Eliza Soane’s Letter to Sarah Smith, July 13, 1796

22/02/2022

Based on a transcript, converted to script format, from historical archives at the Sir John Soane Museum, of Eliza Soane’s private letters.

Made, on occasion of the talk event, Introducing Eliza, for the exhibition, Dear friend, I can no longer hear your voice, March 2022.

Susan Palmer, Head Archivist,

Sir John Soane’s Museum

who typed up the original

transcript.

Anne-Marie Creamer

W: <http://amcreamer.net>

Introducing Eliza talk event: March 2022

“Eliza Soane’s Letter to Sarah Smith, July 13, 1796”

CAST

‘CHARACTER’/ Protangonist NAME #1: Eliza Soane (age 48, at the time of writing):

Character description.

NOTE: This is based on the transcript of Eliza Soane's personal letter to her younger female friend, Sarah Smith. At the time of writing this letter Eliza is 36 years old and had been married for 12 years. Sarah Smith was in her early-mid 20’s.

Eliza was brought up by her uncle who became her ward, London builder George Wyatt, in the mid-late 18th cent. She was middle class, inheriting a sizeable fortune from her uncle upon his death. She married John Soane on 21 August 1784, then a promising architect and son of a brick layer. They are known to have had a loving marriage. They had had four children, two of whom had died in infancy. There were problems between with the sons and their father, resentments and temper which were to eventually breakdown after Eliza’s death.

Eliza was the center of family life, her wit and emotional intelligence often diplomatically managing family or social rifts. She applied the same skills to support her husband’s progress as he became an eminent English architect and Head of Architecture at the Royal Academy. Eliza's wider private letters reveal an intelligent empathic woman; a person of wit and reading; able to navigate the complex social world of regency Britain; a valued loyal friend; in the context of the times, considered a kindly employer; principled, she could be persuasive & forthright.

The Smith family lived outside London in Chertsey, near to where John Soanes elderly Mother Martha also lived, which John and Eliza often visited. The Smith family were friends of Mrs Soane – including Mr Smith the surgeon and his wife, their son, Richard, who was an apothecary. Their daughter Sarah, or Sally, was Mrs Soane’s particular friend.  The children, John, and George spent much time here in their school holidays, even when their parents were in London.​ Sarah often travelled with Eliza to Margate and sometimes looked after Eliza’s sons, John and George, who were 10 & 7 years old at the time of this letter. She remained a firm family friend. Her words about Eliza’s death also feature in my short film at the Soane, *Dear Friend, I cannot hear your voice.*

In this letter Eliza writes to Sarah, who is having trouble with a young man. Not for the first time, she gives Sarah advice about how to manage the men in her life, in a manner recognizable to contemporary ears.

“Eliza Soane’s Letter to Sarah Smith, July 13, 1796”

Eliza Soane:

L I F July 13, 1796

I dare say you are very Angry with me for not writing before this, but you know how much I dislike the business, & how very little time I have, so all these things considered, I hope I shall be excused.

Since I came to town, I have been but very poorly in my head. Perhaps it is the uncertain weather, or London does not agree with me this Season. If so, I shall be better when I get to Margate, which I hope will be in a short time.

I fear our Brighton journey is at an end, yet I hope we shall soon have some other as pleasant.

What have you done with your Beaux?

I hope you keep them in good order – remember Pride, self-approbation, & firmness, is the motto for young women.

For heaven sake my dear Girl never suffer yourself to be ill-treated by any man before matrimony, for surely if you do, you’ll be despised afterwards. They never set any value upon an easy conquest; disdain & difficulty enhances our worth.

You cannot think how much I long to converse with you a few minutes. I think of a thousand Arguments now we are apart, that I forgot to use when we were together. And Indeed, it is a pity, such a heart as yours, (Eliza’s underlining) should be thrown away upon a wretch, (Eliza’s underlining) that would never know its value (Eliza’s underlining).

Let me entreat you to use silent contempt, that is always most mortifying, particularly with weak minds, indeed I (Eliza’s underlining) cannot consent to your fixing you affections on any one I have yet seen in the Country – (save one, and him I fear will not easily wear Chains) – So, I shall look out for you in Town against next time I have the pleasure of your company.

Miss Levick is half angry you did not take leave of her, but I made a blundering excuse, which however I believe satisfied her. Mrs Platel & her Monky have just enquired after you, who knows but he (Eliza’s underlining) may be smitten (Eliza’s underlining).

I was last Friday drag’d to Ranelagh much against my will & was so Illy disposed for the amusement that I would not be at the trouble of dressing, so after sauntering round the Room an hour, or two, I returnd home half dead with the headache, & have had a bad cold ever since. - Do let me hear from you soon - & believe me on all occasions

Most sincerely Yours

Eliza Soane

My/Compliments to Father Mother& Sisters &c &c

[Endorsed]

Miss Sally Smith

Mr Smith Surgeon

Chertsey, Surrey

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