

Review of *Sister Novelists: The Trailblazing Porter Sisters, Who Paved the Way for Austen and the Brontës*, by Devoney Looser. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023. xx+555 pps.

Ernest Davis  
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The sisters Jane Porter (1775-1850) and Anna Maria Porter (1778-1832) were prolific and innovative writers, primarily of historical novels, very much admired in their own time, though largely forgotten in ours. Devoney Looser's biography of the two is one of the most remarkable literary biographies I have read — but not, primarily, for the reason one might expect. The recovery of the sisters' rightful place in literary history is, certainly, a major contribution to literary history; but, much more important, Devoney's narration of their lives, which they recorded in minute detail in letters and diaries, paints an extraordinarily vivid and harsh portrait of Regency England.

The sisters' father was an army surgeon. He died before Maria was a year old, and left his widow forty pounds, a pension of ten pounds a year, and five children: Jane, Maria, William, Robert, and John. Mrs. Porter moved to Edinburgh and made ends meet by running a boardinghouse. Despite their poverty, however, she succeeded in getting her children educated; there was more free schooling and scholarships available for talented children, even girls in 1780s Edinburgh than one might guess. Mrs. Porter also somehow wrangled permission for her children to use the excellent personal library of the Bishop. So Jane and Maria, in their teens, were very well read as well as intelligent, talented, and beautiful.

Maria published her first book, *Artless Tales* a collection of short stories, in 1793, at the age of fourteen (in her preface, she claimed to be thirteen). She followed that with *Artless Tales Volume II* in 1795, *Walsh Cobville*, a novel, in 1797, and *Octavia*, a three-volume novel, in 1798. Jane's first book, *The Spirit of the Elbe: A Romance*, a two-volume Gothic complete with "villains, a ghost, a dungeon, a trapdoor, a poisoning, and an adulterous affair," was published in 1799, when she was twenty-four.

In 1803 the sisters found their true niche with the publication of Jane's four-volume novel, *Thaddeus of Warsaw* about a Polish hero fighting against the Russians. (Poland and its travails were considered very romantic at the time.) It inaugurated a new genre; the "modern" historical novel, combining historical figures and events with fictional characters and personal drama. Within a few months, after a some initial hostile criticism, it had achieved a huge success with critics and readers alike.

In 1810, Jane published her masterpiece, *The Scottish Chiefs: A Romance* in five volumes about the historical Scottish hero William Wallace and his war against Edward I. This was an even greater success, and a more lasting one; it has remained in print; an abridged version, for children, was published in 1921 with illustrations by N.C. Wyeth; a Classics Illustrated comic book version was published in the 1950s; it may well have been one of the sources for the movie *Braveheart*. In the United States, it sold a million copies, though Jane got no royalties from that.

Overall in their lifetimes, Maria published 16 books, mostly three- and four-volume and an opera. Jane published 7 books and a play and was the ghost-writer for four long travelogues by her brother Robert. The two sisters collaborated on four books.

Their literary success also brought them into contact with the leading intellectual, cultural, and fashionable circles of the day. They interacted with famous authors, leading actors, generals in the Napoleonic wars, and all manner of aristocrats up to and including the royal family. They would get invited as house guests for months at a time by wealthy patronesses.

But they were never financially secure. At the height of their success, their publisher was paying them advances of about £140 on each book. (As a point of comparison: In *Sense and Sensibility*, Edward Ferrars and Elinor Dashwood are able to marry and presumably to live in modest comfort

on a clergyman's salary of £250 per annum.) For twenty years they lived with their mother in a small, dank, noisy, ugly cottage in poor repair and with no well. In 1824, feeling comparatively flush, they move to a much more pleasant place – it even had a water closet! — calculating that they could manage an budget of £180. But that proved to be beyond their means, and eventually they were priced out of this second new house.

