own right. In addition to the more than one hundred letters to or from Mary Steele, the collection also includes 129 unpublished poems, nearly all of which were written by Mary Steele between 1767 and 1810, many of them dedicated to various persons who will be identified in this chapter. The most prominent correspondents who will be discussed here are Jane Attwater and Mary Scott (author of the often anthologized *Female Advocate*), though other notable correspondents include Mary Steele's aunt, Anne Steele, and Hannah More.<sup>4</sup>

The Steele family was not only prominent members of the Baptist church at Broughton but their network of Nonconformist relatives and acquaintances extended throughout the English countryside of Wiltshire, Hampshire, and Somersetshire. A letter from Mary Steele ("Sylvia") to Mary Scott ("Myra") illustrates the close acquaintance of their network of Nonconformist friends and alludes to each of the members who figure prominently in Mary Steele's poetry:

Forgive my Dear Myra the numerous Faults you will discover in this scribble I would send you the other but the last Verse is intolerably bad & my Aunt was so kind as to say she would correct it so if you are desirous of having it you shall when I have the pleasure of your Company at

Broughton I received a letter from Marianna & Myrtila yesterday both the Bodemites & the Brotenites were as well as usual & desires their Compliments or rather their Love to my Myra I expect with impatience a Letter from you every Letter from a friend is a valuable Pearl I hope those charming Verses will be inclos'd--

(Steele Collection 5/14)

This letter indicates the general geographical expanse covered by this network of friends. At that time Mary Scott was living in Milborne Port, Somerset. The map below illustrates the relative distance and spread over which much of the correspondence and persons concerned would have traveled.

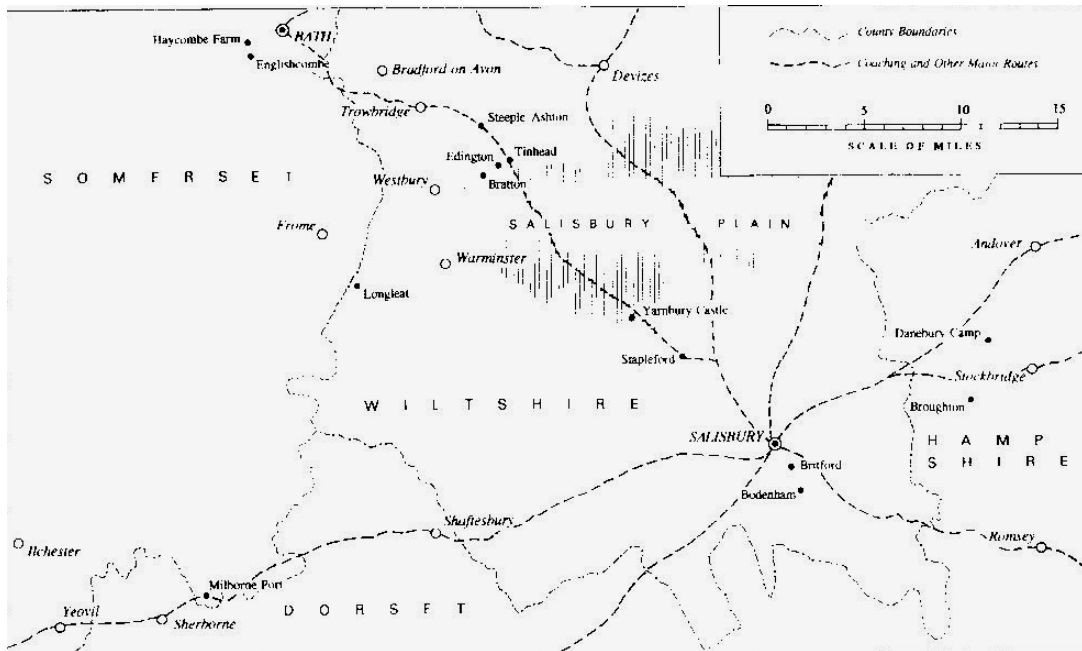


Figure 1: Map of the English Countryside: places mentioned in the correspondence (Reeves *Pursuing*, vii)

The “Aunt” to whom Steele is alluding is Anne Steele, sister to Mary’s father, William Steele Jr., both of whom played active roles in the education and literary development of

Mary Steele. Also, there is the mention of the “Bodemites,” who ostensibly reside in Bodemham, a village not far from Salisbury and much closer to Broughton than Milborne Port, which made visits and communication between the two more regular and more convenient. The epithet “Bodemites” certainly refers to the Attwater family who resided in Bodenham, the daughters of whom are also mentioned in the letter. The Marianna and Myrtilla to which the letter refers are Marianna Attwater and Jane Attwater, the latter of whom assumes the pseudonym “Myrtilla” in her correspondence with Mary Steele. The Attwater acquaintances would have been related to the Steele family by means of William Steele’s marriage to Anne Cator (Reeves, *Pursuing* viii).<sup>5</sup> Both of the Attwater girls were undoubtedly life-long acquaintances of the Steele family due to their proximity and family connections; however, it is Jane, the younger of the Attwater sisters, one of Mary Steele’s most active and cherished confidants whose friendship proved one of her greatest sources of inspiration.

#### William Steele IV (1715-1785)

For many young women growing up in the eighteenth century, their education and literary tastes would have been largely determined and influenced by the men in their lives. For Mary Steele and her literary acquaintances, this would be true as well.

William Steele, Mary’s father, was an avid mentor and advocate for the literary endeavors of Mary’s coterie, encouraging the poetic interests of his daughter and her friends. Indeed, he even engaged in literary endeavors himself, corresponding and writing poetry under the pastoral penname “Philander.”

Born in 1715 to a middle-class family that boasted two generations of Baptist ministers, William Steele IV became the head of the most prominent Baptist family in the

village of Broughton (Reeves, “Jane” 207). William Steele’s father –William Steele III—was a timber merchant and the pastor of the Broughton Baptist church, the village where William Steele would eventually raise his daughter Mary (Reeves, *Pursuing* 4). Anne Steele, William Steele’s younger sister and another highly influential figure in the literary development of Mary Steele and her literary young friends, was born in 1717 and will be discussed at length in the pages to come. William Steele’s marriage to Mary Bullock produced one child: Mary Steele. Mary Bullock, however, died in 1762, leaving her husband free to wed a second time to Martha Goddard. His marriage to Martha Goddard provided two sisters for his daughter Mary.

There is much evidence that indicates William Steele’s active involvement in the literary advancement of his daughter and her like-minded friends, an exceptional attitude for an eighteenth century father in an age where so many looked to the single-minded conduct books for advice on the conditioning and education of daughters. Strictures such as the following reflect the general attitudes surrounding female education:

As for the education of daughters it is said, that there is no need they should be learned; curiosity makes them vain and affected; it is enough, they be one day able to govern their families, and obey their husbands with submission. This seems confirmed by the experience we have of many women, whom learning has but made ridiculous. (Fenelon 2)

Similarly, the ever-popular Fordyce suggests that young women need not pursue a rigorous education or develop their literary tastes because their “business chiefly is to read men, in order to make [them]selves agreeable and useful” (273). Clearly, William Steele had slightly different ideas about developing his daughter’s intellectual and literary

pursuits. Paula Backscheider notes that “Dissenters spent considerable time and effort on their daughters’ educations” (380). This was obviously true of William Steele. Mary Steele dedicates *Danebury* to him, claiming “[b]y a revered and much loved Father’s command it ventures into the world.” Similarly, William Steele’s liberal ideas earned him warm approbation in Mary Scott’s publication, *The Female Advocate*, a poem that scorns conventional attitudes regarding women and learning and exalts a series of learned women throughout history while acknowledging the contributions of a few men who, like William Steele, openly supported women’s education and literary activity.

Furthermore, at least two of the bound books in the Steele Collection suggest that William Steele was undoubtedly an advocate not only for his daughter but also more generally of the female poet. Both of his commonplace books contain an undeniable emphasis on the literary achievements of young women, many of whom were intimately acquainted with the Steele family either through direct acquaintance or their extended network of Nonconformist families. Of particular interest is a bound collection of poetry belonging to William Steele. The contents reflect a keen interest in female authorship, including, in addition to *Danebury*, *The Messiah* and *Female Advocate* by Mary Scott; *Peru, a Poem in Six Cantos* and *An Ode on the Peace* by Helen Maria Williams<sup>6</sup>; and two poems by Anna Seward<sup>7</sup>—the latter of the two, entitled *Louisa, A Political Novel in Four Epistles*, bears the author’s signature (Steele Collection 14/2). William Steele undoubtedly played a significant role in the literary accomplishments of his daughter and the other members of the coterie, particularly on Mary Scott.

Mary Steele (1753-1813)

Relatively little is known of Mary Steele, beyond what can be determined in the Steele Collection and through her relationship to Mary Scott. However, her letters, prose and poetry suggest that she was a devoted daughter, often praising her father's generosity and kindness; an enthusiastic friend, composing a plethora of verses and letters with effusive sentiment; and a spiritual young woman, whose poetry possesses a modest piety and a deep, moral regard for divinity and its creation. Born in 1753, Mary Steele was very close in age to Mary Scott and Jane Attwater, among whom much correspondence and poetry relevant to this discussion passed. Known as "Polly" within her own family, Mary Steele and her friends assumed pastoral pennames in the fashion of the seventeenth-century literary salons of London; these pseudonyms were used almost exclusively in the poetry and correspondence produced by the members of this literary circle. The bulk of the poetic exchange seems to have passed between Mary Steele ("Sylvia") and Mary Scott ("Myra") during the 1770's, while a more lasting and intimate correspondence was maintained between Steele and Jane Attwater ("Myrtilla"). Mary Steele continued to produce poetry throughout her life. She remained single until 1797, when she married Thomas Dunscombe, a Nonconformist minister (Reeves, *Pursuing* 98).<sup>8</sup> Perhaps owing to the example set by her aunt Anne Steele (who refused to marry after the tragic death of her fiancé) Mary Steele was 44 years old when she married, long past the conventional age for marriage. She died in 1813.

Mary Scott (1752-1793)

Born in 1752 to a linen merchant of Milborne Port in Somerset, Mary Scott was about a year older than Mary Steele (Ferguson 3). The bulk of the correspondence seems to have occurred between the years 1770 and 1780. The young women exchanged



numerous poems on a variety of topics though most often their thoughts tended toward the theme of friendship. It seems that this was the most productive and most intimate period for the two friends, who would have been in their twenties during the better part of the decade. The two were active correspondents by 1770, and it is clear from their letters and manuscripts that there was no small amount of conversation that passed between Mary Steele and Mary Scott. Despite the approximately 30 mile distance that separated them, there was a regular exchange of correspondence and visits between the young friends (Reeves, "Literary" 7).<sup>9</sup> One letter from Mary Steele to Mary Scott mentions an approaching visit between the friends, indicating that there was some means of traversing the distance between Somerset and Broughton without a great deal of trial to the travelers:

Adieu My Dear Friend May nothing happen to disappoint the pleasure I  
propose my self in the enjoyment of your Company My Comp<sup>ts</sup> await Mrs  
Scotts & am your very affect Friend Silvia --

(Steele Collection 5/14)

Another letter suggests the fondness and frequency of their correspondence and mentions yet another impending visit:

A Fortnight has elapsd since I recd My Beloved Myras welcome packet &  
I have not had the wishd for opportunity of answering it one thing or other  
has constantly intruded to prevent my scribbling I fear your kind heart My  
Beloved Friend has sufferd by my Silence but Inclination has not been the  
Motive however I have now a piece of intelligence which will I flatter my

self impart some pleasure it is my Dear that I hope if nothing unforeseen prevent to visit Somersetshire next Week.

(Steele Collection 5/14)

The letter goes on to mention the contents of the aforementioned packet which apparently included a revised version of a poem that had previously passed between the girls as Silvia mentions that her father “thinks your poem is greatly amended “and “he has proposed a few alterations” (Steele Collection 5/14/2). The mention of William Steele’s involvement in the correspondence between the girls and the comment regarding his revisionary remarks for the poem suggests that he actively encouraged and even aided his daughter and her friends in their literary pursuits, which may perhaps explain Scott’s dedicatory stanzas to “Philander” in *Female Advocate*, the production of which is intimately linked with Scott’s connection to the Steele family.

