

ROMANTIC FRIENDSHIP IN ANNA SEWARD'S *LOUISA*


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## I

Having established her reputation as the “Muse of Elegy”<sup>1</sup> with *Elegy of Captain Cook* (1780) and *Monody on Major André* (1781), Anna Seward then won popularity with *Louisa, a Poetical Novel, in Four Epistles* (1784). “I know it is the best and ablest of my productions,” Seward boasted of her *Louisa*, in her 1786 letter to George Hardinge, the Attorney General (qtd. in Ashmun 124). In her preface to this poetic novel, she described how the first hundred and fifty-six lines had been “accidentally recovered” (2: 221) sixteen months before publication, having been written, then mislaid, when she was nineteen. In the introduction to the 1996 reprint of *Louisa*, Caroline Franklin surmises that the single Seward’s “own experience of hopeless love” with a married, though separated, vicar choral of Lichfield Cathedral, John Saville, inspired her to finish the poetry at that time (viii).

Like Franklin, most literary critics hitherto tended to regard the love interest of a woman poet as unquestionably male. However, such bias toward heterosexuality could induce readers to misinterpret Seward’s poetry. It was the early twentieth century biographer, Margaret Ashmun, who noted Seward’s long-standing “infatuation” with Saville which had caused gossip in the neighborhood (Ashmun 179–87). Ashmun also wrote of other suitors of Seward’s such as a Mr T— and Cornet Richard Vyse when the poet was in her early twenties (Ashmun 25–29). However,

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<sup>1</sup> This title was given by William Hayley in his eulogy “To Miss Seward: Impromptu,” which was included in *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward*, ed. Walter Scott (1810), 2: 66–67. All quotations of Seward’s poems are from this edition: volume and page numbers are given hereafter in parentheses.

as Lillian Faderman noted in *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981), most of Seward's intense relationships in fact seemed to have been with women, not men. Examples of these intense attachments include Elizabeth Cornwallis, Mrs. Mompesson, Penelope Weston (later Mrs. Pennington), Miss Fern, and her most intense and durable passion toward her foster sister, Honora Sneyd. Honora came to live in the Seward household in 1755, at the age of five. Following the death of Anna's sister Sarah in 1763, a strong relationship developed between Anna and the nine-year younger Honora. In 1773, two years after returning to her father's house, Honora married Robert Lovell Edgeworth (father of novelist Maria Edgeworth), and died of consumption in 1780. Many of Seward's poems expressed her passionate devotion and deep mourning for Honora.

It is uncertain whether Seward could be classified as lesbian<sup>2</sup> in the modern sense of the word. Love such as that between Seward and Honora has most often been defined by the eighteenth-century term "romantic friendship" since Elizabeth Mavor's 1971 *The Ladies of Llangollen*. This was a biographical account of Irish gentlewomen Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, who eloped in 1778, settled in Llangollen, Wales, and lived there together for over fifty years. Although their life-standing relationship was "what we in modern terms would consider a marriage" (xvi–xvii), Mavor gives heed to the apparent social acceptability of the love between them. When they eloped, Ponsonby's relative Mrs. Tighe wrote, "[Sarah's] conduct, though it has an appearance of imprudence is I am sure void of serious impropriety. There was no gentlemen concerned, nor does it appear to be anything more than a scheme of Romantic Friendship" (qtd. in Mavor 27–28). Mrs. Tighe obviously believed that for women "serious impropriety" could only occur with a man, and that even when two women "eloped," there was no sexual danger: their friendship thus appearing no more than "Romantic," at the time, infer-

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<sup>2</sup> This paper uses the words "lesbian" and "lesbianism" as the meaning of female homosexual and female homosexuality, not only for the sake of convenience, but also as some eighteenth-century texts used "Lesbian" as an adjective and a noun to describe women who loved each other, not as "of or pertaining to the island of Lesbos," although in the *OED* the entries of the word as an adjective start in 1890 and as a noun in 1925. There were other seventeenth and eighteenth-century words: for lesbian love, the "Game of Flats" and "Sapphic passion"; for a lesbian, "Tribade," "Tommy," "Sapphist" and others. For details, see Andreadis 3–10; Donoghue, *Passion* 2–6.

ring something fanciful and eccentric. Despite being publicly criticized for their “Extraordinary Female Affection” in 1791 by the *General Evening Post* (Mavor 73–74), the Ladies of Llangollen nevertheless drew many prominent visitors and their sacred friendship was celebrated in such contemporary writings as Seward's *Llangollen Vale* (1796). Mavor therefore applied the term romantic friendship to portray such “Edenic” relationships between women “before they were biologically and thus prejudicially defined” (xvii) as lesbian. Faderman's 1981 study contributed to the extensive use of the term romantic friendship in historical and literary scholarship. She refers to any love between pre-twentieth century women by this term, and maintains that romantic friendship was envisioned as asexual, therefore largely acceptable, and even revered, within the framework of female virtue. “Discouragement of romantic friendship seems to have been rare,” Faderman claims, because only in a post-Freudian era did such relations begin to be defined as “evil or morbid” and “lesbian” (77, 411–42).

