7. Louisa and the Late Eighteenth-Century Family Romance

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When Seward revisited *Louisa* in 1784 after having set the project aside for some years, she had to develop the remainder of it without the aid of the map that Rousseau and Pope had provided to her as she wrote the first epistle. In this chapter, I analyze Seward’s variation on the sentimental fiction of the 1780s and 1790s. In her recent literary history, Susan Staves suggests that self-abnegation was a requisite for female heroism in eighteenth-century women’s literature (*Literary History* 332), but I find Seward disinclined to such a view. *Louisa* seems to me to be contending with Rousseau’s emphasis on sensibility, somewhat in the manner of her younger contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft, who both admired and despised Rousseau and whose *Wrongs of Woman* (1798), her final novel, portrays a woman adapting to life in a madhouse under the influence of Rousseauian sensibility. Seward’s Louisa struggles with depression and the impulse to commit suicide when she believes herself deserted by her lover. Unlike some other heroines of sentimental novels, however, she persuades herself to accept her circumstances and live. In the end, unlike the eponymous heroine of Mary Hays’s *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), who also considers suicide when her beloved marries another woman and then recovers but who marries another, only to suffer her husband’s maniacal jealousy, Louisa’s restraint is rewarded when Eugenio becomes free to marry her. My reading of *Louisa* considers the gendered implications of this plot. Finally, I examine how Seward’s relationship with her own father, the Reverend Thomas Seward, may have powerfully if obliquely influenced her verse novel. *Louisa* emerges as a dense record of Seward’s fraught, even defiant, attitudes toward the patriarchs, real and imagined, in her life. If Seward made an
effort to control her career by orchestrating her first publications, *Louisa* implies the degree to which she chafed under the domination of her father and her chosen literary precursors. Seward’s verse novel opens a window into her wish to control social and emotional aspects of her life, resulting in her positive revision of a sentimental plot.

In the classical Ovidian epistle, the heroine has typically been seduced by her lover, and although he is culpable, she too has transgressed and her fate is therefore somewhat deserved. Seward’s twist on this plot is that not only is Louisa innocent but Eugenio is finally exculpated, and unlike works in the Ovidian genre, whose conclusions were uniformly tragic, the novel ends with the lovers’ joyful reunion. Early in *Eloisa*, St. Preux explains to Julie that although he is her teacher, they are not much like their gothic counterparts. St. Preux is not a salaried employee of Baron d’Étange as Abéard is of Eloisa’s uncle. He is close to Julie’s age, their attraction is mutual, and neither is under binding obligations that might prevent their union (1:67). Of course, St. Preux’s nonnoble pedigree proves an insurmountable obstacle, entangling the lovers in years of subterfuges and trials. Rousseau intended to update the famous medieval lovers’ story along with their predicament: six hundred years later, the accident of birth proved as fatal to St. Preux’s courtship as Abéard’s priestly-employee status did for his. But while suggesting the injustice of rigid class barriers between exceptional people, Rousseau bowed to convention in the unequal punishments he meted out to his lovers. Julie and St. Preux are cruelly separated, and both suffer smallpox. St. Preux endures years of exile, sailing around the world with Admiral Anson. Julie, married to a kind and large-minded gentleman, devotes herself to two children and a beautiful garden before she is disturbed by St. Preux’s return. Although she surmounts her temptation to resume their affair, she dies not long afterward, a victim seemingly as much of the conventional insistence that fallen, even if redeemed, heroines die as of her rash effort to save her drowning son.

Seward, as we have seen, reworked all her models to accommodate her personal ideal of chaste sensibility. She devotes her second and longest epistle to Eugenio’s exoneration and the third and briefest to Louisa’s response after reading Eugenio’s self-exculpation. Louisa immediately resolves to live, if only to “expiate by a Mind/Bow’d to its fate, and cheerfully resign’d,/The dangerous rashness, which my peace had thrown/On human chance, and errors not my own” (3:167–70). Seward wished to emphasize the danger of unbridled sensibility even to a young person thwarted by “chance, and errors not my own.” Louisa apparently condemns herself to life as a punishment for the “frail excess of Love” that nearly led to suicide when, knowing herself innocent, she “coldly view’d that Heaven
[Eugenio] could’st not share” (3:34, 40). In light of the epistle’s paucity of incident except for Louisa’s self-accusing response, it seems clear that Seward intended this chiefly as a didactic episode. Unlike Julie, Louisa will live after her recognition of frailty. Unlike Eloisa, she has been primarily a victim. But her near despair sufficiently warrants a deep sense of guilt and prepares for a denouement in which both lovers have been chastened before entering a union that might have seemed too easily won had their marriage taken place as planned.