The correspondence and poetry between Mary Steele and Mary Scott is generally warm and highly sentimental, often slipping into moments of euphoria; nevertheless, it is clear from her frequent and effusive proclamations that the friendship was much valued by Steele on both a personal and literary basis. An excerpt of a poem by “Myra” addressed to “Silvia” in 1770, exemplifies the tenderness shared between the girls:

Once more I sieze the long neglected Lyre  
Prove gentle Power propitious to my Verse  
While I would fain thy matchless Charms rehearse  
Friendship dear Name of bliss!—To thine to impart  
A thousand pleasing passions to the heart  
If Fortune frowns, or if the Syren smile

There dost our Joys improve, our pains beguile.  
Oh! bliss on Earth supreme! delightful state  
“When Heart meets Heart reciprocally sweet !”  
No powers of eloquence can e’er recite  
The ecstasy when kindred Souls unite  
Angels with Joy the sacred Union view  
And Friends admire, but Ah! they envy too  
Oh may this bliss if heaven permit be mine  
And such my Sylvia be forever thine  
Friendship!—before thy sacred shrine I bend  
Nor wish a higher Title than a Friend  
(Steele Collection 5/2)

Here, as in other poems in the collection, friendship is spoken of in euphoric terms; indeed, its very name is “Bliss.” The “long neglected lyre” is inspired by the theme of unremitting friendship as the poetess sings the praises of the sacred state. This excerpt is representative of the general type of poetry that passes between the young women. The verse is filled with a mix of classical and Christian allusions to sirens, angels, and other divine beings. The lyre is the instrument of choice as the poet humbly apologizes for her inability or invokes the powers of some classical muse; and joyous effusions, marked by exclamations, are smattered liberally throughout the poem.

“Friend” becomes a sacred title and, in this case, is the pinnacle of the author’s hopes. In response to Myra’s poem, Sylvia writes:

What Power can thus the pleasing passions warm

Tis Friendship drest in Myra's winning form  
The Sacred Power that tunes her charming Lays  
Illumes this Breast with animating Rays  
What tho no Muse will deign to tune my Lyre  
And tell the Pleasure which thy strain inspire  
What tho unfavored by the tuneful Nine  
Yet Friendships tenderest feelings all are mine  
For Myras happiness my heart oerflows  
And Gratitude within my bosom glows  
But Ah too weak this hand! these lays too faint  
The warm emotions of my heart to paint  
This well meant lay with kind indulgence view  
Inspird alone by Gratitude & you  
Long as you tread the dubious path of Life  
Where pain & pleasure hold continual strife  
May sacred Friendships heart enlivening smile  
Soothe every sorrow every pain beguile

(Steele Collection 5/2)

This poem is an early example of the major characteristics that mark Steele's published material and, indeed, much of her unpublished works as well. Here friendship acts a source of inspiration, as if it is the favored child of the muses. Here too the poetic form is similar to the poem which warranted such a response. Both Myra's and Silvia's poems employ a rhymed iambic meter, and commonly call upon this convention. Again, the

poet conjures figures of classical antiquity as she praises Myra with humble and formal sentimentality.

Perhaps adding to Mary Scott's need for fellowship and communication is the fact that she spent much of her young life confined by illness. A poem by Sylvia—in response to one from Myra that is dated 1770—illustrates the tenderness of the poetic exchange as well as Sylvia's concern for the continued ill-health of her young friend:

May social peace her halcyon Wing extend  
O'er the retreat that holds my much lov'd Friend  
Far from her Couch may pain & languor fly  
And sweet Health sparkle in her speaking Eye  
May heartfelt Joy & cheerfulness serene  
With brightest luster [gild] each changing Scene  
And Oh may Fancy wildly pleasing power  
Adorn thy path with many a fragrant flower  
The rural Muse her fairest Garland divine  
And should contentment be forever thine  
And long Oh long in pity to her Friend  
May Heaven my Myra to my wishes lend  
And when it calls her from this lower Scene  
May the last Messenger with smile serene  
Dissolve with gentle stroke the mortal Ties  
That hold her Spirit from her kindred Skies  
But while my Myra breathes this lower air

Her tenderest friendship may her Sylvia share  
While Life informs this animated Frame  
My Heart must glow with friendships holy flame  
(Steele Collection 5/2)

Myra could have been no more than eighteen at the time when this poem was written, but the poem certainly indicates that her health is poor enough to leave her confined to her “couch” and that it is serious enough to evoke images of death and heaven. Moira Ferguson, who has documented much of Scott’s life, points out that the young woman was plagued with illness from as early as the age of fourteen, and that complaints of pain, failing eyesight, and possible bloodletting dot both her poetry and correspondence (Ferguson 3).

Furthermore, it seems that a long illness continued to plague her during the three years prior to writing *The Female Advocate*, which she published in 1774. Scott openly refers to her poor state of health in the letter “to a young lady” which acts a dedication and general prologue to what would become her most noted publication. She writes: “And did they know how much the years of ill-health have impaired every faculty of my mind it might perhaps lead them to be favourable in their censures on the execution” (Scott vii). Of course, the question arises: who, precisely, is the “lady” to whom the letter is addressed? As evidenced in the letter excerpted above, both William and Mary Steele were intimately familiar with Mary Scott’s poetry, acting both as readers and revisionists. Mary Steele, then, seems a likely candidate. Scott addresses the following directly to the anonymous female:

Mr. Duncombe's *Feminead* you and I have often read with the most grateful pleasure; and undoubtedly you remember that we have also regretted that it was only a small number of Female Geniuses that Gentleman bestowed the wreath of Fame; and have wished to see those celebrated whom he omitted, as well as those who have obliged the world with their literary productions, since the publication of his elegant Poem. Being too well acquainted with the illiberal sentiments of men in general with regards to our sex, and prompted by the most fervent zeal for their privileges, I took up the pen with an intention of becoming their advocate; but thinking myself unequal to the task, it was quickly laid aside, and probably never would have been resumed had not your partiality to the Author led you to have been pleased with the specimen which you saw.

(Scott xvii)

Though Sylvia is not named specifically in the letter or the poem that follows, there is evidence in the Steele Collection to assert that the girls were in the habit of writing and dedicating poems to one another during the months and years leading up to the publication of the poem, and as I have already shown, both Silvia and Philander had, on at least one occasion, "amended" or critiqued Steele's work. In fact, Reeves states with emphatic certainty that the lady to whom the letter is addressed is Mary Steele (*Pursuing* 51). If so, then it was Mary's encouragement that caused Scott, despite her illness, to resume her attempt to complete *The Female Advocate*.

Also connecting the *The Female Advocate* to the Steele family is the veiled but favorable mention of William Steele in the final pages of the poem. In spite of the

generally negative attitudes Scott reveals regarding men and their approach to female education, Scott finds reasons to commend some gentlemen. Among these men are “Mr. Duscombe,” author of *Feminead*, the reading of which “occasioned” the production of Scott’s poem, and William Steele who is discreetly identified by his pseudonym, “Philander”:

Philander! generous, affable, sincere,  
His taste as polish’d as his judgement clear,  
Blest with the tenderest feelings of the Heart,  
Wise without Stiffness, prudent without Art. (Scott 489-92)

She goes on to add:

Such he, who, when I first attun’d the lay,  
With his own candor view’d the faint essay;  
Enjoin’d me still to court the Muse’s smile,  
The tiresome hours of languor to beguile.  
O could this pen, which Gratitude impells,  
But tell how ----- in each scene excells! (495-500)

Furthermore, the name “William” correctly scans into the final line (Reeves, *Pursuing* 60). This praise for Philander is high praise, as it comes from an author who began her poetic testament to educated women with the following anonymous epigraph disparaging men for their narcissistic and tyrannous enslavement of the fairer sex:

Self prais’d, and grasping despotic pow’r,  
Man looks on slav’ry as the female dow’r;  
To nature’s boon ascribes what force has giv’n,



And usurpation deems the gift of Heav'n.

Perhaps Philander did warrant such high regard from Myra. His efforts to encourage and preserve the writings of the young women associated with his family's network of acquaintances are obvious given his collection of women's writings and his apparent success in commissioning the publication of his daughter's small volume later in the decade.

In spite of the frequency and intimacy with which Sylvia and Myra corresponded during the early part of the decade, the friendship seems to have shifted, and by the latter half of the decade, their communications appear less frequently than in the first half. Ironically, a poem addressed to Sylvia in 1770 promises the longevity of the friendship even as it seems to foreshadow the likelihood of their eventual separation:

Friendship!---before thy sacred Shrine I bend  
Nor wish a higher Title than a Friend  
If e'er I turn apostate to thy Name  
Or dare indulge a more Ignoble Flame  
May I be banish'd from the Sylvan Shades  
To Scenes where noise & ceaseless care invades  
By every muse may I forsaken be  
And Oh my Sylvia---be forgot by Thee  
But e'er these Ills arrive may I be laid  
In soft repose upon my dusty Bed.

(Steele Collection 5/2)

The reason for Myra's disappearance from the correspondence is not entirely clear; perhaps it was the continuance of her own ill health or the demands placed on her time by caring for her ailing mother who died in 1787 (Ferguson 3). Then again, perhaps the demands and expectations of conventional life made the correspondence and poetic endeavor increasingly difficult for both. In 1788, however—a decade after the bulk of the correspondence seems to have passed—a final poem addressed “To Miss Scott in 1788,” offers a bittersweet remembrance of their former intimacy:

“Friend of my heart & sister of my Choice”  
Indulge with me the Dream of former Days  
Listen to memory's softly soothing voice  
And catch the fleeting pleasures she portrays...

Oh happy Hours forever, ever fled!  
When the spontaneous strain alternate flow'd  
By nature prompted & by Friendship fed  
What pleasure each received & each bestow'd...

Friend of my Soul! One pleasure yet remains  
Which Time hath only render'd more secure  
Friendship its pristine Energy retains  
And my heart tells me ever shall endure.

(Steele Collection 5/3)

The exchanges with Mary Scott had become less frequent since the early years of the friendship, and she seems to have completely passed out of the once intimate circle after her marriage to John Taylor in 1788. The two engaged in a fourteen year courtship, postponing their marriage out of filial obedience to her mother who died in 1787 (Reeves, “Literary” 8). Mary Scott would have been approximately 36 at the time she married John Taylor. She died only five years later in 1792, expecting her third child and leaving behind a young son who would eventually pursue his own authorial interests, becoming the founder of the *Manchester Guardian* and serving as its editor until his death (Lonsdale 321).<sup>10</sup>

Anne Steele (1716-1778)

It is possible that the death of Mary’s aunt, Anne Steele, in 1778 contributed to the dissolution of the once active exchange within the literary circle. Anne Steele was a central figure in the Steele literary circle, often exchanging correspondence and poetry with the younger generation of aspiring authors who owed much to her influence and guidance. Anne Steele, who used the pseudonym “Theodosia,” was a part of the older generation of the provincial network, which included her brother, William Steele. Anne lived all her life in Broughton. She may have been something of a recluse, for her letters and diary reflect a timid, somewhat pensive, young woman who preferred a lifestyle of humble piety in her family home in Broughton to the more animated social arenas she visited (Reeves *Pursuing* 67). Though Anne was sent to a girls’ school, a series of letters from Trowbridge suggests, as Marjorie Reeves points out, that the “she probably gained little intellectual nourishment” from her experiences there (*Pursuing* 26). Anne Steele’s education, like that of her niece Mary, seems to have depended largely on the intellectual

stimulation gleaned from her acquaintances, especially the more learned men with whom she came into contact.

A published author in her own right,<sup>11</sup> Anne took an interest in the intellectual and poetic development of both her niece and Mary Scott, offering guidance and bits of her own poetry to encourage and aid Steele and her friends. Jane Attwater records Theodosia's death in her diary on November 11, 1778 (Reeves, "Jane" 215). The impact of Theodosia's death is evident in the following undated elegy in which Silvia mourns the loss of her beloved aunt and mentor:

This was my Theodosia's favorite spot

Her dear idea all around renews

Ah never is that Circumstance forgot

Whene'er beneath its Shades I lonely muse

Each Flower that blooms this vary'd Bank along

And gives its sweetness to the passing Air

Still lives anew in her enchanting Song

Sweet as their Odours, as their Colours fair.

Here oft she wander'd, oft each Object sung,

And learnt from nature, natures God to praise

Now sweeter Music warbles from her Tongue

Now nobler Worship her rapt Spirit pays!