The great blow to their literary prominence and to their lasting literary fame struck in 1814, when Walter Scott (he was not yet “Sir”), already famous as a poet, anonymously published his historical novel *Waverley*, which immediately became a best seller and a huge success. In the succeeding years, Scott continued to publish book after book of historical fiction, enormously more popular and more lucrative than the Porters'. The sisters felt aggrieved that he had stolen their thunder, copying not just the general genre and the style, but also, at times, character types and dramatic situations. They were furious that he never, or almost never, acknowledged their priority in the genre. Scott, in his lifetime and for a hundred years after his death, was widely considered one of the greatest of English writers; the Porter sisters fell into obscurity.

Looser's biography rescues them and their work from that obscurity; that in itself, would be a significant scholarly contribution to literary history. But if that were all, it would not be of great interest beyond literary historians. The sad truth is that Porter sisters' type of historical novel does not offer much to the twenty-first century reader. Scott himself is almost forgotten, except for the occasional TV film versions of *Ivanhoe*, performances of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* and the like. I have not read any of the Porters' novels, and Looser's book does not inspire me with any great desire to try. As far as I can tell, the plots are mostly complicated, melodramatic, and implausible, and the characters are two-dimensional. The prose is the kind of highfalutin that Mark Twain loved to parody:

“I am going to mention a name, which you may hear with patience, since its power is no more. The successful rival of Bruce, and the enemy of your family, is now a prisoner in the Tower of London.”

“Baliol?”

“Yes,” answered Monteith; “and his present sufferings will, perhaps, avenge to you his vindictive resentment of the injury he received from Sir Ronald Crawford.”

“My grandfather never injured him, nor any man!” interrupted Wallace: “Sir Ronald Crawford was as incapable of injustice as of flattering the minions of his country's enemy. But Baliol is fallen, and I forgive him.”

“Did you witness his degradation,” returned Monteith, “you would even pity him.”

“I always pity the wicked,” continued Wallace; “and as you seem ignorant of the cause of his enmity against Sir Ronald and myself, in justice to the character of that most venerable of men, I will explain it. I first saw Baliol four years ago, when I accompanied my grandfather to witness the arbitration of the King of Scotland between the two contending claimants for the Scottish crown. Sir Ronald came on the part of Bruce. I was deemed too young to have a voice in the council; but I was old enough to understand what was passing there, and to perceive, that it was the price for which he sold his country. However, as Scotland acknowledged him sovereign, and as Bruce submitted, my grandfather silently acquiesced. But Baliol did not forget former opposition. His behavior to Sir Ronald and myself at the beginning of this year, when, according to the privilege of our birth, we appeared in the field against the public enemy, fully demonstrated what was the injury Baliol complains of, and how unjustly he drove us from the standard of Scotland. ‘None,’ said he, ‘shall serve under me, who presumed to declare themselves the friends of Bruce.’ Poor weak man. The purchased vassal of England; yet so vain of his ideal throne, he hated all who had opposed his elevation, even while his own treachery

sapped its foundation! Edward having made use of him, all these sacrifices of honor and of conscience are insufficient to retain his favor; and Baliol is removed from his kingdom to an English prison! Can I feel anything so honoring as indignation against a wretch so abject? No! I do indeed pity him. And now that I have cleared my grandfather's name of such calumny, I am ready to hear you further."

From *The Scottish Chiefs* chapter 1

For what it is, it is well done; but few 2023 readers are going to work through five volumes of that.

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The two sisters often travelled separately, often over periods of months — almost never together, since one had to remain to take care of their mother. When separated, they wrote to each other often, at length, and with perfect frankness and much of their correspondence has been preserved.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on this copious material — had the sisters but known it, their best writing, at least from the perspective of readers two centuries later — Looser has put together a fascinating, often repugnant, picture of the world they lived in.

Three pervasive themes in particular stand out for me in this account; the romantic roller coasters, the constant concerns about debt, and the stifling level of propriety that society imposed.<sup>2</sup>

### Emotional roller coasters

The sisters had a propensity for getting into complicated romantic situations. A significant fraction of the book is devoted to charting these.

