



## NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

### **Narrative Section of a Successful Application**

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and applicants are urged to prepare a proposal that reflects their unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/public-scholar-program> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

**The application format has been changed since this application was submitted.** You must follow the guidelines in the currently posted Notice of Funding Opportunity (see above link).

Project Title: Sister Novelists Before the Brontës: The Misses Porter, Fame, and Misfortune in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain

Institution: Arizona State University

Project Director: Devoney Looser

Grant Program: Public Scholars

NARRATIVE / Devoney Looser  
Sister Novelists Before the Brontës:  
The Misses Porter, Fame, and Misfortune in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain

SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTRIBUTION

The first generations of professional women writers in Great Britain produced some of the most lionized—and most forgotten—names in literary history. Jane Austen and Mary Shelley are colossal figures, whose unusual paths to print established enduring stereotypes of female authorship. By contrast, Jane Porter (1775-1850) and Anna Maria Porter (1778-1832), among the most fêted and bestselling novelists of the early nineteenth century, are now mere footnotes. New data-driven scholarship about literature and publishing in the Romantic period has been helpfully reorienting, allowing us to reconceive individual authors' parts in a big picture. Lives of Austen and Shelley continue to dominate, alongside a slowly growing number of others. Yet few grasp that we still lack well-researched lives and critical studies of some of the most significant female authors of the era. A case in point is the Porters, with no full-length work devoted to their groundbreaking writing, early stardom, waning fame, and late posthumous forgetting.

The book I seek to complete with the support of an NEH Public Scholar Award is poised to be the first literary life of the Porter sisters, drawing on unpublished information found in thousands of surviving letters and manuscripts that remain almost entirely unmined by previous scholars. Each sister deserves to be brought back to prominence in her own right. Their literary innovations, impact, and legacy suggest the need for a series of studies, much less a first. Anna Maria, the younger sister, emerged as a prodigy at an age she claimed was 13, publishing her imaginative *Artless Tales* (1793) and was nothing short of prolific. Elder sister Jane enjoyed the greater fame of the two, after the publication of her bestselling historical novels *Thaddeus of Warsaw* (1803) and *The Scottish Chiefs* (1810). Jane long felt that Sir Walter Scott had stolen some of her method in *Waverley* (1814). According to one source, Scott acknowledged it late in his life. Jane's novels center on Christian sentimental war heroes, feature courageous, cross-dressing heroines, and offer upright moral lessons, set among historical people and actual events. Both sisters' novels depict fierce heroes in battle who return home to shed tears with mothers, sisters, and chaste lovers. The Porters published dozens of volumes of fiction, some collaboratively, most under their own names. Anna Maria also wrote an opera and published poetry, and Jane wrote an ill-fated play. Along with their artist and travel writer brother, Robert Ker Porter (1777-1842), the Porters spent 30 years in the public eye in Great Britain, North America, and Europe, and, for a time, in Asia and South America as well.

Their literary reputations were once global, but they fared poorly in traveling across time. I hope my book will change that. The Porters' lives and careers should resonate far beyond their own histories, because their experiences compel the reframing of popular assumptions about women's authorship, creativity, fame, fortune, and genius. British women authors were not necessarily writing anonymously or in private, although the example of Jane Austen is often used to argue that they were. Nor were they forced to break every social rule in order to pursue authorship, or take their literary cues from great men, as Mary Shelley's story is sometimes misused to argue. The Porters were bold innovators who took personal and professional risks under their own names but who desperately sought to maintain reputations as conventional, polite women. They

sought acquaintance across political and economic lines and lines of social propriety. They sought friendships with celebrity outcasts, especially artists, musicians, and actors, while striving to keep those connections a secret in order to maintain their spotless reputations. The sisters were making up their own rules as they went along, trying to carve out identities as a new kind of public woman in a new mode of professional authorship, when these boundaries were in flux.