(Steele Collection 5/5)

This excerpt is not just a mark of Steele's mourning the loss of a fond relative, however; the poem clearly indicates the extent to which Anne Steele influenced the poetic development of the young. Silvia herself suggests Theodosia's importance to her as an instructor and as a source of inspiration both spiritually and creatively. Silvia goes so far as to suggest that her own poetic life will cease with Theodosia's expiration: "My humble Strains, from her I caught the Glow,/And with Her too that little Spark expir'd;/The Source once dried the Brook no more can flow" (Steele Collection 5.5.7). Mary Steele's poetry does not expire upon the death of her aunt, otherwise there would be no elegy; however, it does seem as if Sylvia's most productive years are behind her at this point, in spite of her impending publication. Certainly, the death of her favored aunt, literary mentor, and the center of the literary circle of young women must have been a great disappointment to Sylvia as well as the other young women with whom she corresponded. Whether it is an unlucky coincidence or the cause, Anne Steele's death does seem to correspond with a noticeable decrease in the correspondence and exchange of poetry between Sylvia and Myra.

Jane Attwater (1753-?)

Mary Steele's friendship and correspondence with Jane Attwater was deeply intimate, even more so than Mary's relationship with Mary Scott. Ultimately, it is Jane Attwater to whom Steele turns increasingly not only for literary exchange but also for friendship and encouragement. Born in the same year as Mary, Jane was youngest child of Thomas and Anne Attwater of Bodenham whose family is linked to that of Mary Steele through William Steele III's marriage to Anne Cator, his second wife (Reeves, *Pursuing* 4). In 1790, Jane married Joseph Blatch, the same, mysterious "Mr. B"

mentioned in her diaries who supposedly courted the reluctant Jane for twenty years before she agreed to marry him (Reeves, “Jane” 211).

What remains of the letters that passed between Mary Steele and Jane Attwater are largely Jane’s and they reveal a spirited, strong-minded, pious, loyal and independent young woman who reveled in her friendships. On February 14, 1775 Jane writes:

Your welcome Note my dearest Silvia claims my most grateful acknowledgements particularly for the kind construction you put on my Supposed Silence—I wrote last Tuesday sennight My Bro<sup>r</sup> carried it to Sarum & gave it to M<sup>r</sup> Smith of Houghton—I suppose he must have forgot to deliver it to you please to ask him if you have not yet got it—for I long to receive a letter from y<sup>e</sup> dear partaker of my joys & sorrows...

(Attwater MSS )

In the same letter Jane goes onto speak of learning to use a pistol after an attempted robbery at her mother’s home. She also includes a vehement anti-war poem entitled “On the Birmingham Petition,” illustrating the political awareness of these young women (a point I will consider more fully in my discussion of Steele’s political poem, “Liberty, an Ode”). Jane’s desire for more frequent correspondence with Mary is reiterated in another letter dated February 20<sup>th</sup> of the same year:

The pleasing hope of hearing fm My Dearest Silvia last Tuesday was turn’d into unwelcome disappointment have you not yet read the letter as was sent by M<sup>r</sup> Smith? I cannot but be very anxious on y<sup>e</sup> account of our dear Afflicted friends at Broughton I long to hear particularly how they are it seems a little age since we have had even any paper-talk for our

discourse of late has been disagreeably interrupted—O when shall I have  
the happiness to see the dear partaker of my inmost thoughts I am often  
ready to ask & shall I ever be so happy to see my dear my only much  
loved parent & my dearest best loved Friend together in this now  
disconsolate Mansion—

(Attwater MSS)

Though we do not have Sylvia's responses to Jane's inquiries, Mary Steele clearly  
valued Attwater's friendship dearly as evidenced in a poem she dedicated to Myrtilla in  
January of 1781:

With Love as warm as when in early Youth  
My Soul to thine first pledg'd her artless Truth,  
With the first dawning of the Year I send  
My earliest Wishes to my earliest Friend[...]  
When Memory with reverted Eye Surveys  
The various blessings of my various Days,  
Thy Friendship still amid the dearest Shines  
And every other heightens & refines,  
Blessed source at once of Virtue & of Joy  
May thy pure Light no Earthborn fogs destroy!  
When this<sup>12</sup> full Heart with Agony was rent  
Thy sympathizing Love its succor lent  
And pourd with lenient Skill & Aspect kind  
The balm of pity o'er my wounded Mind:

For this, for all thy Love, my grateful Heart  
Its tenderst, fondest wishes would impart,  
May future life if future life be lent  
The growing union of our Souls cement  
(Steele Collection 5/5)

Herein Steele speaks fondly of her earliest memories of her dear friend and reminisces about a time when that friendship brought her “wounded mind” great comfort<sup>13</sup> even as she illustrates her desire for continuing the intimacy they shared in youth. The highly sentimental tone of this poem is echoed in other poems by Mary Steele to Myrtilla, reflecting a similar kind of sentimentality—as I have already illustrated—present in Mary Steele’s exchanges with Mary Scott.

#### Conclusion

The pen was clearly a much valued possession to Mary Steele and her literary friends; as a result, writing became a cherished past time for all of them. Their desire to communicate their most intimate beliefs and sentiments by means of literary endeavor is demonstrated throughout the manuscripts found within the Steele Collection. The frequency and intimacy of their correspondence allows us to glean important information about their daily lives and their proclivity for the pen. Their interactions, particularly those between Mary Steele and her friends Jane Attwater and Mary Scott, provided fodder and inspiration for their endeavors; moreover, their shared interest in poetry and in each other guaranteed an avid and receptive audience for their poetic attempts. The poems which passed between these young women, though composed in the sentimental style of the day, reveal their deep friendships and paint a picture of a group of educated



and witty young women who possessed a passion for the written word and an inordinate desire to cultivate and exchange their own literary abilities with their most cherished friends and family members. Mary Steele and her literary friends existed primarily on the fringes of society, removed from the hustle and bustle of the more fashionable locales of commerce and society; as the daughters of Nonconformists, they were even further marginalized because of their beliefs. This was not a disadvantage, however, for it allowed them to revel in their own fellowship, solidifying and exercising their spiritual, social, and political ideologies into a tight-knit network of like-minded individuals.

Isobel Grundy, commenting upon a similar set of adolescent authors from the 1730s, notes that their writings offered a “voice for their rebellion,” and an outlet for their “mental independence and imaginative self-realization” (186). Such an assertion might also be made regarding the members of the Steele coterie, each of whom writes with a vivacity characteristic of a passionate and imaginative youth and deep spiritual and moral reflection. Indeed, several members ultimately produce published work that not only illustrates their own brand of “mental independence” but, as Grundy has argued, conveys an “imaginative self-realization” that confronts and subverts conventional notions regarding eighteenth century women. As I have already noted, Mary Scott’s *The Female Advocate*, published in 1774 during the most active years of the Steele coterie is an imaginative and meticulously annotated celebration of educated women writers, several of whom were Scott’s contemporaries. Likewise, Mary Steele’s publication, *Danebury, or the Power of Friendship*, speaks loudly of her “mental independence” in an age that preferred that young women remain silent: first, in a romance that depicts the brave heroics of a pair of independent, self-sacrificing young friends in Anglo-Saxon England;

second, in an ode that reveals a deep sense of piety and an effusive regard for provincial environs; and finally, in a second ode that resounds with the echoes of an age old struggle for liberty. I turn now to the centerpiece of Steele's anonymously published volume:

*Danebury, or the Power of Friendship.*

## CHAPTER 3

### *DANEbury, OR THE POWER OF FRIENDSHIP: MARY STEELE AND THE LEGACY OF THE FRIENDSHIP POEM*

“Friends grow not thick on every bough,/Nor every friend unrotten at the Core.”

Taken from Edward Young’s *The Complaint, or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality*,<sup>14</sup> this rather ambiguous testament to friendship seems an oddly pessimistic quote with which to inscribe a poem about a pair of devoted friends. However, that is precisely where it can be found, neatly penned onto the title page of one of the Bodleian’s three surviving copies of *Danebury: or the Power of Friendship, a Tale with Two Odes*.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps Young’s popular aphorism, in spite of its seemingly dubious attitude with regards to friendship, is actually an apt choice. In ostensibly suggesting that friendship grows only sparsely, and that when found it often proves rotten, the passage demonstrates that the discovery of a friend who is “unrotten at the Core” is a rarity indeed. Such a friendship is at the heart of the *Danebury: or the Power of Friendship*.

The aforementioned copy of *Danebury* stands in stark juxtaposition to the three texts with which it is bound in the Bodleian volume—a printed letter regarding philosophy and theology and two sermons on the book of Revelation and the “Power of the Supreme Being”—all highly didactic religious works by men, none of which seem in keeping with the imaginative narrative poem authored “By a young lady.” The inscription and binding, however, are not the most striking aspect of this particular copy of *Danebury*; rather, it is the name “Miss Steele” hand written onto the title-page, a

striking characteristic given the anonymity that *Danebury* has retained for well over two centuries. Of the three bound copies of *Danebury* housed at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, only the Mansfield volume identifies Mary Steele as the author, authorship confirmed by the materials in the Reeves and Steele Collection. Moreover, the presence of the author's name on the title page suggests that in spite of the anonymity with which the work was printed, at some point, probably early in the nineteenth century, Steele's authorship had become known—at least in some circles.

Another copy of the poem lends yet another clue as to the identity of the anonymous young lady who wrote it. An inscription on the title page of a copy of *Danebury* contained in the Reeves Collection at the Angus Library reads: “the Gift from the beloved Author to J. Attwater,” as if to answer the questionable identity of the “beloved Author.” The following note accompanies the printed poem:

Sylvia cannot transmit this little Pamphlet to the Friend of her heart without reminding her from whence those Ideas of Friendship which it feebly attempts to describe arose without recollecting with enthusiastic tenderness those happy hours when her *Myrtilla* taught her “Ere she knew its *name* to feel its *Power*” & however deficient she is in every other respect her Bosom still glows with the ardent wish of being what Emma was to Elfrida a *Faithful Friend*.

(Reeves Collection 12/17)

Not only does Mary Steele (Sylvia) identify herself as the author of “this little Pamphlet,” but her use of the characters' names, and the brief quote that she includes from the poem itself, directly link the note specifically to *Danebury*. The note also suggests that Steele's

friendship with Myrtilia (Jane Attwater) may have acted as a source of inspiration or instruction for the kind of friendship she depicts between the young women in her poem. Combining the information in the Reeves Collection with that contained in the Steele Collection not only supports the attribution of the work to Mary Steele, but also hints at when the poem was likely written and published--both of which are problematic because neither the manuscript copies nor the published edition of *Danebury* is dated. One manuscript copy of *Danebury*, bears a label that says it was written in 1768 (Steele Collection 5/5/2). If this date is accurate, then Mary Steele would have been only fifteen at the time *Danebury* was written, a noteworthy composition for such a young woman. Corroborating this assertion is a manuscript note written in a nineteenth-century hand attached to a printed copy of the poem and identifying it as "*Danebury* a Poem written by Mrs. Dunscombe at the age of fifteen" (Steele Collection 14/3/2). If the note is accurate, then *Danebury* would have been written sometime in 1768, thus predating much of the unpublished poetry in the Steele Collection and both of the odes that accompany it. Indeed, only eight of Steele's 129 unpublished poems were composed prior to 1769, so *Danebury* would have been a very early effort, which may well offer some explanation for the differences between it and the other poems in the collection.

Two letters from William Steele to his daughter in Broughton tell us that he was traveling with a manuscript of *Danebury*; and, by his own admission looking to publish the work as early as 1777. After talking to several London publishers, he writes to Mary on 14 August, 1777:

Tuesday morning Mr Dun called on us & carried us in his coach to his elegant Villa at Dulwich, where we enjoy'd a pleasing retirement in the

society of his amiable Family & in the evening return'd by the same conveyance. I will not tell you how much they were pleas'd with Danebury &c, but only that M<sup>r</sup> Dun read it as Poetry ought to be read & that they all seem'd to enjoy it in the true enthusiasm of Poetry...

M<sup>r</sup> Dilly just cast a cursory View over Danebury &c (for I would not leave it with him) & proposed to print it for me while I am in Town on my saying I should Like to have it printed tho' not for Sale, he said he cou'd print 250 Copies for 5£ on small paper & offer'd to shew it to M<sup>r</sup> Scott but I (you may be sure) declin'd it. He talks of Poetry like a Man of Trade that knows no more of it than belongs to his business, "there are pretty thoughts in it & tis above Mediocrity &c["]

M<sup>r</sup> Dun wou'd fain have had it left with him& he would shew it to M<sup>r</sup> Hoole & M<sup>r</sup> Scott both, but I told him I could not leave it behind me on any Acc<sup>t</sup>.