For Faderman, the eighteenth century created a fashion of romantic friendship, and Seward's poems about Honora and the Ladies of Llangollen were literary testimonies to the fashion. Anthologies of homosexual or lesbian literature, such as *The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse* (1983) edited by Stephen Coote, *Chloe Plus Olivia* (1994) edited by Faderman, *Poems Between Women* (1997) edited by Emma Donoghue, and *The Literature of Lesbianism* (2003) edited by Terry Castle, have included these poems ever since Faderman's 1981 study. In the meantime, Faderman's theory of the pre-modern asexual romantic friendship, as distinguished from modern lesbian love, has been disputed by other historians. In *Passions Between Women* (1993), Emma Donoghue, in particular, uncovers a variety of lesbian cultures and lesbian (and bisexual) identities from the Restoration to the beginning of the nineteenth century, ranging from asexual female friendship through to explicit sexual relationships.<sup>3</sup> She asserts that “romantic friendship is not the dominant paradigm but only one part” (268). Alison Oram and Annmarie Turnbull, in their introduction to *The Lesbian History Sourcebook* (2001), also consider romantic friendship as one of archetypes of lesbianism (50), whilst Tim Hitchcock in *English*

<sup>3</sup> The most powerful evidence of sexual possibility is provided by Anne Lister's early nineteenth-century diaries, which Helena Whitbread discovered in 1981 and published in 1988 and in 1992.

*Sexualities, 1700–1800* (1997) states that “for many, romantic friendship was simply the public face of a very physical love” (87). Donoghue ultimately suggests, in an introduction to the anthology edited by her, that romantic friendship can best be considered “not as a particular, sexless kind of love, but as a set of literary conventions for expressing love” (xxvi).

Despite this development in the study of British lesbian history, along with the rediscovery of lost lesbian literature, most recent literary critics of the Romantic period, Franklin included, still show a tendency to neglect or at least overlook Seward’s homosexual tendency. A stream of anthologies of Romantic women poets has been published since the mid-1990s, as one means of reevaluating forgotten women poets, yet editors have not considered the possibility of Seward as a lesbian poet at all. They anthologize her poems of natural scenery for the most part, excluding those of love for Honora. At other times, biographies, footnotes, and annotations explain away her relationship with Honora as friendship and her poems about her foster sister as an expression of such. *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era* (1997) edited by Paula R. Feldman, among others, seems to be inconsistent in its editorial policy, including relatively more poems about Honora than any other anthology, yet following Ashmun’s depiction of a heterosexual Seward in its biographical explanations. Of recent publications on the British Romantic period, *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age* (1999) edited by Iain McCalman is the only work dealing with Seward under “Sapphism,” a term used to refer to lesbianism since the late eighteenth century.

I have argued elsewhere that Seward’s poems of love for Honora, created by a fervent longing and yearning for her absent beloved, were in the tradition of Sappho of Lesbos, whose surviving poetic fragments are generally acknowledged as the first examples of lesbian poetry.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I will highlight Seward’s masterpiece *Louisa* and examine the ways in which it seemingly presents itself as a heterosexual love story, while possessing a story full of conventional expressions of romantic friendship between women. Against the strong heterosexual bias of most recent Romantic critics, I illustrate that the poet’s attention is almost always devoted to romantic female friendship rather than heterosexual romantic love.

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<sup>4</sup> For details, see Kawatsu 28–42.