To underscore Louisa’s suffering and redemption, Seward includes a sixty-one line interpolated tale in the third epistle, nearly one-quarter the length of the entire letter. To explain her sense of renewed joy in life once assured of Eugenio’s innocence, Louisa instances her friend Clairmont, a mercantile adventurer whose bride was swept overboard during a storm en route to South America. Despite his survival, his life had been miserable for years until he received the news that “Clarissa lives!—on coasts unknown/Wreck’d, like himself, unfriended and alone,/By destiny severe, an hapless slave” (3:123–25). Now, Clairmont has been revived by the mere knowledge that she lives and his hope of somehow recovering her. Most interpolated tales in eighteenth-century novels served as both an entertaining digression and a pointed analogue to the protagonist’s experience, and Clairmont’s story is no exception. Clairmont too has innocently suffered the loss of his beloved. He has been healed by learning of Clarissa’s physical survival, much as Louisa rejoices upon learning that Eugenio’s morality remains wholly intact. Seward might also have intended to offer a masculine version of Louisa’s plight as a way of extending her story’s appeal, since Clairmont and his bride have had exotic adventures denied to Louisa in her dell. But another suggestion lies within the episode’s details. Clairmont was torn from his bride, somewhat as Louisa was torn from her fiancé, by circumstances beyond his control (in this, he also resembles Eugenio). He now knows not only that Clarissa lives but that “Fate may aid the ardent strife,/And to his arms restore his long-lost Wife!” (3:129–30). In that hope, Clairmont’s “agony subsides almost to peace” (3:132), concludes Louisa, “So I—but to Eugenio swift impart/How full the pardon of Louisa’s heart!” (3:133–34). The couplet is revealing. Louisa ostensibly means that she will live consoled by the mere fact of Eugenio’s continuing, innocent existence. (She exhorts him, through Emma, to behave as nobly, as a husband and father, as he has acted as a son [3:155–58]). But the couplets preceding her message to Eugenio describe Clairmont’s hope that although Clarissa is “by destiny severe, an hapless Slave,” fate might intervene and reunite them (3:125). “So I,” adds Louisa, before interrupting herself to convey the urgent message of pardon. Louisa’s “So I” refers to Clairmont’s general circumstances, but it also refers to his recent hope that,
although he and Clarissa are currently “wreck’d . . . unfriended and alone,” they might eventually be rejoined. Eugenio is metaphorically “enslaved,” condemned to a loveless marriage “by destiny severe.” But might he not one day become free? There can be no “ardent strife” on his behalf; Louisa has to accept his marriage, much as Seward had to accept John Saville’s marriage. But surely, buried in Louisa’s self-interrupted analogy, as it likely was in Seward’s heart, is the barely conscious wish that someday she and Eugenio might fulfill their vows. That wish is stifled as soon as it is suggested, but it prepares us for the conclusion in which fate reunites the separated lovers. It also humanizes Louisa, whose self-condemnation is martyrlike in its severity. She still cherishes her original feelings, although in repressed form.

The longest and most incident-fraught letters of *Louisa* are the second and fourth, which narrate Eugenio’s trials. Caroline Franklin, *Louisa*’s most recent editor, correctly asserts that its plot is “typical of the age of sensibility in that it pits the importance of the feelings against the power of ‘attractive Commerce’” (x). That power has separated Emma from Louisa, Louisa from Eugenio, and Clarissa from Clairmont. Many novels, such as *Clarissa* and *David Simple*, denounced familial greed and might have supplied hints for Seward’s plot. But since such plots and themes were ubiquitous, their power to move contemporaries depended on the skill with which they were deployed. Eugenio’s pursuit by a headstrong heiress, his reluctant marriage to save his family from ruin, and his consequent misery—none of these developments would have surprised Seward’s first readers. Spoiled heiresses, conflicts between parents and children over marriage choices, and the unhappiness of marriages contracted for fiscal reasons were all standard topoi. Seward’s handling of these conventional topics, however, warrants close attention in several respects, because of her skillful orchestration and also because of the insights they provide into her personal opinions of romantic and familial relationships.