(Steele Collection 4/5/32)

Though William Steele elected not to have the manuscript published with the London printer—we know from the publication that it is W. Pine in Bristol who eventually publishes *Danebury* and the other poems—it is, nevertheless, apparent that he was pursuing the notion of publishing his daughter's poems. Furthermore, the letter indicates the pride and affection Steele must have had for his daughter's poetic endeavors; herein he mentions a reading conducted during a visit to Mr. Dun. Moreover, he guards the manuscript from a reputable publisher who, in Steele's opinion, reduces the substance of poetry to little more than a mere business transaction. It may have been on a similar trip

to Bristol less than a month later, however, that William Steele presented the manuscript to William Pine and arranged for its publication. A second letter to his daughter, this time from Bristol, on September 11, 1777, places Steele in the city and poses yet another, slightly more public, reading of the poems:

What think you of *Danebury* being read in full Assembly this Afternoon  
don't blush when you read this, for I am not ashamed it should be read  
before the Queen, however, I don't yet know how it may be.<sup>16</sup>

(Steele Collection 4/5/59)

This correspondence not only places William Steele in Bristol with the manuscript during the last quarter of 1777, but it also confirms his eagerness to proudly display his daughter's accomplishment to well-respected acquaintances. It is unclear; however, whether this trip provided Steele with a publisher for *Danebury*, for even the title page of the published copy does not specify a year, only W. Pine as the printer and Bristol as the location.

Most likely the poem was published in 1779, for it received favorable mention in the *Monthly Review* in July of that year:

There is an excellence in this poem which few writers attain to, and which, from a female pen especially, is not always expected—it is uncommonly correct. The two Odes which are subjoined are evidently effusions of the same elegant and ingenious Mind. (44)

The above is merely an excerpt from a much lengthier review that outlines the general plot of the tale and quotes it at length. A handwritten copy of this review, transcribed by Jane Attwater, also appears in the Steele Collection (5/9/i). The critic finds unusual merit

in the poem, arguing that its uncommon quality and genius are even more praiseworthy since they are the product of a “female pen.” It is not clear from the review whether the “correctness” the critic grants the work is due to the historical accuracy of the imagined battle or the technical merit of the poem—the author’s use of form and so on. It is, however, evident from this review that *Danebury* received at least some accolades from those outside Steele’s literary circle, and that the publication was well-received enough by the reviewer to warrant a warm, if slightly back-handed, approbation from a critic who seems to expect little of female authors.

The critic from the *Monthly Review* was not alone in his esteem for the poem. It seems that Hannah More was aware of Steele’s literary talents as well as her personal graces. Her admiration is demonstrated in the following poetic tribute:<sup>17</sup>

Extempore by Miss H. More

Sep<sup>r</sup> 1786

Sylvia forgive thy daring Friend

And do not take it Ill

That her presuming hand has plucked

A wreath from Danebury Hill

Yet tho’ I much admire the gifts

Thy genius can impart

Far rather Sylvia would I steal

One Virtue from thy Heart!

And who fair Sylvia do you think

Could blame the Moral Theft?



One Virtue you could scarcely Miss  
You'd have so many Left.

(Reeves Collection 12/17)

We have already noted William Steele's attempt to gather Miss More, among others, to a reading of *Danebury*, but this poem seems to suggest not only More's familiarity with the countryside surrounding Broughton, but also the friendship and poetic exchange that occurred between the young women of the group in general. It is not a far stretch to imagine that upon some visit or other Steele's publication would have been shown to More, who, incidentally, had also published two legendary tales of her own in 1776—though neither is overtly concerned with the theme of friendship as found in Steele's *Danebury*. A footnote which accompanies the poem claims “the Author gathered a branch of juniper on Danebury Hill w<sup>ch</sup> She presented to my amiable Friend with y<sup>e</sup> above Lines,” which seems to suggest that on at least one occasion, Hannah More and Mary Steele had visited the very site together—apparently in the company of Jane Attwater. The symbolic gesture refers specifically to the setting of the ancient tale and the “gifts” of Steele's “genius.” Coming from a much celebrated and published author, this “extempore” poem is perhaps a valuable testament to Steele's poetic abilities.

In spite of the positive criticism it received for its elegance and genius, *Danebury*, as well as the two odes which accompany it, has sunk into relative obscurity. Scholars of the female literary canon of the eighteenth century have omitted any mention of the poem; indeed, only Marjorie Reeves and Moira Ferguson have so much as made mention of Mary Steele, and in both cases her accomplishment is overshadowed by Mary Scott's poem, *The Female Advocate*.

It is of little wonder that an aspiring author like Mary Steele, bright, spirited, rigorously engaged in an active and productive circle of female friends, might have been inspired to compose some lines in praise of female friendship. Indeed, we have already seen that friendship is a recurring theme for these young women as it was for so many eighteenth century women authors. The centerpiece of Steele's only publication, *Danebury*, a friendship-themed narrative tale in poetic form, differs from the other friendship poems in the Steele Collection—several of which were excerpted and discussed in the Introduction.

Friendship between women is one of the most common themes of eighteenth-century poetry. Part of the reason for its wide-spread popularity is its seemingless endless flexibility and its relevancy to women. With regards to the conventions of the friendship poem, *Danebury* exhibits much of what critics have come to expect from a poem in this genre: stylized pastoral names and scenarios, classical allusions, sentimental—often effusive—diction, and idyllic depictions of female friendships generally represented in terms of a spiritual bond. Though a hitherto unrecognized exemplar of the form, Steele's handling of the theme of friendship is similar to that of her most well-known contemporaries, containing the complexities and ambiguities that have caused modern critics to reexamine this part of the female literary tradition of the eighteenth century.

Composed in lines of iambic pentameter with an alternating rhyme scheme, *Danebury* tells a poignant tale of friendship between two courageous and self-sacrificing young women, a friendship so pure and devoted that it allows the girls, Elfrida and Emma, to overcome death. The following quote from Akenside's *Pleasures of the*

*Imagination* appears on the title page of the printed poem and poignantly establishes the theme and tone for the narrative that follows:

In all the dewy Landscapes of the Spring,  
In the bright Eye of Hesper<sup>18</sup> or the Morn,  
In Nature's fairest Forms is Ought so fair  
As virtuous Friendship?<sup>19</sup>

Set against the backdrop of Anglo-Saxon England, the story opens with the description of an idyllic pastoral setting where, in rustic simplicity, "good old Egbert," a widowed farmer, lives with his beloved daughter, Elfrida, in the peaceful seclusion of the English countryside:

Twas then retir'd on Brige's<sup>20</sup> peaceful plains,  
The friend, the father of the neighboring swains;  
The good old Egbert trod life's humble vale,  
Where noise, nor care, nor vanity assail.  
A little farm his every want supply'd,  
Enough for happiness, though not for Pride...  
Though of his much-lov'd partner long depriv'd,  
One lovely copy of her worth surviv'd. (*Danebury* 8,9)

In spite of his widowhood, the aged Egbert, whose name is possibly an allusion to Egbert of Wessex, an early Anglo-Saxon king, takes great comfort in the society of his daughter Elfrida and his adopted daughter, Emma. Orphaned and alone at an early age, Emma was taken in and brought up by Egbert after the death of her parents. Within this world of rude but noble simplicity, the friends find true contentment in their surroundings and in

one another. Thus, governed by the kind and paternal Egbert, Emma and Elfrida spend their days in humble happiness and in the perfect companionship of a loving friend:

Kind Providence ordains the friendly mind  
Shall seldom fail a kindred soul to find;  
For friendship form'd, Elfrida found that friend,  
In Emma's mind unnumber'd graces blend...  
Ev'n in the dawn of childhood's sportive years,  
Virtue's instinctive sympathy appears;  
Fair Friendship smil'd upon their natal hour,  
And ere they knew its name, they felt its power. (9-10)

The peaceful pastoral, however, is destroyed by the threat of war, and the aging but noble Egbert, inspired by "fair Freedom's fire," takes up arms and joins the effort against the invading Danes (12). Elfrida, fearing for her father's life, follows him to the battle, determined to be dutiful and comforting should her father meet his end:

Ah then! What tortures wrung Elfrida's heart!  
Imagination only can impart!  
When to the fatal field she saw him fly,  
Barely resolved to conquer or to die!  
She follow'd, filial love absorb'd each fear,  
Check'd each fond tremor, dried each selfish tear:  
Resolv'd, should fate a Father's life demand,  
To close his swimming eyes with duteous hand,  
Pour the warm tear, catch the last fleeting breath,

And share or soften ev'n the pangs of death. (13)

The consequences of Elfrida's bravery are tragic. On the battle field, she espies and intercepts a poisoned arrow destined for her father:

While round the feather'd Deaths promiscuous flew,  
One well aim'd arrow caught Elfrida's view!  
Instant she mov'd to meet the fatal dart,  
Design'd to pierce the aged Hero's heart!  
Her gentle breast receiv'd the fatal wound,  
And her pale form sunk bleeding on the ground!  
Youth's lovely bloom forsook her fading face!  
And death-like languor crept o'er every grace! (14)

Mortally wounded, Elfrida subdues her suffering and meets her end with a tearless and impassioned plea to Emma:

Oh check my friend the anguish of thy breast.<sup>21</sup>  
Support my Father!—cheer his life's decline!  
Fulfill the pleasing task that once was mine!  
Wipe, wipe that tear—since I have sav'd my Sire  
With gratitude and pleasure I expire! (16)

Emma, faced with losing her dear companion, cannily devises a plan to save Elfrida's waning life:

While death-like sleep her friend's sensation droun'd,  
She suck'd the poison from the throbbing wound!  
Resign'd herself a victim to the grave,

A life far dearer than her own to save. (16)

Elfrida wakes, restored to life by Emma's selfless act; while Emma, having sucked the deadly poison from Elfrida's wound, withers next to a nearby tree. Thus, Elfrida lives, even as Emma awaits certain death:

Emma, alone remain'd to watch her Friend,  
And o'er the bed in silent anguish bend.  
While thought on thought distract her troubled mind,  
Friendship a bold, a generous act design'd...

Nature soon felt the change, no more with pain

The vital flood creep cold through every vein.

Elfrida wakes,--the death-like slumber flies

As night retreats when morning glads the skies! (16-17)

At the moment when it seems all hope is lost and that tragedy has indeed claimed the happy kinship of the friends, a "venerable Sage" appears. Inspired by a "heavenly vision" and "commision'd from on high" to reward the friends' virtue, the Sage gives Emma a life-restoring potion whereupon her vitality is restored and the friends reunited (18):

In her [Emma's] eye, the trembling luster shone,

And health and beauty reassum'd their throne.

The moving tale soon reach'd Elfrida's ear,

The moving tale, stole many a rapturous tear.

Ah! Who can paint the feelings of her mind?

Love, wonder, gratitude, and joy combin'd! (20)

The battle done, and the Danes defeated, the peaceful harmony of the scene is once more restored. The poem ends as the speaker contemplates the setting, no longer a part of ancient lore, but very much a part of the present. The poem shifts from the reverie of the narrative to a cathartic view of the once war-ravaged scene. The vestiges of war and the ruined encampment dot the contemporary landscape, conjuring graphic projections of the bloody past even as the speaker contemplates serenity and idyllic countryside of another age. These final lines of the poem are among those that the critic from the *Monthly Review* found “well-finished and beautiful” (43-4):

Though Time with Rapid wing, has swept away

Forgotten ages since that well fought day:

Ev'n now, their rising graves this spot disclose,

And Shepherds wonder how the hillocks rose!

Ev'n now, the precinct of their camp remains,

And Danebury Hill, the name it still retains.

Oe'r those romantic mounds, whene'er I stray,

And the rude vestiges of war survey;

Fair gratitude shall mark<sup>22</sup>, with smile serene

The alter'd aspect of the pleasing scene.

There, where the crowded camp spread terror round,

See! waving harvests cloath the fertile ground!

See! smiling villages adorn the plain,  
Where desolation spread her iron reign!  
How fair the meads where winding waters flow,  
And never-fading verdure still bestow!  
While stretch'd beyond, wide cultur'd fields extend  
And wood-crown'd<sup>23</sup> hills those cultur'd fields defend!