The Porters' risk-taking did not lead to financial independence. In part, it's because the fashionable novel would skew male (by numbers and reputation) in the 1820s, and the genre proved especially unwelcoming to older women. It's also because the sisters became the breadwinners, propping up the family's failing fortunes. Their father, a military surgeon, went mad and died young, leaving his widow with five small children. The two sisters would end up supporting not only their mother but, by turns, their three brothers. The eldest was the ne'er-do-well John, who would die in debtor's prison. Next was miserly, despised William, who had financial interests in slave-holding Jamaica and became a physician and author. The sisters were most attached to Robert Ker, a renowned panoramic artist and travel writer who married a Russian princess.

That fairy-tale alliance, which was supposed to be the social and financial making of the family, instead brought greater debt and misery. The Princess was cash-strapped, thanks to Napoleon, but she required a certain style of living. Her showy matrimonial visit to England produced debts that her sisters-in-law shouldered for years thereafter. Indeed, Jane and Anna Maria tried to manage Robert's troubled finances throughout his life. Paying off interest from old debts with earnings from their writings, the Porters could never make ends meet. Their lifelong publishers, the Longmans, often offered small advances on their next novels. It was an arrangement that suited their crisis-to-crisis fiscal reality, but it did not allow for much authorial bargaining power. The Porter sisters, like Scott, tried to write themselves out of crushing debt--information that remains unknown even to experts in the field, because it is so far only described (like much of the detail in this narrative) in unpublished letters.

The Porter sisters became savvier and more jaded in their later lives, but the private correspondence from their more innocent, early years resembles a sparkling novel of manners. Their letters tell of all-night masquerade parties, artful flirting, illicit romance, secret correspondence, social machinations, and unrequited love. They write about their clever dealings with publishers and about rubbing elbows with the day's celebrities. The Porters exuberantly rose from obscurity to fame, but they discovered that it did not produce the happy endings that befall many heroines. Instead, the Porters found themselves exhausted, anxious, and unwell in middle age, single and increasingly desperate for money.

The Misses Porter stood by their men, in life and in fiction, but they discovered how rarely those men stood up for them. As famous women without fortunes, the Porters painfully describe being viewed as romantic liabilities. Anna Maria came to believe that a woman's fame served as the death knell to private happiness. In one letter, she laments that the best men she knows are terrified to choose successful women as wives. Adding to the complication, the Porter sisters' fictional writings themselves may have proved psychological stumbling blocks. Real-life men could not hope to live up to the Porters' perfect heroes. When we tell the story of Jane Austen's life, we often say that she chose to remain single in order to pursue private, anonymous

authorship. That may or may not be true. What my book will return to the conversation is a more sophisticated understanding of the ways in which an educated, middle-class woman's "choosing" a writing career might have masked not just an active refusal, or an alternative lifestyle, but her being culturally forced out of traditional routes to marriage. The ideal male characters it was a courrant for female novelists to create may have dampened the courtship efforts of flawed, real-life suitors, as made and as received. At least one unsympathetic observer felt Anna Maria's experiences of romantic love were warped by her own fiction—and, of course, vice versa.

Anna Maria was a dynamic and passionate woman, whose amorous adventures were poured out in confidential letters to Jane. Anna Maria boldly initiated a secret correspondence with a handsome soldier-stranger, leading to a years' long—and ultimately failed—secret engagement. Later, she was ejected from the estate of a wealthy man she was becoming intimate with. Her dismissal was at the order of his disapproving mother, who opened one of Anna Maria's private letters to Jane and discovered the intrigue. Jane, too, had her romantic scrapes. She describes her surprise at receiving quasi-declarations of love from a clergyman who was engaged to someone else. I've already written about Jane's carrying a lifelong torch for the famous, notorious war hero, Sir Sidney Smith, and its impact on her fiction. Smith would disappoint Jane's hopes by marrying a wealthy widow. Years later, Jane learned from a confidante that Smith had been unfaithful to his wife. When she was presented with letters that proved his adultery, she stunned the confidante by shoving them in the hearth fire and poking them to bits—her own small feat of heroism. After Smith died, Jane assiduously worked to advocate for his monument.