The most remarkable was a romance of Maria's. In the summer of 1803, Maria went for an extended visit to her friends, the Asplands, who lived on the Isle of Wight. One morning, Maria was looking out the window and a very handsome soldier, an "Adonis", she later told Jane, marched by, leading his regiment. The soldier stopped briefly at the window. Maria gazed at him. He gazed back. Then the regiment marched on. But the soldier came back, repeatedly. "The soldier stationed himself in front of the Asplands' window, where he had first seen her, at all times of the day and night, marking some lengths near the house. Maria began to watch for him, at certain times, with growing interest and curiosity." But there was no one to introduce them, and no justification for them to talk to one another. The soldier cleverly succeeded in communicating his name — Frederick Cowell — to Maria by setting up a situation where the soldiers under his command would shout it out. This went on for some weeks. Maria became so unguarded about it that the Asplands commented on it. Maria's visit to the Asplands was coming to an end. She wrote a letter to the soldier at his regiment, under a false name, but somehow with enough information in it so that he would know it was from the woman he had been looking at and so that he would be able to answer the letter, perhaps by having him mail his letter to the local post office. (This letter of Maria's does not survive, regrettably; we know about it from her description in letters to Jane.)

Frederick Cowell answered her letter. Soon after, he and his regiment were sent off to Jamaica. He and Maria kept up a clandestine correspondence through the rest of 1803 and 1804. Maria's only confidante was Jane; when she and Jane were separated and were discussing it by mail, they used

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<sup>1</sup>It is mostly held at a variety of research libraries, including the Huntington Library and the New York Public Library; it has not been published or edited, but it is largely accessible for scholars.

<sup>2</sup>Another pervasive theme, it goes without saying, was the sexism that permeated the society. It impacted every aspect of the sisters' lives. The sisters were altogether conscious of it; they admired the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane quoted Wollstonecraft at length, though not by name, in one of her books.

cryptic code words, so that if someone saw the letter (which once happened with brother Robert) they could not figure out the secret.

In late 1804, under Jane's urging, Maria finally wrote to Frederick, giving (at last) her true name, and declaring her love for her – in effect, proposing to him. She declared that “there was one heart in Europe that beat only for him.” He wrote back amorously and enclosed a lock of his hair. They were engaged.

But, of course, Frederick was in Jamaica, and Maria was in England. Moreover he didn't seem to have much gumption (my phrase, not Maria's or Looser's); he had no idea how he was going to advance in life, nor any great ambition to. Maria gave her usual advice to people whose character seemed weak; she sent him a list of books he should read to improve himself.

Finally Frederick did succeed in returning to England, though there was no guarantee that he could stay there. In November 1806 the lovers finally succeeded in meeting. This was still highly improper — brother Robert would have sternly disapproved — but Maria arranged the rendezvous at the house of a couple she knew who themselves were living together out of wedlock and so were not too fussy about these things.

Two years in the tropics had been hard on Frederick's looks – his complexion had faded, his hair was cut short, and he was fat. Worse, his depression about his life's course had gotten worse, and he found Maria completely intimidating. Maria reminded him about the books she had recommended, and told him that her love was conditional on his pulling himself together. That did not help Frederick's state of mind. Anyway, the engagement continued, unhappily, for three more years. Jane and Maria devised various plans to somehow pull strings to get him a promotion, or another position, or money, but with no success. The engagement gradually fizzled out, and in May 1809 Maria finally wrote him a letter breaking it off.

The romance between Frederick and Maria was the only one involving the sisters that actually reached the point of an engagement, but there were many others; so many, in fact, that I started to lose track of them. Jane received a passionate proposal from a man who did not interest her at all, and a declaration of love from a man who was already engaged and whom she had first met a few days earlier; she declined both of them.

Both Jane and Maria, at least twice for each, were involved in romances that developed along the following lines: Due to circumstances of one kind and another, one sister or the other comes into frequent contact with a man who seems charming and worthy. He clearly admires her. They spend a lot of time together. She falls in love or gets a huge crush — somewhere in that space — anyway, she is ready to accept a proposal, and she does what she can within the bounds of propriety to encourage it, which in most cases is almost nothing. She does, however, spend a lot of time daydreaming about it and discussing it with her sister. But the gentleman's intentions are not at all clear and do not become any clearer. From her point of view, he seems to be blowing hot and cold. At times he says and does things that would seem, by the conventions of the time, to mark him clearly as a suitor; at other times he acts only as a friend or even as an acquaintance. He never proposes, and, eventually, the whole thing comes to an end, either gradually or dramatically.