But ah! too faint my numbers to display  
The various charms that rise in rich array!  
One peaceful spot detains my longing sight,  
There Fancy dwells with ever-fond delight,  
Recalls the scenes of Childhood to her view,  
And lives those pleasing moments o'er anew. (*Danebury* 21-2)

Up to this point the narrative voice, though effusive and even rapturous at times, has maintained a third person perspective—with the occasional narrative break—relating the story as if it were a legend. These final stanzas obliterate the speaker's separation from the poem's subject matter and relate an intensely personal reaction to the contemporary scene where the ancient battle was enacted. The speaker's delight in the natural beauty of the legendary sight renewed with life is unmistakable. It is as if the pastoral scene provokes a more acute emotional response given the tragedy and carnage which once "cloath[ed] the fertile ground." The imagery is reminiscent of ruins and landscapes that would become conventional for the Romantic authors of the next century. The tragedy of



separation enacted and the scene surveyed, the poem concludes with the speaker fondly recalling memories of visiting the sight during her childhood.<sup>24</sup>

Legendary tales like *Danebury* became increasingly popular during the latter part of the eighteenth century. Hannah More, for example, published two such works in 1776: *Sir Eldred of the Bower* and *The Bleeding Rock*, a tragic romance about a noble knight who, in a jealous passion, murders the lost brother of his virtuous beloved. Similarly, Helen Maria Williams, who would later gain notoriety for her series of books, *Letters from France* (1790-1793), published a similar tale entitled *Edwin and Eltrada* in 1782. Of the three, *Edwin and Eltrada* is the only friendship poem. As Marjorie Reeves suggests, it is tempting to suspect that Mary Steele's inspiration for *Danebury* at least in part came from the better-known Helen Maria Williams work (137). Williams's setting is indeed reminiscent of the pastoral and isolated environment of Steele's narrative, but *Edwin and Eltrada*, although their names resemble those of Steele's Emma and Elfrida, are not two heroic females but a maiden and a young man. Moreover, *Danebury* appeared in print approximately three years before Williams's poem.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of its rather gothic preoccupation with a reinvigorated landscape, however, *Danebury* is, as the title suggests, primarily a tale about the *Power of Friendship*. Even more so than the legendary tales of the last half of the century, the friendship poem gained in popularity over the course of the eighteenth century; so much so, in fact, that Paula Backscheider dedicates an entire chapter to the friendship poem in her book *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry*. Women authors such as Katherine Phillips, Anne Finch and Jane Brereton are perhaps best known for producing the exemplars of the type. They and their contemporaries are credited with making the

friendship poem a distinctly female product. According to Backscheider, the friendship poem is “the only significant form of poetry that women inherited from women” (174). Indeed, the vast popularity of the friendship poem and its legacy may be attributed to two factors: the variety of forms the theme assumed and the intimacy with which it was created and integrated into women’s lives (175). To say that the female friendship poem is a virtual cornucopia of poetic conventions would be an understatement. Thematically, it ranges from simple narrative to lyrical and witty advice passing from one woman to another; from odes glorifying the title of friend to chastisements and pithy dialogues. The form of the friendship poem is as wide-spread as its themes. Some boast simple ballad stanzas while others exhibit complex metrical patterns with broad, sweeping lines.

In two poems by the aforementioned Katherine Phillips, hailed by her contemporaries as the “matchless Orinda,” we find examples of two characteristics of the female friendship poem apparent in *Danebury*: first, these poems have a tendency to establish a retired, or secluded, environment in which the female friendships can be exercised freely and without reproof or interruption; second, these poems utilize highly stylized and expressive diction that conveys the importance of female friendship in terms of a spiritual bond or sublime connection. “A Retir’d Friendship. To Ardelia,” illustrates these conventions:

Come, my Ardelia, to this Bower,  
Where kindly mingling souls awhile,  
Let's innocently spend an hour,  
And at all serious follies smile.

Here is no quarrelling for crowns,  
Nor fear of changes in our fate;  
No trembling at the Great One's frowns  
Nor any slavery of state.

Here's no disguise nor treachery,  
Nor any deep conceal'd design;  
From blood and plots this place is free,  
And calm as are those looks of thine.

Here let us sit and bless our stars,  
Who did such happy quiet give,  
As that remov'd from noise of wars,  
In one another's hearts we live. (Phillips 524)

Not only does this poem idealize the kinship between the women in spiritual terms, but it also illustrates yet another convention of the form: a withdrawn or isolated setting wherein the female friends can commune free from censure and daily cares. The retreat in Phillips's poem reveals a telling juxtaposition between the world to which the women are beholden and the world contained within the bower. The friends' retreat is "happy" and "quiet," free from the "treachery," subterfuge, and war that mars the world beyond the peaceful lair. In *Danebury* a friendship remarkably similar to the "mingling souls" of Phillips's poem is exercised in a removed setting, a haven protected from the cares and corruptions of the world beyond. The opening stanzas of *Danebury* establish a setting

clearly removed from the vain pursuits of the social world and a touchingly nostalgic desire for the simplicity of a life led in rustic seclusion far from “Fashion’s slavery” :

‘Twas then retir’d on Brige’s peaceful plains,  
The friend, the father of the neighboring swains;  
The good old Egbert trod life’s humble vale,  
Where noise, nor care, nor vanity assail.  
A little farm his every want supply’d,  
Enough for happiness, though not for Pride:  
From fashion’s splendid slavery exempt,  
Secur’d alike from envy and contempt... (7-8)

Steele’s setting is even more remote given that it is an environment far removed from the present, occupying an ancient and highly romanticized past. Moreover, Emma and Elfrida spend much time engaged in happy fellowship in a setting slightly more rustic than the one proposed for Ardelia but no less secluded:

Beneath an ancient elm’s romantic shade,  
Where rustic toil an humble seat had made;  
When day departing crimson’d o’er the sky  
And glitter’d on the stream that wander’d by...  
While breathing woodbines sweeten’d all the air.  
Each blameless feeling of their hearts unfold. (18)

A second poem by Katherine Philips illustrates more precisely the imagery and character that epitomizes these friendships:

Love, nature's plot, this great creation's soul,  
The being and the harmony of things,  
Doth still preserve and propagate the whole,  
From whence man's happiness and safety springs:  
The earliest, whitest, blessed'st times did draw  
From her alone their universal law.

Friendship's an abstract of this noble flame,  
'Tis love refined and purged from all its dross,  
The next to angels' love, if not the same,  
As strong in passion is, though not so gross:  
It antedates a glad eternity,  
And is an heaven in epitome. (561)

Technically, this poem illustrates the popular reliance on a classical poetic style. An alternating rhyme scheme of iambic meter is the preferred form in this poem as in many of those that passed between the members of the Steele literary circle. Thematically, the poem also illustrates a popular trend associated with the genre, depicting female friendship as ennobling to one's spiritual being by bringing the soul closer to divinity either through or as a result of the connection, a theme most heartily adopted by Steele when composing *Danebury*. In Philips's poem, the spiritual nature of the bond is strengthened by imagery emblematic of God. The female friendship is stripped of its "vulgar" and "gross" connection to the base and carnal laws of "passion" and likened to

the divine love of angels. Indeed, the last two lines identify friendship as a precursor to “eternity” and the “epitome” of heaven itself.

Whereas Philips’s friendships offer a glimpse of heavenly paradise, the strength of the love between Steele’s daring friends earns preservation from heaven in the form of divine intervention. Steele also emphasizes the spirituality and virtue of Emma and Elfrida’s friendship—though theirs is perhaps even more idealized given their lifelong tenderness for one another:

Ev’n in the dawn of childhood’s years,  
Virtue’s instinctive sympathy appears;  
Fair Friendship smil’d upon their natal hour,  
And ere they knew its name, they felt its power.

If Emma’s bosom heav’d a pensive sigh.  
The tear stood trembling in Elfrida’s eye;  
If pleasure gladden’d her Elfrida’s heart,  
Still faithful Emma shar’d the larger part.  
Successive years the tender tie endear’d,  
And each to each a dearer self appear’d.

And oft beneath some spreading shade reclin’d,  
Pour’d forth the warm effusions of the mind:  
Uncheck’d by fear, the rising thought impart,  
And catch the glowing transport of the heart.

*(Danebury 10-11)*

Here, the narrator glorifies the emotional and intellectual attachment shared by the friends, and Elfrida and Emma are depicted as reveling in the bond of perfect empathy and kinship. One might even imagine the “warm effusions” which pass between Emma and Elfrida are like those which passed in correspondence between Steele and her own dear friends.

Backscheider points out that such identification with a sister-soul is a major theme of the friendship poem (176). In this isolated pastoral setting, the young friends are able to achieve and enact an equality of mind and reciprocal affection denied most eighteenth-century women in their daily lives. Such manifestations of friendship are not uncommon within the female poetic of the eighteenth century; many poems of this type “present friendship as a serious rival to marriage” (176). In fact this rivalry was a potentially dangerous adversary to the eighteenth-century marriage (Backscheider 184). Friendship poems, in their idealization of female companionship, represented to many of the young women who read and wrote them the possibility of a happy life without marriage. The relationship between Emma and Elfrida represents such a life. The girls are friends wholly of their own accord; they are equals, sharing similar interests and a mutual regard for one another, posing a striking contrast to many eighteenth-century male-female relationships.

Indeed, the only male influences in the world of Emma and Elfrida are the venerable father, Edgar, who symbolizes the steady and comforting hand of the reigning but asexual patriarchy, and the aged Delphic hermit, whose chastity and reclusion make him a harbinger of God, sent to save Emma’s life following her noble sacrifice. Indeed,

*Danebury* is almost entirely devoid of men. Robert B. Shoemaker, in his book *Gender in English Society 1650-1850*, suggests that heroic female characters like Emma and Elfrida, found in the popular ballads from the latter part of the eighteenth century, were appealing because of their ability to subvert conventional gender assumptions (39). When Elfrida follows her father into the battle, eventually intercepting the poisoned arrow destined for him, she invokes this popular “woman as warrior” image to which Shoemaker is referring. Elfrida is not the typical damsel in distress; instead, she enacts an altruistic self-sacrifice, saving one of the only two male characters in the narrative. In entering the battlefield, Elfrida defies convention, entering a realm conventionally occupied by men. In rendering her character’s actions as self-determined and possibly heroic, Steele grants her characters an independent agency she herself lacked.

There is, however, a third, more threatening and ostensibly masculine force at work in this poem. It comes in the form of the warriors who are to fight on the field at Danebury. Though they are never physically depicted, they are the ever-present force which encroaches upon and destroys the happy tranquility of the pastoral. The father and the sage do not fall into the same category as they are innocuous, patriarchal figures who would offer no threat to the female friendship. An allegoric reading of the poem might even suggest that the warriors could represent the ever-present threat of marriage. Ironically, it is the “piercing” of this “poison’d arrow” that separates Elfrida from her Emma, and later Emma from Elfrida, much as marriage might separate unwilling female friends as they are called to perform the conventional duties of wife and mother. Ultimately, it is one of these nondescript warriors who wounds the daring Elfrida and enacts the primary tension of the narrative: the separation of the friends.



## CHAPTER 4

### MARY STEELE'S "SPRING, AN ODE" AND THE TRADITION OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY RETIREMENT POETRY

Much like the friendship poems discussed in the previous chapter, odes to the various seasons were highly popularized forms of expression during the second half of the eighteenth century as authors increasingly turned their attention to nature as the ultimate source of poetic inspiration. Published in 1730, Thomson's *Seasons* has long been lauded as one of the one earliest nature poems within the English literary canon. Composed of over 5000 lines of blank verse in its final form, it is also one of the most extensive. Thomson's subject matter is no less than what is promised by the title; the seasons are examined successively, beginning with spring and ending with winter. The landscape of each season is depicted with vivid and varied imagery and acute observations of the natural world. Moreover, Thomson's *Seasons* conveys a convincing understanding of the ecological and spiritual harmony of nature, a recognition of it as a source of artistic inspiration, and an awe-inspired appreciation for the hand that created it. All are characteristics of a burgeoning poetic aesthetic that would define much of the poetry of the latter half of the century, an aesthetic that would also dominate much of the poetry written by the literary young women within the Steele literary circle.

The subsequent widespread popularity of Thomson's poem prompted generations of writers who emulated the style and adapted the themes of nature and retirement to suit their own purposes. Paula Backscheider asserts that this is especially true of women poets such as Anne Finch, Elizabeth Carter, and Hester Chapone, all of whom viewed nature as

an “aesthetic experience” and thus “saw the possibility for a feminine sublime” (266). In her examination of eighteenth century women poets, Bacscheider identifies this body of work as the “poetry of retreat,” or “retirement poetry,” and dedicates an entire chapter to an examination of this rather fluid genre (233). In spite of the innumerable variations that exist among female retirement poems, the common motifs of the poetic are the isolated reflection of the poet—generally in a rural or natural environment wherein the poet is free “from censorious scrutiny and pressure” and the cares of a vain and busy world—and the availability of “discretionary time” for contemplation (262). It seems that retirement poetry was especially appealing to women of the eighteenth century because of its adaptability and, much like the friendship poems, the withdrawn and isolated environment upon which the form insists.