Seward might have found numerous visual and literary clues for the characterization and demise of Eugenio’s wife, Emira. “Emira” is first of all an anagram for “Marie” or “Mary,” another fanciful version of an English name that, in keeping with the romance tradition that informed many early novels, elevated Seward’s tale about plain Laurence, Eugene, Mary, and Ernest into a glamorous fiction. The mostly Italianate names also suggest the real-life practice of slightly veiling names in newspapers’ society columns. Emira is both the ubiquitous spoiled heiress and the embodiment of the mercantile forces threatening such exemplars of pure sensibility as Louisa and Eugenio. Her name suggests the title of a Muslim ruler and thus hints at her domineering personality as well as the source of her
fabulous wealth in the same commerce that has torn other loved ones apart in the novel. The Eastern-sounding name also connotes the corrupt sexuality associated with Turks, which stands opposed to Louisa’s passionate but chaste sensibility. As Louisa models British sensibility, guided by religion and social decorum, Emira represents the self-indulgent passion Seward would have thought “Eastern” or—as in Rousseau’s characters—European.

As he recalls in the second epistle, Eugenio meets Emira while out riding. He is reflecting on the beautiful moonlit evening, when he is torn from his reverie by a woman’s shrieks: she has been pulled from her horse by three armed assailants. After killing one of the criminals (the other two run away), Eugenio leads their victim toward his father’s home. Only when they emerge from the woods into the moonlight does he perceive with surprise her splendid garments and the “gorgeous trappings” of her horse (2:167). The clothes serve the narrative function of enabling Eugenio to assure Emma that he was not enchanted by Emira—the fact that he was distracted by Emira’s garments proves that he was not paying attention to Emira’s face. But readers might discern from her fashionable, oriental-style clothing, such as the embroidered belt “clasp’d by a Gem, the boast of Orient Mines” (2:173), that Emira personifies the wealth her family has evidently gained from Eastern trade. No doubt, like most aristocrats (Emira boasts about her “lin-eal Blood, allied /To Rank, and Pow’r” [2:270–71], Emira’s family has invested in commercial ventures to support and extend their landed property. Eugenio’s family soon recognizes in their guest the topic of popular gossip owing to her beauty and fabulous marriage portion; unfortunately, Emira has been characterized as “insolent” and “vain” (2:211). Her flirtation with Eugenio resembles, to him, the attempted seduction of Telemachus by Calypso, a story familiar to Seward’s readers through the popular, didactic prose epic by Fénelon. Like Telemachus, who pines instead for Eucharis, Eugenio prefers the charms of a more retiring nymph. The comparison to Calypso emphasizes Emira’s dangerous power, her obsessively persistent will, her personality’s “foreignness” as opposed to the virtues of sensibility. The association of Emira’s privileged status with mercantilism aligns Louisa, genteel but not wealthy, with spiritual and aesthetic values that Seward admires. The characterizations imply both a critical view of national policies and an early example of what Mary Poovey describes in *Genres of the Credit Economy* as the gradual disconnection of the literary from the economic or monetary. While Seward was one of many novelists who, as Miranda J. Burgess describes it, “represented commerce as a diffuse force that penetrated into and destabilized the safest corners of private life,” her resolution of the problem was somewhat different from that of writers like Frances Sheridan and Frances Burney who be-
lieved they were witnessing “the overthrow of British institutions by individual desire” (87)

Emira is also associated with the fashionably exotic pastime of the masquerade. Terry Castle has written the definitive study of British preoccupation with this Italianate entertainment; suffice to say, fictional masquerade balls were associated with sexual corruption, social contamination, and foreign decadence of all kinds. As in *Louisa*, they also usually provoke the climax or turning point of a plot (Castle 117–18). English audiences and readers were evidently fascinated by the socially disruptive possibilities inherent in events at which all participants are disguised. Accordingly, in drama and fiction, wives and heiresses are either carried off or narrowly rescued at masked balls; seducers and female rakes either fool their victims or are foiled. Masquerade plots rang multiple changes on the theme of social order tragically breached or comically restored. Seward might have recalled a visual representation of such an episode from Hogarth’s *Marriage à la Mode*, when the countess dies after a rendezvous with her lawyer, Silvertongue, at a masquerade. Hogarth’s plot satisfied contemporary expectation because his dissipated but previously faithful young heroine slips over the boundary separating virtue from vice after deciding to attend this palpable occasion of sin. Seward could have found no more an economical device to convey Emira’s self-destruction, nor one more familiar. In the novel’s fourth and final epistle, Ernesto narrates for Louisa the disastrous course of his son’s marriage. Emira recognized from the outset of her marriage that Eugenio still pined for Louisa. Her pride wounded, Emira turned first to frivolous and then to licentious pastimes rather than fulfill her roles of wife and mother. Seward does not clarify, but Emira manifestly intends to wound Eugenio as much as amuse herself through such dangerous activities as “Play, ruinously high, and dark Intrigue” (4:103). Eugenio attempted to reason with her but recognized her escapades as efforts to assuage marital disappointment. Ernesto recalls one particular scene that in its poignancy may have suggested to Elizabeth Inchbald the scene between Dorriforth and Miss Milner before the latter defiantly attends a masked ball in *A Simple Story* (1791).