## II

First, Franklin's premise that Seward's "experience of hopeless love" was relevant to the finishing of *Louisa* should be denied. It is more possible that the object of her hopeless love was not so much Saville as Honora, who died on 30 April 1780, just four years prior to *Louisa*'s publication. There were no poems about Saville around that time,<sup>5</sup> whereas Seward lamented Honora's eternal loss in poem after poem, whilst turning her anger toward Honora's husband. Due to Honora's serious illness, the Edgeworths returned to Lichfield to consult Erasmus Darwin in 1779. Despite this, in "Sonnet XXXI," for example, Edgeworth's presumed indifference to his moribund wife was severely attacked: "Regardless of thy life's fast ebbing tide; / I hear him, who should droop in silent woe, / Declaim on actors, and on taste decide!" (3: 152). Then, in "Sonnet XXXII," the ultimate cause of Honora's death was ascribed to her marriage to Edgeworth, "by whose cruel wiles / I lost thy amity; saw thy dear smiles / Eclips'd" (3: 153). Edgeworth had married Honora just five months after his first wife's death and married again, to Honora's sister, only eight months after his second wife's death. Perhaps this was why Seward implicitly accused his inconstancy at all times. In "Invocation to the Genius of Slumber, written, Oct. 1787," she lamented that Honora's tomb had been "By faithless Love deserted and forgot" (1: 102) for six years. Around that time, in a letter, Seward declaimed the love of men:

Men are rarely capable of pure unmixed tenderness to any fellow creature except their children. In general even the best of them give their friendship to their male acquaintances, and their fondness to their offspring. For their mistress, or wife, they feel, during a time, a tenderness more ardent and more sacred, a friendship softer and more animated. But this inexplicable, this fascinating sentiment, which we understand by the name of love, often proves an illusion of the imagination; — a meteor that misleads her who trusts it, vanishing when she has followed it into pools and quicksands where peace and liberty are swallowed up and lost.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> After many years, in "To Remembrance," the last poem written right before her own death, Seward referred to the death of "Saville" (3: 401).

<sup>6</sup> *Letters of Anna Seward: Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807*, ed. A. Constable, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Constable and Co., 1811) 3: 29–30; qtd. in Mavor 88.

It would seem therefore, that it was at this time when Seward was far from worrying about a hopeless love for a man, but in fact heightening her distrust of men's love, that she wrote *Louisa*. The fictional date of the first epistle was 21 October 1779 (the year of Honora's return to Lichfield for the last time and the year before her death), and the dates of the other three epistles were 15 April, 21 April, and 25 April (the month of her death), respectively of 1781 (the year following her death). The dates of the epistles may be arbitrary, but they are a strong indication that the poet was thinking of Honora more than anyone else during the composition.

Indeed, although the central theme of *Louisa* appears to be the heterosexual love story of the heroine, abandoned by a fiancé who marries another woman, Seward explicitly sets the heroine's relationship with her female friend above her love of the man. *Louisa* was a new species of composition, a sentimental novel-like poetry in an epistolary form. Four epistles form four chapters of a long story, which evolves into a happy ending. In the preface to the poetic novel, Seward states that she described "passions" rather than "incidents" (2: 219) as she had followed the styles of Alexander Pope and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. She said that she had attempted to create an ideal heroine of sensibility, "more faultless" than the creations of male writers, by uniting "the impassioned fondness" of Pope's Eloisa (in "Eloisa to Abelard" [1717]) with "the chaster tenderness" of Mathew Prior's Emma (in "Henry and Emma" [1709]), and avoiding "the voluptuousness of the first, and the too conceding softness of the second" (2: 219). Quite possibly, the name of Louisa was derived from Pope's Eloisa and Rousseau's Héloïse (in *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* [1761]), the passionate heroines modeled on the real medieval French abbess Héloïse.

Even more notable is, while Seward tends to improve the heroines created by men in amorous epistles in verse, she transgresses the tradition of such epistles significantly. According to Linda S. Kauffman, Ovid's *Heroides* created the tradition of amorous epistolary literature, in which heroines write to an absent beloved "who has seduced, betrayed, or simply left them behind." The prerequisite condition for an amorous epistle is the absence of the beloved, for, Kauffman points out, "if the beloved were present, there would be no need to write" (17). While the traditional heroine writes of her wavering emotions or outbursts of

passion to the male beloved who is not present, Seward's heroine does not write of her feelings to her fiancé, Eugenio, nor directly receive his letters. Instead, both Louisa and Eugenio write to their common female friend, Emma. The love story of Louisa and Eugenio, corresponding to that of Eloisa and Abelard, is clarified indirectly in Seward's poetic novel.