## Debt

Debt was a constant presence, almost a defining element, in the lives of the Porter family and many of their associates. One one-time admirer and long-time friend of Jane's, Henry Caulfield, was sued by a vindictive husband for adultery, lost the case, and was ordered to pay damages of £2500, which was completely impossible. For a year, he was on the lam, hiding here and there, visiting Jane when that was safe. Eventually, the husband caught up with him, and he got sent to debtors' prison; Looser's description of that is more gruesome than any in Dickens.

A less tragic but more remarkable story of debt is that of Jane and Maria's favorite brother Robert — quite a yarn in itself. As a boy, Robert Ker Porter (1777-1842) was an artistic prodigy. He was admitted to the Royal Academy School and, at age fifteen, won a silver medal — J.M.W. Turner won the gold. In 1799 he decided to take advantage of a vogue for large panoramic paintings, and painted (with unacknowledged assistants) the biggest, most dramatic panorama anyone had ever imagined; a 106 by 20 foot, three-quarter circle painting, "The Storming of Seringapatam" depicting a recent British military victory in India. (Jane ghosted the 134-page brochure.) It was an enormous success. Gross receipts were £3499; after expenses, Robert and his investor each got £1203. The young artist became a huge celebrity, clearly on the path to fame and fortune.

The success was his ruination. He spent lavishly, loaned and gave money to all kinds of friends, made bad investments, got swindled. He painted a second panorama, *The Siege of Acre*, but the vogue for panoramas was now fading fast and he lost money on it. A third and fourth panorama were even less successful. Robert was now seriously in debt, and all his life he never got free of it.

In 1805, to escape his creditors, he travelled to Russia. Using his connections he eventually succeeded in presenting himself to Tsar Alexander, who gave him a ring, but not a commission. He met Princess Mary Shcherbatov, they fell in love, they became engaged; that, it seemed to him and his family, would surely also take care of his money problems. However, the Tsar would not allow a British commoner to marry a Russian princess. Jane and Maria tried, unsuccessfully, to get him knighted, using such devices as making up distinguished histories for their ancestors. Then in 1807 Russia became an ally of France against Britain, so he was kicked out of Russia. He travelled to Sweden and was knighted by the King of Sweden. In 1812 he was finally able to marry Mary. However, unsurprisingly, it was not easy to turn the ostensible wealth of a Russian princess into ready cash, particularly as one of her estates had been destroyed during Napoleon's invasion. In 1813, first Robert, then Mary and their new baby, came to England, but that was a disaster. Mary was a spendthrift and treated Robert's sisters like upper servants. Robert and his family returned to Russia. Then, for some reason, Robert left his wife and daughter to travel in the Middle East: Persia, Armenia, and Georgia. (He wrote up his travels in Russia and in the Middle East in books that Jane ghosted.) In August 1824, Robert set sail for England "bringing money to *begin* paying his debts" (emphasis added). He got an appointment from the British government as a *chargé-d'affaires* in Venezuela — I'm not making this up. The salary was £1250 per year, but most of that went directly into the pockets of his creditors. In 1841 he returned to England and then later that year travelled with Jane back to Russia. He saw his daughter for the first time in seventeen years (Mary had died ten years earlier). Just as he was stepping out the door for their return trip to England in 1842, Robert had a heart attack and died. After the funeral and the trip home, Jane was finally able to settle the accounts with his creditors.

It seems absurd to say that someone became a world traveller, a Swedish knight, the husband of a Russian princess, and a diplomat in Venezuela in order to avoid his creditors at home, but more or less that seems to be the case.

### Stifling propriety

I have read enough fiction and biography from this period to have some idea of the tightrope that women, and, to a much lesser extent, men as well, had to walk if they were to maintain their position in respectable society. But I have never seen the rigidity and harshness portrayed as clearly as in Looser's book. Any kind of social *faux pas* could be punished by loss of patronage, loss of support, exclusion from society, unmarriageability, unemployability — potentially disastrous for women in the Porter sisters' always precarious social position.