Ernesto is haunted by memories of an evening when Emira was “hastening to the midnight Mask” (4:134). She is “consummate from her toilette’s anxious task,” anxious perhaps because she is thinking about an impending tryst or simply because she is vain. Significantly, she has not been part of the group in her drawing room, where Ernesto cuddles her baby daughter while Eugenio broods. Instead, she has come only to take leave of her family. Eugenio sighs with exasperation when he surveys her costume and recognizes that Emira has disguised herself not as an emir, but as the member of a seraglio, complete with feathered, bejeweled...
turban, loose belt, and clinging, translucent sleeves (4:141–48). Eugenio tries to warn Emira about the dangers of masquerades. He adjures her, if not as an injured husband, as an interested friend, to beware the possibility of “ambush” lurking at such balls (4:166). He asks her how her pride will endure the gleeful destruction of her reputation by rivals happy to witness her likely fall. When Emira turns away from him, Eugenio makes a last, desperate effort to dissuade her. He places their baby in Emira’s arms and begs her to think of their daughter before continuing on her destructive path. Emira pauses, involuntarily shedding tears on her daughter’s head. But she soon remembers her anger and returns the baby to Ernesto, declaring, “Go little Wretch!—of tender mutual flames/Thou wert not born!—then why should I embrace./And live for thee, whose birth is my disgrace?” (4:300–302). By stifling her positive, maternal sensibility, Emira has sealed her fate. She chooses instead a venue famous for duplicity, for concealed identities and feigned motives. Emira has resorted to sensual habits, hardening her heart, to quote Seward in a 1762 letter to her imaginary friend, whereas Louisa chastely endures (Poetical Works 1:l).

Although Emira’s fall does not immediately follow, she eventually (and predictably) succumbs to a tryst after “the loose revel of [a] wanton mask” (4:342), much like Hogarth’s countess. In choosing masquerade over motherhood, Emira has deliberately chosen the path to self-destruction. Her anguished words to her daughter suggest that beneath Emira’s pride lurks genuine, if self-willed, heartbreak. If to bear children in an economically driven marriage signifies “disgrace,” then Emira has learned what Louisa and Eugenio already understand, that such a marriage resembles, for the wife, a kind of prostitution. This argument, too, was a commonplace in eighteenth-century arguments against forced marriages. But Emira takes the analogy seriously, using it as the rationale for her outrageous behavior. She throws herself away on a “haughty Lord, licentious, false, and vain,” who loves an opera dancer and sleeps with Emira merely “to support his consequence” (4:351, 359). Their affair becomes public knowledge after he boasts of the liaison. Eugenio forbears to separate from or divorce the woman for whose shame he feels somewhat responsible, although he moves to a different bed. Emira, however, completes her ruin by contracting a contagious disease while carousing among “the light Throngs, that crowd the garish Mart” (4:391). If by “Mart” Seward meant not a generalized commercial locale but a marketplace, Emira is appropriately infected while shopping, another association of mercantilism with general corruption. The poem concludes after Emira begs Louisa, through Ernesto, to attend her deathbed and pardon her for severing Eugenio from Louisa. Assured that Louisa will raise her child, Emira dies, leaving Eugenio and Louisa
to resume their interrupted betrothal, now “more sweet, for generous Pity’s mingled sighs; sweet above all, from the exulting pride / Of self-approving Virtue, strongly tried” (4:528–30).