The first epistle, written from Louisa to Emma who has lived for four years in the East Indies, tells of the former's broken engagement. Eugenio has left Louisa to go abroad for his father's commercial business, but is rumored to have married another woman. Louisa considers suicide. The second epistle is from Eugenio to Emma, "on her return from the East-Indies" (2: 240). He explains that his father's bankruptcy obliged him to marry the rich heiress, Emira, whom he had rescued from rogues, in order to save his family from penury. Eugenio finally asks Emma to tell Louisa after his death how hard it must have been for him to dismiss his love for Louisa. Emma soon forwards his epistle to Louisa disregarding his request, then the third epistle is written from Louisa to Emma, "the day after she [Louisa] had received from her [Emma] Eugenio's exculpating letter" (2: 265). Louisa consoles herself with the knowledge that Eugenio was innocent, accepts their separation, and resolves to live. The fourth epistle, from Louisa to Emma, tells of a visit by Eugenio's father, Ernesto, who relates that Emira is dying from dissipation and asking for Louisa to visit. When they meet, Emira implores Louisa's forgiveness for encouraging Eugenio to break off their betrothal and begs her to raise her daughter. All four epistles of *Louisa* are addressed to Emma in this way. How can Emma's role in this poetic novel be construed?

Elizabeth Fay notes that Emma "acts as the text's ideal reader, sympathetic but distanced" (132), for, as Fay says, both Louisa and Eugenio expect her to sympathize with their plights when in fact actual readers would respond emotionally to their epistles. Fay's interpretation of Emma's role of ideal reader is persuasive, and might bring to mind Seward's juvenile letters from October 1762 to June 1768. These letters, posthumously published as "Extracts from Miss Seward's Literary Correspondence" in the first volume of *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward* edited by Walter Scott in 1809, were all to the attention of "Emma" who is presumably a fictional person.

In *Louisa*, however, Emma is cast as more than a reader of the epistles. It cannot be overlooked that she is also a writer, the one who adds the

last twenty lines to Eugenio's epistle, beginning with "My dear Louisa! — pardon him, who strove, / By means so seeming harsh, to quench thy love!" (2: 263). In other words, the second epistle titled "Eugenio to Emma" actually ends with Emma's note written directly to Louisa. Louisa reads Emma's note included as part of the second epistle before she writes the third. They then continue to correspond with each other in this way. Moreover, considering that three of the four epistles in the text are from Louisa to Emma, it is apparent that Seward placed a special emphasis on the relationship between the two female characters.

As one of characters in the text, Emma also plays another more important role than that of mutual friend to Louisa and Eugenio. In the first epistle, Louisa says that she and Emma have enjoyed a close, sympathetic relationship since their childhood: "one have been our pleasures, one our cares, / From the first dawn of those delicious years, / What time, inspir'd by joy's enlivening powers, / We chas'd the gilded insect through the bowers" (2: 223). She considers Emma a "soft mourner o'er my bosom's smart! / Friend of my soul, and sister of my heart!" (2: 238), expressions which undoubtedly imply that their intimate relationship is no less than what is conventionally called romantic friendship.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, while Louisa writes to Emma as the one and only friend who can understand her sorrow at being betrayed by Eugenio, she passionately tells us that the most grievous experience she has ever had is her parting from Emma, who has left for the East Indies:

No grief my bosom at our parting knew,  
But that of bidding thee a long adieu;  
And the sweet tears, that such soft sorrows bring,  
Fall, as light rain-drops in the sunny spring; (2: 225).

As the traditional amorous epistle is premised on the spatial distance between a heroine and her male love, Seward requires the absence of her heroine's romantic friend for the sake of the act of writing.

As Emma left Louisa behind for her father's presumably commercial interests in the East Indies, so originally did Eugenio: "Attractive Commerce calls him to her [the Thames'] tide; / ... / His rising interests on

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Seward's "Epistle to Miss Honora Sneyd, May 1772," in which the poet addressed Honora as "sister of my soul" (1: 86).



the call attend, / For with a father's prosperous fate they blend" (2: 232). Representing the contemporaneous literature of sensibility which places feelings over the power of commerce, Seward's poetic novel thus traces the cause of the heroine's separation from her beloved, female or male, to Britain's commercialism. For Louisa, the separation from Eugenio is not as sad as the one from Emma. When Eugenio goes away, Louisa places "generous confidence" in his love rather than feeling "parting sorrows" (2: 233). Because of this, as soon as she hears of his treachery, she cannot restrain her anger to the point that she, intentionally or not, attacks him in the second person in an epistle addressed to Emma:

Thy love, a sacrifice to glut thy pride!  
 Ah! What avail the riches of thy bride!  
 Can they avail, remorseless as thou art,  
 To tear the wrong'd Louisa from thy heart?  
 Gold, and ye gems, that lurk in eastern cave,  
 Or to the sun your gay resplendence wave,  
 Can joys sincere, one heart-felt transport live  
 In aught ye purchase, or in aught ye give? (2: 234)