One particularly striking instance. When Jane, Marie, and Robert were at the start of their careers, they had two supportive older female mentors. One was Mary Champion de Crespigny,

high-society, wealthy, and moralistic; she wrote and published a book of banal, high-minded advice, ostensibly addressed to her son. Mrs. de Crespigny lived with her husband in Champion Lodge, on a thirty acre park four miles London, where she lavishly entertained guests and promoted her hobby, which was archery. (She liked Robert because, among other things, he was a good archer.) The other was Mary Robinson. Mary Robinson had been a young, married actress, when she caught the eye of the Prince of Wales. She became his mistress for a year, then he discarded her, paying her off with an annuity of £500 a year. That should have been plenty, but she was already deeply in debt. She took a series of other lovers. She became an author, writing feminist and abolitionist treatises, among other things.

At some point, Mrs. Crespigny became aware of their friendship with Mrs. Robinson. She gave a warning to Robert, which he passed on to his sisters: “She told him that not only ladies but also many gentlemen had expressed to her their concerns and surprise at Jane and Maria’s supposed association with a woman who’d once lived in so disgraceful a manner. Mrs. Robinson . . . was now shunned by every person of character.” Maria prudently dropped Mrs. Robinson. Robert told his sisters that he had dropped her, but in fact continued visiting her in secret (as a man, he had much more freedom). Jane did not dare visit her, but continued to correspond with her in secret and deeply valued her friendship.

In 1800, while Jane was on a visit to Champion Lodge, she got the news that Mrs. Robinson had died. At dinner, Jane was visibly in tears. Mrs. Crespigny attacked cruelly:

Mrs. Crespigny asked Jane directly, with a frown, if she was acquainted with Mrs. Robinson . . . If Jane had been a friend of the now-dead Mrs. Robinson, then all the world would have to cut her. Indeed, Mrs. Crespigny herself would have to drop Jane. She’d be shamed by all decent people, the powerful society woman proclaimed, threatening to do it then and there, in front of the whole company.

Terrified, Jane caved; she said that she did not know Mrs. Robinson and that she was crying because she had a headache.

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My feeling, as I have said, is that, though Looser’s book is a significant contribution to literary history, its chief value is as a portrait of Regency society. Accordingly, the most pertinent comparisons are not to other literary biographies but to novels of the same or similar times and places.

The most obvious point of comparison, which Looser<sup>3</sup> points out several times, is Jane Austen, especially *Sense and Sensibility*, with its two protagonist sisters. Even the character difference between the sisters’ is similar; Jane and Maria were nicknamed *Penseroso* and *Allegro* respectively. One particular incident, in which the actress Therese De Camp warned Jane off from getting involved with Charles Kemble by showing her a letter from Kemble swearing undying love for De Camp, is almost eerily like the episode in *Sense and Sensibility* where Lucy Steele stakes her claim to Edward Ferrars by showing Elinor a letter she had received from Edward. (Unlike *Sense and Sensibility*, however, Kemble eventually married De Camp, and they remained on very friendly terms with the Porters.)

In happier moments, there are also some slight echoes of *Little Women*; the warm relation between the sisters, the literary daughter writing potboilers to escape poverty, the artistic sibling, the devoted mother, the absent/dead father.

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<sup>3</sup>Looser herself is a Jane Austen scholar.

However, what I am reminded of most strongly is Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, set in the Regency, though written thirty years later. Certainly the characters are very different; no fictional heroine could be less like the Porter sisters than Becky Sharp, except for Amelia Sedley. But the whole social atmosphere seems to me very much the same: the frenetic fashionable life, always on the precipice of financial or social ruin; the constant necessity to be at the beck and call of rich, unreliable, often horrible, patrons who at any moment might turn on you viciously; the constant attempts to cultivate and flatter the rich and powerful or their hangers-on, desperately hoping for promotion, assistance, recognition, and generally getting nothing but snubs. If you have a friend who has read too many Regency romances, or watched too much *Bridgerton*, or read Jane Austen too superficially, and is under the illusion that the Regency would have been a great era to live in, *Sister Novelists* is a fine corrective.