Jane may have destroyed Smith's duplicitous letters, but she seems to have been unable to destroy any of her own. Although she once enjoined her brother Robert never to let the family papers be made public, she also confessed that she couldn't bring herself to get rid of her late sister's letters. As a result, the Porter correspondence offers a seemingly unfiltered treasure trove of information about the habits and mores of the early nineteenth-century literati, as well as the painful complications facing educated women. After Jane and her last surviving brother William died in quick succession, the Porter family papers were offered at auction in a horrifying jumble, in three large, packed sea chests. Most of that lot sold for a pittance to a notorious bibliophile who was attempting to acquire every surviving literary manuscript. The Porter papers lingered on in his tangled estate for a century. By that time, the sisters' lingering literary fame had died out. Jane left evidence that she believed she deserved a biography. She was right. But the materials she would have had someone destroy on her behalf are precisely what will end up making her name once again. The Porter correspondence offers a moving account a lifelong sororal intimacy. It provides the closest firsthand evidence we are likely to get of what it meant to try to make it as a woman writer in a tumultuous age, from the pens of forgotten sisters who had no small hand in constructing that mythical nineteenth-century category, The Authoress.

## WORK PLAN

A year of NEH support would allow me the dedicated writing time needed to complete this book, my fourth. I plan a 120,000-word manuscript to be completed by December 2019. Half of the manuscript is in draft (chapters 1, 3, 5, 8, 9, and 10). I would plan to spend the first half of 2019 (Jan-July) drafting chapters 2, 4, 6, and 7 and the second half (Aug-Dec) revising the whole.

*Proposed Table of Contents*

Introduction: Sister Novelists

Part I: Coming of Age

Chapter One: A Prophecy for Greatness from Genteel Poverty (1770s-1780s)

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Chapter Three: Finding Fame without Fortune in London and Bath (1790s-1800s)

Part II: Women Authors, Beloved and in Love

Chapter Four: Anna Maria Porter's Clandestine Epistolary Lover (1803-1809)

Chapter Five: Jane Porter and the Unattainable War Hero: Sir Sidney Smith

Chapter Six: Anna Maria Porter and the Aristocratic Rake (1809-1817)

Part III: The Trials of Authorship

Chapter Seven: Spinsterhood and the Waning of Celebrity (1810s-1820s)

Chapter Eight: Ruined by Kean: Jane Porter's Failure on the Stage (1810s)

Chapter Nine: Living from Pen to Mouth (1820s-1830s)

Chapter Ten: Jane Porter, Victorian (1830s-1850)

Conclusion: Three or Four Closely Packed Sea-Chests of Unsorted Papers: The Survival of the Porter Correspondence

## COMPETENCIES, SKILLS, AND ACCESS

My third book, *The Making of Jane Austen*, was a crossover book. In its eight months in print, in hardcover, it has sold **(b) (4)**. I have been able to speak to a broad audience on TV (CNN), radio, and in print (*New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Salon*, etc.), as my résumé describes in brief. Although the Porters do not provide the ready audience of general readers that Jane Austen does, I believe I am well poised to bring a study about unknown Romantic-era women, their success, and their struggles to a wider audience.

My research methodology combines traditional archival and digital resource research. I have already traveled to the necessary archival collections, having worked in the voluminous Porter papers over the past 15 years, thanks to short-term fellowships. Approximately 7000 letters and manuscripts are extant at the Huntington Library, the University of Kansas Spencer Library, and the New York Public Library. I have read through these letters once (some twice), taking copious notes. I'm eager to give final shape to the information.

## FINAL PRODUCT/DISSEMINATION

My editor at Johns Hopkins University Press (the publisher of my first three books) reports that she would consider a biographical study of the Porter sisters with interest. An editor at Random House has also indicated he would welcome a chance to consider the proposal. I will approach a trade press first to gauge interest but am committed—because this is the first full-length book of these women writers—to completing an engagingly written book that also provides footnotes, in order that future readers and scholars may retrace my steps as a researcher.

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