Through Eugenio's actions, who chose the wealth of Emira over the love of Louisa, Louisa learns that every woman suffers the same torment from men: "For gold, and dazzling state," she says, "incessant prove, / In Man's hard heart, the murderers of love" (2: 228). Louisa's tale of a broken heart is, in fact, not "singular, nor strange" (2: 228). As we have seen before, Seward also attacked Edgeworth's inconstancy and the very nature of men's illusionary love around the time of the publication of *Louisa*. Since her youth, she had condemned such marriages as entirely depending on a spouse's wealth. In one of her earlier poems, "Evander to Emillia," Seward portrays the love between a daughter of wealthy parents (Emillia) and a man without fortune (Evander), which is eventually frustrated by her "father's proud disdain" (1: 62).<sup>8</sup> In *Monody of Major André*, the unhappy pair is represented likewise. The British soldier John André, who was ignominiously executed as a spy in America on 2

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Kelly notes that "Evander to Emillia" reflected the situation of many young couples (xiv), for, according to Roy Porter, matrimony in the eighteenth century "was not narrowly about love and bliss, but involved wider matters of family policy, securing honour, lineage and fortune" (26).

October 1780, was an acquaintance of Seward's and had been Honora's lover for a brief time. In this *Monody*, while mourning his death, Seward implies that they had a secret engagement ("the lily bands of plighted love"), which was broken by Honora's father ("power parental") because of the inadequacy of André's fortune (2: 73). Although in *Louisa*, it is the heroine who is rejected as a bride because of her "want of gold" (2: 243), it could be asserted that marriage for money was a recurring object of Seward's criticism.

In many amorous epistles, the abandoned heroine considers suicide, but rather than ending her life, she nurtures illusions of her beloved's return and their mutual passion, thus protesting the fate to which he has abandoned her (Kauffman 17-18). Similarly, Seward's abandoned heroine Louisa considers, then quickly reconsiders, suicide. Unlike the traditional heroine, however, she goes as far as disparaging Eugenio as "the base object of my scorn," declaring: "Nor one slight thought on false Eugenio waste!" (2: 239). Instead, she thinks of Emma, and her longing for her romantic friend's return ends the first epistle.

The third epistle reveals that Louisa's absolute trust lies in Emma rather than Eugenio. Louisa is relieved to know that Eugenio's true feelings have remained unchanged, not because she believes what he has written in the second epistle, but because she believes in Emma's note, which assures her of his innocence and love:

Oh! how o'er-joy'd my dazzled sight surveyed  
 These words, in Emma's characters pourtray'd,  
 "He is not guilty!" — rapid from my tongue  
 They, exulting iteration, sprung.  
 "Read, dear Louisa, and acquit the heart,  
 "That bears in all thy griefs so large a part."

.....  
 Disorder'd sounds my lips pronounce, nor spare  
 The useless question to the unconscious air.  
 "Does that dear hand yet trace Louisa's name?  
 "Will it this love, his innocence proclaim?  
 "How may this be? — Yet Emma says 'tis so."  
 Then did I read, and weep, and throb, and glow,  
 Approve, absolve, admire, and smile, and sigh,  
 Till pensive Peace shone mildly in my eye; (2: 267-68)

Furthermore, Louisa retreats to her "favourite bower" in her natal countryside ("The vernal beauties of my native vale" [2: 272]), which is antipodal to the commercial, urban world into which Eugenio has plunged. She then recollects the happy times she spent with Eugenio at that place: "here I first beheld the graceful youth, / And here he promis'd everlasting truth" (2: 272). It is notable that this idyllic landscape had contained a further significant person, Emma; "And here, to thee, my friend, I us'd to grieve, / When life could charm no more, nor hope deceive" (2: 272). Louisa, Eugenio and Emma spent their childhood and youth in such a paradisiacal setting until the latter two left. Consequently, at the denouement of the poetic story, the image of paradise regained is ingeniously invoked. Here again, Louisa's call is not directed to her former male lover, but to her romantic friend:

O come, my Emma! . . .

.....

Haste then to share our blessings, as they glow  
Through the receding shades of heaviest woe! —  
As spring's fair morn, with calm, and dewy light,  
Breaks through the weary, long, and stormy night,  
So now, as through the vale of life we stray,  
The Star of Joy relumes, and leads us on our way! (2: 293–94).