The creative process for such a poem requires the individual’s withdrawal from the world, generally for the purpose of private reflection, a hard-won luxury for most eighteenth-century women, and judging from the collection of her unpublished works, a much favored pastime of Mary Steele. An excerpt from an “Elegy written July 21<sup>st</sup> 1770” exemplifies the longing for solitude and time for private reflection that not only defines retirement poetry as a whole, but is also a major characteristic of Steele’s poetry in general:

Escaped from Scenes of Vanity & Noise

Where gaudy Phantoms charm the gazing Eye

From airy Pleasures & tumultuous Joys

To thy kind Arms Oh Solitude I fly

(Steele Collection 5/2)

The poet finds peace and solace from the sites and sounds of the “Vanity and Noise” of society in the kindness of solitude. In other poems, conventional themes of the retirement poem are exemplified, as the poet revels in rustic environments and applauds the virtues of time spent away from daily cares and the pressures of society. Another unpublished poem, “A Reflection Wrote in 1768,” illustrates the isolated meditation of nature that defines retirement poetry:

What sweet Delight these rural scenes afford  
These o'er the Heart diffuse a tranquil Joy  
And lead the restless Mind to Meditation  
On the vast wonders of creating Skill.  
Shines not a painted Insect or a flow'r  
But speaks the sovereign Hand of Natures Lord.  
O How superior are the harmless Joys  
Of Meditation in a sweet retirement  
(Steele Collection 5/14/1)

In this excerpt Steele, employs the themes, attitudes, and language typical of the retirement poem: solitary appreciation of a pastoral scene, a nature-based aesthetic, and stylistically sentimental and expressive diction. Here, as in so many of Mary Steele’s unpublished works, the observation of nature leads to meditation of the divine creator, and so the discourse turns from external appreciation of the scene to more metaphysical ponderings. The contemplation of nature is thus intrinsically linked to the contemplation of God.

The first of the two odes that accompany *Danebury*, “Spring, an Ode,” fits seamlessly into the literary tradition established by Thomson and refined throughout the century. In this homage to spring, traditional images of the season abound and a careful survey of the bucolic scene provokes a descriptive reverie. The simple appreciation of the scene is complicated, however, as the meditation shifts into a metaphorical contemplation of man’s physical and spiritual existence. The metaphor that develops is a conventional one: the changing seasons are linked to the corresponding stages of life. As the ode progresses, the meditative reverie imbued with a nature-based aesthetic becomes a vehicle for a spiritual epiphany, an archetypal pattern since female retirement poems “almost invariably rise beyond melancholy to religious revelation, and their poetry can often be traced along a path leading to the sublime nature description” (Backscheider 248).

The poem begins with a conventional invocation to the appropriate muse:

At length, my hand resumes the silent lyre,  
At length attempts to tune the jarring string<sup>26</sup>:  
Come, gentle rural muse, my breast inspire,  
To hail the blest approach of welcome Spring.

Awake! awake the raptur’d strain!  
To sing the Hill, the Grove, the Plain!  
And paint the beauties of the scenes I love.  
Through my cold breast, diffuse thy vital power,  
And wake my languid heart to joy,

With smiling pleasure crown the vernal hour,  
And be his praise my blest employ,  
Who crowns with beauty every field and grove! (*Danebury* 23-4)

The invocation of the “gentle rural muse” indicates retreat from the rigors and demands of the world as the poet conjures an environment and enters a space well suited to isolated reflection and meditation. The speaker calls upon the “welcome Spring” both for its fair landscapes and its power to inspire her song and awaken the heart to warmth and life. Spring’s approach heralds changes in the speaker too. Spring provides not only a pleasing and familiar aesthetic experience, but also an internal reanimation as it awakens the lethargic and melancholy heart to “joy.”

The “rural muse” is called upon not only to inspire adequate praise for the beauty of the vernal landscape but also to transport the poet from languor to elation, from creativity’s gloomy absence to the blessed productivity of spring:

Revive those dear sensations of delight,  
Of late effac’d by sorrow’s ruthless hand:  
Lost in the gloom of pale affliction’s night,  
Are all the fairy scenes which fancy plann’d.  
Dear happy hours! And are you ever fled?  
Are Hope and sprightly Fancy dead?  
And shall their power no more this bosom warm?  
No more creation’s varied beauties Charm? (*Danebury* 24)

The reawakening of nature is metonymically linked to the productivity and emotional state of the poet. Figuratively, spring becomes the embodiment of the fertile imagination

that has been dormant, in a sort of imaginative winter. From the emphatic lines that follow, however, one can assume that the muse has acquiesced to the poet's plea:

Nature calls, awake to joy!

See, Creation smiles around!

Genial Spring, profusely throws

Her vivid mantle o'er the ground!

Beauty pencils every vale!

Music breathes in every gale! (*Danebury* 24)

Here the poetic meter shortens to catalectic trochaic tetrameter used by writers from Shakespeare to Blake—except the fourth line which is iambic tetrameter and provides a nice balance to the catalectic meter. Though the poem frequently deviates from an otherwise traditional iambic pentameter, this division bears the most remarkable and circumscribed metrical variation in the poem. The effect of the altered meter is that of a quickened movement, a briskening of the pace of the poem, as if we are being hurried along as the season awakens, and the poet's inspiration begins to take form. Echoing the excitement and the quickening pace of the poetic line is the smattering of exclamatory marks that punctuate each thought as the arrival of spring gently draws the morose poet from "sorrow's ruthless hand." The excitement of the moment is almost palpable as the poet views with obvious pleasure the sensory delights of the season. Moreover, the use of the verb form of the word "pencil" is a subtle reminder of the poet's occupation as Beauty personified paints the landscape. The imagery of the next stanza shifts the audible change in the scene:

The artless warblings of the woodland choir

A higher sense of bliss to me impart,  
A sweeter transport their wild notes inspire,  
Than all the modulated strains of art.  
'Tis nature swells their little throats,  
Her bounty tunes their varied notes! (*Danebury* 25)

As if in response to nature's burgeoning spring the birds too begin their song. The speaker finds "bliss" in the "artless warblings" of the birds, which have in them the ability to inspire a "sweeter transport" than all the "modulated strains of art," a poignant juxtaposition since poetry too is an art. Art, then, assumes a rather pejorative cast as the speaker sings the praises of the humble "woodland choir." Metaphorically, the warbler awakened to nature's call may represent the speaker whose "jarring strains" parallel the "wild notes" of the artless songbird, a rather apt metaphor for Mary Steele herself. Indeed, the poem itself seems in part a gentle resistance to strict poetic conventions. The meter, though consistently iambic, vacillates in the number of beats per line, sometimes dropping the fifth foot, in places adding a sixth, or even a half-foot without adhering to any clear pattern of deviation.<sup>27</sup>

The poet seems to identify with the songbirds that are unfettered by the restrained machinations of form imposed on the artist. The identification of the poet with an animal—generally small and innocuous—is a common motif in retirement poetry (Bakscheider 138). If Steele does indeed see something of herself in the creatures, then the metaphor is complicated in the following stanza:

Ye sportive youths, who range the spacious down,  
Or seek the close recesses of this grove;

Let sweet humanity your bosoms move,  
And spare!—oh spare  
These sweet inhabitants of air!  
So shall their songs harmonious flow,  
And cheer the heart oppress'd with woe;  
While with their melody, the fields and groves resound. (*Danebury* 25)

The empathy exhibited here for the songbirds is not surprising, but the accompanying fear for their safety at the hands of some “sportive youths” is perplexing. If the poet and songbird are analogous in this passage, as both makers of artless but harmonious songs, then it bears the question: what is the threat that the poet perceives? It may be that she simply fears critical or public response to her verse.

The stanza that follows conveys the change of seasons—from spring to summer and summer to autumn, and the formulaic movement of the retirement poem begins to take shape:

Th’ unfolding groves now smile in living green,  
And verdure sweetly steals o’er every scene:  
A fainter tinge first paints the opening leaves,  
Soft as the hours of youth’s unfolding bloom;  
But soon the grove a deeper dye receives,  
And stronger tints the scenes of life assume.  
Deeper and deeper grows the spreading green,  
In Summer’s glowing beauties drest;  
Till Autumn mild embrown the scene,



And o'er the groves and lawns extend her dusky vest. (*Danebury* 26)

The change in seasons is marked by the accompanying shift in the visual imagery of the scene. Color imagery is employed to mark the passage of shifting seasons. The faint “verdure” of new spring deepens into the “deeper dye” of summer, and then gives way to the “mild” earthy tones of autumn. The poet then contemplates the impending arrival of the “human Autumn” also:

The human Autumn too, will soon arrive,

Swift as the rapid wing of time can fly!

When the tir'd mind no new delights revive,

And all the landscape fades upon the eye.

When youth's sweet transports please no more,

And manhood's busy scenes are o'er:

When the exhausted passions sink to rest,

And no unpleasing calm steals o'er the pensive breast. (*Danebury* 26)

The speaker anticipates the all too swift approach of age. The “sweet transports of youth” fall by the wayside as the “tir'd mind” can no longer find pleasure in the delights of youth or, it would seem, of nature. The faded landscapes no longer incite the exuberant passions of the imagination as they did in youthful spring. In this season the aged sets aside inspiration and fancy and allows the “exhausted passions” to rest. The last line of the stanza reiterates the tone that develops in this stanza. The “human Autumn” brings tranquility, “no unpleasing calm,” but perhaps a pensive bitter-sweet retirement, removed from the cares of “manhood's busy scenes.”

As in nature, Autumn gives way to Winter, and so the poem turns to such a scene:

Ah! soon these smiling groves shall wear  
The melancholy traces of decay!  
When the rude hand of Winter drear  
Strips of its charms the leafy spray  
The falling leaves sink to their native earth,  
And mingle with the clay that gave them birth.  
Thus fade the transient human race  
When Age extends his wintry gloom!  
The graceful form, the beauteous face,  
Thus silent sink into the tomb. (*Danebury 27*)

Winter is treated with less ambiguity than autumn as its “rude hand” extends a “wintry gloom” over a lifeless scene. It is not a far reach from such an observation to reflect upon the similar finite nature of man’s physical existence. Such is the path that Steele’s reflections take. Images of life and nature in full bloom give way to images of death and decay. The bounty of the Earth yields to the necessity of passing time, and the once vibrant and idyllic scene becomes charmless and dreary. Here the poem assumes a melancholy and fatalistic tone.

The next stanza recalls the cycle of the year and the seasons, reminding us that Nature is called to a resurrection from the decay of its former self:

Soon shall the year revolve its constant round,  
And bid the groves their wonted charms resume:

Soon, Spring returning paint the russet ground,  
And bid the verdure spring, the daisy bloom.  
But Life's quick changing scenes return no more,  
Pale age no more shall smile in youthful prime;  
No second spring its faded charms restore,  
Or heal the ravages of wasting time. (*Danebury 27-8*)

We are reminded that the seasons are a part of a larger earthly cycle, one that poses a stark contrast to the more limited nature of man's physical existence. Here, the regenerative property of nature and its seasons is poignantly juxtaposed against the ephemeral and finite nature of man's earthly condition. Ultimately the meditation leads the speaker into a spiritual epiphany, a glimpse of the divine realm wherein the virtuous are promised the bounty and joy of an everlasting spring:

But see! beyond this transient scene  
Eternal Spring its beams display!  
The dawn of Heaven's resplendent day!  
All blissful, all unclouded, and serene!  
Then shall the forms of human race  
Renew'd, with fairer lustre shine  
(If virtue life's short passage grace)  
All undecaying! all divine!

No shade of grief shall cloud that blissful plain,  
But unknown transport ever reign!

Pale Winter there resign his frigid sway,  
And one eternal Spring embloom the Realms of Day.

*(Danebury 28)*

The afterlife is depicted as an eternal spring, a reward for a life of virtue, where grief and winter's decay hold no power; it is a divine, spiritual existence beyond the transient physical world occupied by nature and by man, a place where the "transport" previously linked to the coming of spring resides eternally.