According to Byrne R. Fone, since Virgil's *Second Eclogue*, the metaphor of earthly paradise or Arcadia — "a happy valley, a blessed isle, a pastoral retreat, or a green forest fastness" — has been used to represent a safe place to be homosexual, secluded from heterosexual society (13). Fone refers only to male homosexuals, yet, poems of romantic female friendship also draw on this homosexual literary tradition. Charlotte MacCarthy's "Contentment, to a Friend" (1745) and Georgiana Spencer's "To Lady Elizabeth Foster" (written in 1796), for instance, set two women's love in an idyllic retreat (Donoghue, *Poems* xxix). In this sense, Emma is indispensable to Louisa's paradise ("the vale of life") and Eugenio may well always be in the shade beside Emma.

### III

In Rousseau's work, Janet Todd points out, "Saint-Prux and Julie are

lovers, but so, incipiently, are Saint-Preux and Claire. Julie and Claire are friends, and perhaps — to steal Rousseau's coy phrase — 'something more'" (133), that is to say, romantic friends.<sup>9</sup> Seward repulsed such a portrayal of Claire and her romantic friend, Julie, as rivals for the love of Saint-Preux in "Literary Correspondence," dated October 1762:

In the sphere of friendship, Clara [Claire] shone with unclouded light; but an unreciprocal passion for the lover of Eloisa seems not congenial to a turn of mind more sprightly than tender, more reasonable than enamoured; and it sullies the lustre of her exertions to make them happy, while it was probable they might be united, and to save them from themselves, when their separation became necessary.

I see the author's design, that it was to exalt the constancy of St Preaux [*sic*]; but I think *a new object* had better have been introduced for that purpose. (1: lii; emphasis added)

Unlike Rousseau's initial triangle of Julie, Claire, and Saint-Preux, therefore, Seward introduced a fourth potent character ("a new object") to her own story of Eloise. Emira, who marries Eugenio, is contrasted to Louisa in regards to not only parentage and fortune but also female sexuality. In short, Emira is a libertine aristocratic woman, who earns such epithets as the "fair Calypso of a sensual age" (2: 250) and "A female Proteus in the wiles of love" (2: 252). Rescued from rogues by Eugenio, she comes to love him. When she learns that he loves Louisa who is nothing but "a village maid" (2: 251), her pride is greatly marred, so, in order to take him away from his beloved, she attempts to lure him, as Eugenio writes:

Sometimes, with archness laughing in her eyes,  
Hangs on my arm, and ridicules my sighs;  
And oft with coy tenderness appears,  
While love's warm glances steal through shining tears;  
Now, with arch'd brow, and supercilious stare,  
Affects the empress dignity of air;  
And now, as reasoning with a wayward heart,  
In trances, broken by the frequent start,

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion about the romantic friendship between Julie and Claire, see Faderman (78–79).

With pausing step she wanders through the grove,  
A female Proteus in the wiles of love! (2: 252)

After the marriage, she is found to be neither a good wife nor a good mother. She does not breast-feed her baby daughter but leaves the child at home and goes to operas, theaters, and masked balls, dressed in "licentious vestment" (2: 280) with her bosom and limbs almost naked, and finally flirts with a "swarthy opera dancer" (2: 286). As a natural consequence of her dissipations, she is struck by the "bane of health, as the disgrace of love" (2: 287) and ultimately dies.

Such an expedient death of Emira implies not only the defeat of "wealth, and rank, and all their gorgeous train" (2: 292), but also the punishment of a licentious woman, and the dismissal of female sexuality. In "Epistle to Cornelia," Seward attacks Alexander Pope's idea that while men, "some to business, some to pleasure take," / Is "every woman at her heart a Rake" (2: 117)<sup>10</sup> harshly. In *Louisa*, she implicitly illustrates that Pope's characterization of women's nature and sexuality as essentially lascivious was absolutely wrong; for, as Eugenio's father Ernesto says, it is not a lascivious sexual woman but a maternal being who obeys "the sacred force of Nature's law" (2: 285).

Significantly, Seward's vision of women as essentially maternal rather than sexual beings reflected the newly defined gender and sexuality of the late eighteenth century. In *Making Sex* (1990), Thomas Laqueur argued that during this period of the eighteenth century, the concept of biological sexual difference changed from what he calls a one-sex body model to a two-sex body model. The former model considered the female body to be a slightly different version of the male body, while the latter model considered it to be essentially different. In this transition, female orgasm or any other form of female sexual pleasure came to be viewed as independent of conception, and the very existence of women's sexuality also came into question and was redefined. Women's sexuality was no longer seen as active and lascivious, but as primarily passive and pure. Ruth Perry, in "Colonizing the Breast," sees this transition as producing the "desexualization of women," which "was accomplished, in part, by redefining them as maternal rather than sexual beings" (116). Maternal

<sup>10</sup> Seward quoted Alexander Pope, "Epistle II: To A Lady: Of the Characters of Women," lines 215–26.

feelings, such as pity, tenderness and benevolence, came to be perceived as counter to sensual feelings, and the maternal role of child care, breast-feeding in particular, was increasingly emphasized in the late eighteenth century.

Hence, to return to *Louisa*, we see Ernesto complaining that “in the female breast [of Emira], so form’d to prove / The sweet refinements of maternal love, / Disdain, and guilty pleasure, should controul, / And to its yearnings indurate the soul” (2: 280). Emira’s breast is thus seen as a symbolic organ of sexual pleasure rather than of maternal breast-feeding. Emira represents the older type of female gender and sexuality and Louisa represents the new one. Whilst Emira is described as “frolic, insolent; . . . haughty, vain” (2: 248), “voluptuous” (2: 250), “licentious” (2: 251) and “artful” (2: 252), Louisa is portrayed as:

The touching sweetness of Louisa’s face;  
Where from each feature beams, or mildly plays,  
Refined intelligence, with varying rays;  
Where native dignity, with air serene,  
Conscious, not arrogant, adorns her mien;  
While from those eyes, in scorn of artful wiles,  
The tender spotless soul looks out, and smiles, — (2: 249–50)

Throughout the text, Louisa remains a “fair angelic maid” (2: 277), a virgin with no sexuality. Unlike the Eloises of male writers, she has had no sexual relations with her fiancé Eugenio, as she declares after learning of his betrayal: “I still possess, thus withering in my youth / The peace of innocence, the pride of truth” (2: 239). She does not express passion or desire for the man who abandons her, nor does she marry another. It is not even clear whether she will marry Eugenio after his wife’s death. A repentant Emira on her deathbed appears to want Louisa to become Eugenio’s second wife and their baby daughter’s stepmother, when saying: “Love her, Louisa — love her — I implore, / When lost Emira — wounds thy peace no more! / Oh! Gently foster in her opening youth, / The seeds of virtue — honour — faith — and truth” (2: 291). However, in the end, the text merely suggests that Louisa should go back with Eugenio and Emma to their previous innocent, pastoral world. It is possible that Louisa hereafter will nurture Emira’s child, as the dying Emira is convinced that “I know thou wilt!” (2: 291), yet it is uncertain

whether Louisa and Eugenio will marry. Louisa remains sexually innocent, chaste, and angelic throughout the text and we are led to presume that she will do so even after the story ends. Retaining her sexual purity, she will become a maternal nurturer. The idea of an asexual mother would seem to be contradictory, as becoming a mother is seen as a natural consequence of sexual activity. However, women were redefined as “naturally” asexual in Seward’s time, and maternity and sexual desire were imagined to be mutually exclusive; therefore, it would seem proper that Louisa be an asexual maternal woman.

#### IV

*Louisa* sold remarkably well, with four editions appearing in 1784, the first year of publication, followed by an American edition in 1789 and a fifth edition in 1792. Such popularity presumably resulted from Seward’s portrayal of a heroine with no sexuality. This portrayal clearly conformed to the disappearance of female sexuality and a new emphasis on the motherhood in the late eighteenth-century. In a period of revolutionary claims for social equality “between rich and poor, aristocrats and workers, men and women,” it was important to reinvent “the physiological difference between male and female” and thereby desexualize women in order to “offset potentially subversive claims women might make for political equality” (Perry 115). Public taste had altered its preferences for simple and artless poetry in the later 1790s and Seward’s classical style with the use of personification and rhetoric became, as Walter Scott said, “too remote from common life, and natural expression, to retain its popularity” (1: xxv). Nevertheless, the conservative satirist Richard Polwhele in his *The Unsex’d Females* (1798) mentioned Seward as a *not* “unsex’d” woman writer on the side of Hannah More, and highly praised her *Louisa*, along with her elegies “Captain Cook” and “Major André,” as “first-rate performances: either of these enchanting Poems would be sufficient to immortalise the name of Seward” (33). According to Claudia L. Johnson’s interpretation, by “unsex’d” he does not mean women who hate men or want to be men, as Lady Macbeth did in her “unsex me” speech, nor women who are against “nature’s supposed way, heterosexuality” (namely, unnaturally homosexuals). “Quite the contrary,” Johnson remarks, “For Polwhele, ‘unsexed’ women are ‘oversexed’ . . . What being

an unsexed female entails . . . is indulging in unbounded heterosexual love without the heterosexual sentiment" (9). Whereas radical women writers like Mary Wollstonecraft were "unsex'd" because they were lascivious and "despis[ed] NATURE's law" (Polwhele 6), it is natural that the unmarried Seward and her heroine Louisa were *not* "unsex'd," for they had no sexual relations with men at all, and therefore clearly conformed to the newly gendered category of women.