That Steele's "Spring, an Ode" fits the definition of the female eighteenth-century retirement poem is undeniable. The characteristic withdrawal from the world at large, the retreat into nature, and the marked emphasis on the link between nature and God are all archetypal elements of the form. The natural descriptions are rendered secondary to both the creative inspiration and spiritual understanding to which they lead. In fact, in suggesting that "a reflective process is almost always being driven by, or going on behind, the descriptions and the final resolution in retirement poetry" and that "landscape and natural scenes are emblems of nature as a principle of order" and of the creator, Paula Backscheider might have been describing Steele's body of nature poetry specifically (261).

The theme of retirement is a recurring one for Steele; however, in the second of the two odes Steele published in this volume, nature is little more than an ideal scene rendered a passive victim in a land governed by Tyranny.

## CHAPTER 5

### “LIBERTY, AN ODE” AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

There are two manuscript copies of “Liberty, an Ode” in the Steele Collection, both of which bear markings that identify the poem as having been produced during the year 1775. The first manuscript (Steele Collection 5/5) bears the title “An Ode finish’d in the year 1775”<sup>28</sup>; the second, transcribed by William Steele, similarly titled “Ode written in 1775,” appears in a copy book containing several of Mary’s unpublished poems (Steele Collection 5/7).<sup>29</sup> Both of the existing manuscripts largely concur with the version of the poem that appears alongside *Danebury* with relatively few exceptions.<sup>30</sup> Except for the addition of punctuation and six instances of variant diction, the manuscript tradition remains largely intact in the publication. Marjorie Reeves points out a third, perhaps less complete, manuscript of the ode that begins with verse four of the printed poem, thus, suggesting that the poem was likely written in 1775, and “that the first three verses were added and the whole polished for publication in 1779” (*Pursuing* 138).

“Liberty, an Ode” is considerably shorter than the other published poems, comprised of just eleven quatrains of rhymed iambic pentameter. In spite of its relative brevity, however, this last ode is perhaps even more provocative given its controversial political theme. As the title of the publication suggests, this ode glorifies the virtues and bounties of Liberty even as it villanizes the antitheses of Liberty: Oppression and Tyranny. Its form is characteristic of Steele’s other poems in its development. Here, as in both *Danebury* and “Spring, an Ode,” Steele employs an array of effusive natural imagery and an abundance of symbolic personifications. Together, these concrete

elements work to illustrate a philosophical or abstract meaning—in this instance a political response to the threat of the impending American Revolution. The tranquil images of natural surroundings that abound in the earliest stanzas of the poem are replaced in the later stanzas by images of desolation at the hands of the more abhorrent personifications. The ode depicts nature's affinity for the stability and benevolence Liberty affords even as it envisions the unnatural and deleterious effects brought about by Tyranny and Oppression. The poem is particularly poignant in the way it conveys the effects of these forces on nature, by extension suggesting that tyranny and oppression are essentially unnatural, a theme which is telling given Steele's almost Romantic proclivity for nature. Moreover the poem's theme is particularly surprising given not only its controversial political implications but also the gender of the author.

The poem alludes to the escalating political instability between England and the American colonies in the days and months leading up to the poem's composition in 1775, a period of conflict that would ultimately escalate into the American Revolution the following year. Mary Steele's ode is provocative given its clear political alignment with the American cause, a cause which Nonconformists championed as the tensions between the British government and the colonies escalated. Steele was not the only young Nonconformist author to compose verses in support of the Americans. At least one such poem can be found in William Steele's commonplace book, which, as I have already mentioned, contains a pointed regard for other Nonconformist female authors. Helen Maria Williams, author of *Edwin and Eltruda* (1782) and *Peru* (1784), also published an *Ode on the Peace* (1783) in the wake of the American Revolution.

In spite of the overwhelming gravity and cultural implications of the larger theme, however, the structure of the Mary Steele's verse lends this ode a surprising lightness. Indeed, of the three published pieces, "Liberty" is the most lyrical; the buoyant, often effusive sentiments, alternating rhyme scheme, and smattering of alliteration and assonance are almost musically arranged. The poem begins with relatively images of landscapes and rural scenes, both majestic and quaint:

How fair yon Landscape rises to the Eye!  
Adorn'd by Cultivation's bounteous Hand,  
There<sup>31</sup> Hills whose azure Summits pierce the Sky,  
And all the wide-stretch'd Prospect round command!

The mingled Light and Shade harmonious blend,  
Here<sup>32</sup>, Towns and scatter'd Hamlets grace the Scene;  
There, the brown woods their dusky Shades extend,  
And there the Meadows smile in living Green.

*(Danebury 29)*

Such attention to nature is typical of Steele. The diction reveals an evident love of the scenes afforded by the speaker's view, be they literal or imaginary. The landscape is picturesque, as if "adorn'd," "blend[ed]," and "shade[ed]" by some visionary artist. The verse is dotted with imagery that conjures a scene of the harmony and bounty of the peaceful pastoral as well as the quiet majesty of the uncultivated wild. In one instance, the speaker revels in the beauty and fruitfulness of a cultivated land; in the next, she reverently depicts a scene that seems something more of an untamed wilderness. In fact

it seems possible that these two seemingly divergent depictions are not even meant to be read as a single physical location, but two. The use of relatively ambiguous spatial references, such as “yon,” “here” and “there,” hints at a developing juxtaposition of the two scenes even though the stanzas that follow seem to offer little overt evidence for such a reading. However, it may account for the puzzling diversity of the imagined landscape in this passage—a united image at once encompassing the cultivated landscape of the British island and the vast expanses of its daughter colony in the Americas. In short, the apparent contrast in the types of images might serve the emerging theme of conflict between two cultures that should be in accord with one another as nature demands. In any light, however, it does seem as if Steele is attempting to encompass, at least in part, the diversity and beauty of the British landscape.

The nature based imagery continues to build in the next stanza as it moves from the landscape to the creatures of the wild:

Thro' liquid Air, what melting Music floats!  
Their mingled Songs the raptur'd Warblers raise,  
But chief the Sky-lark's wildly-quivering Notes  
Swell the full Anthem of her Maker's Praise!

*(Danebury 30)*

Here again, as in the previous ode, Steele chooses innocuous varieties of fowl to develop her imagery. Notably, the warblings of the songbirds are described neither as melodious nor sweet, but as “raptur'd” and “wildly-quivering,” as if impassioned by some unseen force. This stanza advances the momentum of the ode. Specifically, the diction adds a sense of disquiet or perhaps even excitement to the otherwise peaceful scene, thus



introducing an animated element to the observational tone of the first two stanzas. The shifting tone is further developed in the stanzas that follow as the speaker addresses her subject in effusive strains:

Oh say, Britannia, what mysterious Charm<sup>33</sup>

Diffuses Beauty o'er thy favour'd Isle,

Bids genuine Transport every Bosom warm,

And all thy loveliest Scenes more lovely smile?

Tis sacred Liberty—her magic Reign

To Nature's scenes can unknown charms impart,

With riper Harvests cloath the fertile plain,

And swell with transport the expanding Heart. (*Danebury* 30)

Liberty, whose reign well behooves nature's bounty and charm, is personified as a majestic monarch, queen and ruler over Britain's "favor'd isle." She is a beneficent sovereign who blesses the land and her subjects with the fruits of her reign. She is the source of Britain's beauty; likewise, she is the producer of fertility. Under Liberty's rule, there is great surplus: the land flourishes and is fruitful even as the spirit expands.

However, the next stanzas interrupt the effusive reverie:

Ah! what avails the bounties<sup>34</sup> Nature yields,

If rude Oppression's ever-grasping Hand

Snatches the product of the fertile Fields

And scatters Desolation o'er the Land?

Ah! what avail the lovely bloom of Spring,  
The fairest Landscape of the fairest Clime!  
If civil Discord wave her baleful Wing,  
And Wars dread horrors mark the flight of time!

*(Danebury 31)*

Thus juxtaposed against Liberty's effects are those of "rude Oppression" and "civil Discord." Oppression is characterized as a destructive force that brings "desolation" and despair. The image of Oppression's "ever-grasping hand" "snatch[ing]" Liberty's bounteous yield insinuates that oppression is essentially motivated by greed, an unnatural greed that ruins and devours. Similarly, Discord is a force deleterious to Nature. In a provocative choice of images, the speaker suggests that the fruits of spring are to no avail if strife among brethren "waves her baleful wing," suggesting some type of bird, a figure generally innocuous in Steele's poetry. Furthermore, aviary imagery suggests too that there is something of nature in Discord, as if it is essentially a natural force that is nevertheless destructive. Adding to the horrific vision conjured by the presence of Oppression and Discord, is a personification of Tyranny:

Such Scenes the historic page unfolds to view,<sup>35</sup>  
When Tyranny in sanguine garb array'd,  
O'er Albions Isle<sup>36</sup> his baleful Influence threw,  
Her Counsels guided<sup>37</sup> and her Scepter sway'd. *(Danebury 31)*

Here and in the stanzas that follow, the speaker alludes to a history of Tyranny in Britain, one that is intrinsically linked the prophetic vision of the poem and the history of Dissent. Like Liberty, Tyranny is personified as a sovereign, but this time the pronoun use

indicates a masculine force, one that is as malignant and bloody as Liberty is bounteous. Furthermore, Tyranny is depicted as malevolent, clothed in robes the color of blood. Thus, the imagery poses Liberty as Nature's gracious ally against Tyranny and Oppression as Nature's severe nemesis.

History continues to haunt the vision even as the unnatural repercussions of "Tyranny's baleful influence" are further explored in the two stanzas that follow:

The Voice of Nature, Friendship, heard no more,  
Amid the din of universal Strife!  
A Brother at a Brother's hand implores,  
Implores, but ah in vain! His forfeit Life!<sup>38</sup>

Imagination shudders at the thought!  
While Terror whispers---See these Scenes return!  
See! with a thousand latent horrors fraught,  
Again the flames of civil Discord burn! (*Danebury* 31)

In these lines, the ode's momentum builds to a climactic pitch. Exclamatory phrasing is the rule rather than the exception and the diction assumes a dramatic and highly emphatic tone. The imagined scene affords a disquieting vision of chaos, the horrifying return of war, ruin, and bloodshed as mercy is restrained and enmity entertained once again. As Marjorie Reeves suggests, the struggle for liberty is deeply embedded in the Nonconformist understanding of history in which Mary Steele would have been raised. Indeed, any struggle for liberty resounded deeply with eighteenth-century Nonconformists, and in Reeves's estimation these lines bear witness to the

Nonconformist “remembrance of the great struggle for liberty and the victory won in the seventeenth century” (Reeves, *Pursuing* 122); a remembrance of history that fueled Nonconformist anxieties against tyranny in any form and which aroused Nonconformist sympathy for the American cause prior to the American Revolution. This sympathy is evident in the final lines of the ode as the prophetic visionary then pleads to the heavens to forestall the imminent and repetitious approach of the awful scene:

Avert it Heaven! Avert th’ impending Storm!  
Tho’ Vengeance hover o’er a guilty Land!  
When rig’rous Justice lifts her awful Form,  
Let Mercy still restrain her lingring Hand. (*Danebury* 32)

It is difficult to view these final lines of the poem as anything other than a valiant plea for peace, a peace that will be attained is “Tyranny” is subdued and “Liberty” allowed victory.

Given the tumultuous relationship between Great Britain and the American colonies during the days and months leading up to 1775, it seems obvious that Steele’s ode is responding to the mounting political fervor between the two, and that the cause of the American colonies has claimed the author’s imagination, but this cause is also an recurring theme in letters that pass between Silvia and Myrtilla at this time. A series of letters from Jane Attwater illustrates a surprising political awareness and fervor for the cause of the crisis given the girls’ provincial surroundings and the eighteenth-century attitudes regarding women and political discussion. A letter from Myrtilla, dated February 20, [17]75, illustrates not only her keen interest in the developing crisis but also the support at least one Nonconformist family offered the American cause:

this Afternoon Colonel Bathurst came to solicit the same favour as he was pleased to call it my Bro<sup>r</sup> desired to know their political sentiments spoke freely to y<sup>m</sup> told y<sup>m</sup> he was determined to give his vote to none who is against the Americans—y<sup>e</sup> latter told him he was for y<sup>m</sup> but as my bro<sup>r</sup> was partly preingaged to the Earl of Radnor he could not absolutely give him his vote Saturday y<sup>e</sup> Earl sent to him to desire it after w<sup>ch</sup> my Bro<sup>r</sup> wrote to his Lordship giving him his Vote upon condition y<sup>t</sup> y<sup>e</sup> person he should nominate was of y<sup>e</sup> same political sentiments with himself not otherwise—don't you think he is a firm advocate of our distant our worthy Brethren—

(Attwater MSS.)