The rise of the asexual woman in the late eighteenth century was apparently associated with the fashion of romantic female friendship. Since they had nothing to do with men, women's close relationships with each other could be considered to be free from accusations of immorality. However, the period in which *Louisa* was favorably received was not only the time in which the trend towards asexual romantic friendships between women had reached its zenith, but also the time in which such relationships were suspected as being "unnatural" sexual relationships or "sapphism," as Seward's friend, Hester Lynch Thrale (later Piozzi), called it (Oram 59).<sup>11</sup> Thrale's diaries indicate that "sapphism" was becoming more widespread in urban Britain as well as in pre-revolutionary Paris. In her 1 April 1789 diary entry, Thrale writes that the "Queen of France" is one of the "*Sapphists*," and on 17 June 1790, she says that Anne Conway Damer, Horace Walpole's niece and heir, is "a Lady much suspected for liking her own Sex in a criminal Way" (Oram 58). Importantly, the concepts of asexual romantic friendship and sexual "sapphism" can be seen as being polarized, but actually this was not entirely true. The Ladies of Llangollen, for example, were celebrated as ideal romantic friends by many eminent persons, and also suspected of being "not platonic" by Anne Lister (*I Know* 210). They were publicly admired, but privately suspected of being "damned Sapphists" (qtd. in Stanley 163) even by Thrale. These testimonies demonstrate the variety and complexity of lesbianism in the late eighteenth century. One striking distinction is that "sapphism" was much more strongly linked with disdain for marriage and celebration of spinsterhood than was romantic friendship. In the satiric poem *A Sapphick Epistle, from Jack Cavendish to the Honourable and Most*

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<sup>11</sup> In her diaries of 1 April 1789 and 9 December 1795 (Oram 58–59), Hester Lynch Thrale used "sapphism" and "Sapphist" as in their modern use, although the *OED* only traces "Sapphism" back to 1890, and "Sapphist" to 1902.



*Beautiful Mrs. D\*\*\*\** ([1778?]), the anonymous author alluded to the above mentioned Damer as one of the "Tommies" (English slang for women "who had sex with women" [Donoghue 5]) originating from Sappho, sarcastically commenting on these women's desire for female separatism and feminist hatred of heterosexual marriage: "Ye Sapphick Saints, how ye must scorn / The dames with vulgar notions born, / Who prostitute to man; / Who toil and sweat the tedious night, / And call the male embrace delight, / The filthy marriage plan" (372). Similarly, in her 23 January 1794 diary entry, Thrale wrote that Miss Rathbone's house where her female friends had lived was "supposed to have been but a Cage of unclean Birds, living in a sinful Celibat." Thrale wondered why "Miss Weston" (one of Seward's romantic friends) had been so averse to marriage, but explained that "Miss Weston did use to like *every Girl*" (Oram 58–59).

Such thoroughgoing revulsion against marriage was not found in Sarah Scott's novel *A Description of Millenium Hall* (1762), referred to by Mavor as "the *vade mecum* of romantic friendship" (83). Scott depicts widows and spinsters living together in the country, yet permits them to help poor girls to marry, presumably "to shield herself from accusations of misogamy" (Donoghue 127). Seward, who was a spinster for life, was even more prudent in depicting fictional romantic friends than Scott. Although romantic female friendship consistently overshadows heterosexual relationships in *Louisa*, and marriage for money is severely criticized, the institution of marriage itself is not repulsed. Moreover, as romantic female friendship is depicted as being far from sexual and not as a desirable alternative to marital or non-marital heterosexual relationships, it does not appear to be a serious threat to the accepted system of a heterosexual society or heterosexual marriage. On the contrary, the closing of *Louisa* tellingly hints at the heroine's happy future together with both her romantic female friend and her heterosexual lover. Seward thus illustrates an aspect of late eighteenth-century lesbianism which was compatible with heterosexual society.

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