Though we do not know what Silvia's response to her friend's comments were, it is safe to say, given "Liberty, an Ode," that Silvia and Myrtila must have agreed on the matter if not wholly, to some extent. In the same letter, Jane uses the common analogy of the patriarch and his offspring to question the moral ambivalence of a country that could willingly make war against its own citizens:

how can the father proclaim war against part of his once beloved Offspring & those Friends who once lived in delightful Harmony together perhaps in the same place in the same family shall they now rush into the field of Battle & lift up the hostile weapons against those they did & those they still love Nature recoils at the thought humanity shudders at the dreaded prospect "a house divided against itself cannot stand" &c I fear the fall of England is at hand— I am realy [sic] much concerned about our

present situation & I think every individual should lay it to heart.—but I know not your opinion on these matters perhaps we are not of the same mind if so you will excuse my prolixity on the subject— (Attwater MSS.)

Jane's comment regarding the "fall of England" may in retrospect seem an overly dramatic statement, but it may also help to clarify the ambiguous ending of Steele's ode. If Jane feared the fall of England as a result of the conflict with the colonies, then it is possible that Steele shared her sense of foreboding. The ever-increasing tensions are further reflected in another letter wherein Attwater questions Silvia as to her father's opinion and laments the certainty of the up and coming conflict:

w<sup>t</sup> is your papas opinion on y<sup>e</sup> Ministry's &c present proceedings? as I much fear y<sup>e</sup> Event of these Deliberations— there are now Universal preparations making for war— (Attwater MSS.)

Marjorie Reeves suggests that it is likely through their Nonconformist connections to Bristol that Mary Steele and her society of young women were able to attain their surprising political awareness though they lived far from the political centers of England (Reeves, *Pursuing* 22). Of particular interest are the sermons and letters of Caleb Evans, a noted Baptist minister from Bristol and a common acquaintance of our literary coterie. Like many Dissenters, Caleb Evans sympathized with the plight of the American Revolutionaries, going so far as to even preach from the pulpits a message of liberty. In a sermon entitled "British Constitutional Liberty,"<sup>39</sup> Evans sides decidedly with the American cause, proclaiming taxation without representation to be against the liberties granted every English citizen by the British Constitution, and linking the plight of those seeking religious liberty in England's history to the contemporary struggle for

civil liberty. In an impassioned speech, he reminds loyal Englishmen that they “are called to liberty” and bound by history, the British Constitution and conscience to a careful preservation of liberty, “both civil and religious” (Evans 28). Furthermore, Evans briefly reconstructs the history of tyranny and oppression in England. He connects the cause of religious freedom during the tyrannous and perilous age of religious persecution of sixteenth and seventeenth century Britain to the contemporary cause of American civil liberty. Evans’s view of history uncannily echoes those imagined scenes of horror already examined in Steele’s ode. In fact, even the words of Caleb Evans resound in Steele’s final poem. Whereas Steele’s “Imagination shudders at the thought” (31) of the merciless horrors of war, Evans asserts that “humanity shudders at the thought” of the oppression of liberty and the likelihood of war (20).

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

As a female poet who published anonymously during the eighteenth century, Mary Steele would have already trodden on the out-skirts of acknowledged literary achievements of the era; as a provincial young woman far removed from the hub of literary activity, it is not surprising to discover her only published work sank to the depths of relative obscurity after its publication sometime around 1779. Mary Steele's poetry remains largely unpublished with the exception of one small obscure volume and another single poem published separately. In her published and unpublished works, however, Mary Steele's poetic voice is colored by middle-class provincial living and a network of Nonconformist friends and family members.

The centerpiece of her short publications, *Danebury*, exhibits the popular conventions associated with the popular friendship poems to which eighteenth century women were drawn, but Steele's imaginative narrative subverts conventional gender assumptions of the era. Her second poem, "Spring, an Ode," illustrates the deep sense of piety that permeates the writings of her Nonconformist contemporaries, though her effusive regard for nature and the spiritual epiphanies derived from the contemplation of such scenes is more characteristic of later Romantic poets. Finally, "Liberty, an Ode" creatively articulates her Nonconformist background in the form of a political poem supporting the American cause for liberty—a surprisingly controversial accomplishment for a provincial young lady during the eighteenth century.



An examination of the poems and letters that passed between Mary Steele and her literary coterie provides a unique glimpse into the literary development of a special group of Nonconformist provincial young women during the latter half of the eighteenth century and into the published works of Steele herself. As a part of a the collective identity of the extended literary, Nonconformist network—an identity which might be characterized in terms of its notably Dissenting views with regards to religion, female education, and even national politics—Mary Steele’s imaginative verse bears witness not only to the existing female poetic aesthetic of the late eighteenth century but also to the particular concerns of eighteenth-century Dissent. A closer examination of Mary Steele’s published poems is well warranted given the unique cultural perspective offered by this particular young woman.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The title page of the volume is not dated; however, *Danebury* received critical approbation in a review in the July edition of *Monthly Review* in 1779. See Chapter Two for more evidence as to the publication of the volume.

<sup>2</sup> The Nonconformist empathy for the American cause is explored more fully in the chapter dealing with Steele's poem "Liberty, an Ode."

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the figures mentioned in this chapter, Mary Steele also wrote letters to the Miss Mores of Bristol, her half-sisters, her niece, and Caleb Evans of Bristol.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah More (1745-1833)—A noted author and contemporary acquaintance of Mary Steele as evidenced in the Steele Collection. More was also known among the celebrated "Bluestocking" circles of the late eighteenth century. During her active literary career, More produced plays and poetry as well as more didactic works such as *Essays on Various Subjects: Principally Designed for Young Ladies* (1777) and *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) (Lonsdale 323-5).

<sup>5</sup> Anne Cator was William Steele's second wife. Mary Steele's father, William Steele (Philander) was the product of William Steele's first marriage to Anne Froud; thus, Anne Cator would have served as a step-mother to William's children: William and Anne, the father and much favored aunt of the young Mary Steele who wrote the letter.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Maria Williams (1761?-1827) is often lauded as one of the most radical dissenting female voices of the era. The two works included in William Steele's commonplace book were published in 1784 and 1783 respectively. Williams's first

publication, *Edwin and Eltruda, a Legendary Tale* (1782) is discussed briefly in the next chapter as it is thematically linked to Mary Steele's *Danebury*. Helen Maria Williams is well known for her volumes of letters from France, and in October 1793 she was imprisoned by Robespierre (Lonsdale 413).

<sup>7</sup> Anna Seward (1742-1809) was the daughter of Thomas Seward, Canon of Lichfield who encouraged her education and early literary endeavors. A close correspondent with Mary Scott after her publication of *The Female Advocate* connects Seward directly to the Steele circle (Ferguson 8); thus, possibly explaining in part the inclusion of her works and her signature in William Steele's collection. Both Seward and Williams, like most dissenters, championed the cause of the French Revolutionists; however, Seward resends her support after later developments and in 1793 refuted Helen Maria Williams's continued enthusiasm for the cause (Lonsdale 311-12).

<sup>8</sup> While this is the date given in *Pursuing the Muses*, Reeves's article contradicts this information stating that she was married in 1779, a more conventional age surely, but one that, nevertheless, seems to be inaccurate (Reeves, "Literary" 8).

<sup>9</sup> Reeves contradicts herself in suggesting a distance of 45 miles "across the Somerset border," slightly more than the figure in the article (Reeves, *Pursuing* 47).

<sup>10</sup> A newspaper founded in the nineteenth century, now a much recognized national publication; it is linked in origin and ideology to middle-class interests and connected to the ideology of the dissenting populous.

<sup>11</sup> *Poems on Subjects chiefly Devotional* (1760) and the posthumously published *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose and Verse* (1780).

<sup>12</sup> the word ‘my’ is written above the word ‘this’ in the manuscript

<sup>13</sup> The line alluded to here may refer to a period of mourning of the loss of her Aunt Steele only a few years prior to the dedication of this poem.

<sup>14</sup> The quotation appears in a section titled “Thoughts on Discontent. Mary Steele copied this essay into one of her commonplace books on December 12, 1775 (Steele Collection 5/9/3).

<sup>15</sup> Bodleian Library, shelfmark Mansfield 158.

<sup>16</sup> William Steele’s proposed audience for the reading is outlined in the letter: Dr. Stonehouse, a Bristol Minister; Caleb Evans, a Baptist minister and noted Nonconformist; Hannah More and her sister Martha, acquaintances included in some of the correspondence, the former a published poet and, later, a religious reformer.

<sup>17</sup> The date has been scratched through on the manuscript but what is visible of the original markings appears to correlate with this date. It is written in Attwater’s hand.

<sup>18</sup> Hesper refers to the evening star.

<sup>19</sup> This quotation is taken from Book One of Akenside’s three volume poem. Ironically, the lines preceding this passage allude to one of the most notorious friendships recorded in classical antiquity: the death of Caesar at the hands of his friend, Brutus.

<sup>20</sup> According to Camden, Brige is a legendary Roman settlement—an area that would eventually become Broughton, and the home of the young Mary Steele (Reeves, *Pursuing* 137).

<sup>21</sup> Manuscript copy reads: “My Emma was a dying friend’s request” (5/5/2).

<sup>22</sup> This line of the manuscript copy housed in the Reeves collection reads “May fair gratitude still mark...”(5/5/2)

<sup>23</sup> The manuscript reads: “And yon blue hills...”(5/5/2).

<sup>24</sup> The extempore poem by Hannah More quoted in this chapter confirms Steele’s personal familiarity with the site at some point after the poem was written; however, the lines here quoted from *Danebury* suggest a more long-term intimacy with the landscape of Danebury Hill and its surroundings, not surprising given its proximity to Broughton.

<sup>25</sup> Helen Maria Williams’s tale alludes to the War of the Roses and not an Anglo-Saxon battle as Reeves suggests.

<sup>26</sup> As the speaker “resumes” instruments of her trade and calls for the “gentle rural muse” to inspire her song, we get a sense of the poet’s humility. Indeed, the “jarring string” hardly describes the “humble lay” that follows though “Spring, an Ode” does lack the regular metrical consistency of *Danebury*. In general the ode is constructed with an alternating rhyme in iambic meter with an irregular reliance on strict pentameter. Indeed, “jarring,” is a harsh judgment to place on technical merit of the poem at large since the general cadence of the poem is not destroyed by the shifts in meter, but adds to the overall movement of the poem.

<sup>27</sup> In spite of the inconsistencies in metrical pattern, lines that deviate from the traditional iambic pentameter are generally rhymed, at times sequential, and at times alternating.

<sup>28</sup>This poem is marked near the title “printed.” See Reeves 138, n.45.

<sup>29</sup> This particular manuscript copy bears the title “Ode Written in 1775,” not “Liberty, an Ode (Steele Coll. 5/7).

<sup>30</sup> Discrepancies among the texts are annotated where appropriate in the footnotes throughout this chapter.

<sup>31</sup> Appears as “these” in both 5/5 and 5/7 manuscripts

<sup>32</sup> Appears as “these” in 5/5 and “here” in 5/7, suggestion some revision between the completion of 5/5 and 5/7.

<sup>33</sup> An early version of the poem begins with this verse, omitting the first three verses as well as the ninth (Reeves, *Pursuing* 138).

<sup>34</sup> 5/5 reads “beauties” instead of bounties, 5/7 with the published poem

<sup>35</sup> This stanza and the one that follows most likely alludes a particularly Nonconformist view of the seventeenth century, a history to which Caleb Evans also refers in his sermon on *British Constitutional Liberty*.

<sup>36</sup> Britain

<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, there are two variations in the manuscript copies of the final line of this stanza. In 5/5 the word “girded” has replaced the word “guided” which appears in the final lines of both the published work and the manuscript in 5/7; however, the word “girded” seems far more evocative of the Tyranny’s constraining even as it continues the robed imagery in the second line of the stanza.

<sup>38</sup> Manuscript reads: “Implores in vain, his quickly fleeting Life! (Steele Collection 5/5)

<sup>39</sup> This sermon was preached at Broad-mead, Bristol in November of 1775 and later “printed at the request of many who heard it,” by W. Pine, the same Bristol printer responsible for publishing Mary Steele’s poems.

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