Seward beautifully orchestrates the conclusion to pull together several strands of her narrative. The transfer of Emira’s child to Louisa completes the characterization of Emira as foil of Louisa. Throughout epistles 2 and 4, Emira is developed as Louisa’s antithesis. Emira is proud, artful, and given to display, while Louisa is modest, artlessly responsive, and retiring. Louisa must be loved for her intrinsic qualities, given her “want of gold” (2:81), while Emira is married only for her opportune wealth. While Louisa remains rooted in her bower, almost like one of the plants around her beloved spring, Emira engages in a mad round of activities. Seward emphasizes Louisa’s despair when she has become convinced that Eugenio does not love her. Her psychological struggle is resolved through moral reflection and confidence in divine support. Once reassured of Eugenio’s goodness, she resigns herself to live patiently, consoled by awareness that Eugenio, too, likewise endures despite forces beyond his control. Emira, on the other hand, indulges her despair when she realizes that Eugenio will never love her, despite his gratitude to her for forestalling his family’s bankruptcy. She does not try to win his friendship or even reflect on her rash behavior; rather she exacerbates her pain by courting disgrace. Seward’s portrait of Emira is not unsympathetic. Not only does she seem, like Louisa, to have no parents but she also seems to have no brother, sister, or guardian who might have provided direction. (Literary headstrong heiresses have inattentive or ineffectual parents and guardians and therefore are often left to their own devices.) Louisa enjoys the dignity arising from “the peace of Innocence, the pride of Truth” (1:446), but Emira makes a spectacle of self-degradation after she fails to secure Eugenio’s love along with his marriage vow. Emira’s choosing the masquerade over her infant would have horrified contemporaries, who idealized maternal love. On the other hand, her exclamation conveys genuine anguish. She “bought” her husband from his desperate father, and their baby resulted from the consummation not of love but of a financial arrangement. She now despises Eugenio and Ernesto, but above all, she hates herself. Unfortunately, her self-loathing leads to the virtual self-immolation that comes with a tawdry affair. Seward could rely on contemporaries to draw the parallel between Louisa, who chastised herself for the “frail excess of Love” that led to the “sad extremes” of sickness and despair (3:34–35), and Emira, who deliberately turned away from reflection and persisted in extreme behavior. Seward leaves no doubt that Emira represents the twisted alternative to Louisa’s wholesomeness, but she grants Emira a degree of self-consciousness that, while far from excusing
her willful self-destruction, suggests she too is the victim of a culture that encourages women to consider themselves commodities in marriage. Louisa, as we have repeatedly noted, is connected with the natural world and with religious and aesthetic values, as if to underscore sensibility’s distance from commodification.

Although Seward found most of her plot elements—the spoiled heiress, the sacrificial marriage, the climactic masked ball, the deathbed confession—scattered among contemporary paintings, plays, poems, and novels, Emira demonstrates Seward’s ability to infuse these stock characters and situations with sensibility. Seward’s chief male characters, particularly Eugenio’s father, Ernesto, are likewise elaborations of familiar types, but they are developed with genuine originality. Ernesto in particular reveals Seward’s ambivalence about one of the major cultural shifts of her generation, the transfer of familial allegiance from blood kin to relations by marriage as outlined by Ruth Perry in *Novel Relations*. In her illuminating study, Perry detects, in much later eighteenth-century fiction, traces of the anguish caused as economic and social changes gradually wrought corresponding changes in family structure. Fiscal considerations led parents to make decisions about their children’s marriages that threatened women’s status as never before. Traditionally, Perry explains, women could claim a certain equality with their brothers as children of the same father, bearers of the same familial blood. As genteel families struggled to retain their status in the developing economy, however, daughters could now seem drains on their fathers’ fortunes and their brothers’ future inheritances owing to escalating dowries (Perry 13–20). While British parents could not, like Italian parents, forcibly lock supernumerary daughters in convents to reduce the cost of their support, many daughters evidently languished at home or in the low-paying occupations available to ladies, victims of a system in which they were now inconveniences rather than intrinsically valuable family members. Perry finds evidence of the trauma caused by this shift throughout British popular literature, particularly in novels, where plots featuring daughters who find long-lost fathers or who are protected by loving brothers represent the wish-fulfillment fantasies of women writers or of sympathetic male writers such as Richardson.

*Louisa* contains many of the characters and plot configurations Perry finds typical of late-century fiction. Louisa has no parents, but she has a strong bond with her brother. As Perry observes, “A loving brother was better than a father because closer to the heroine’s own interests and more of a friend” (151). Lorenzo, fulfilling his role as ideal brother, brings his best friend to meet Louisa, no doubt hoping for just the outcome that results from his introduction. Lorenzo’s intervention is presumably crucial because, since Louisa has no large dowry and has
not been paraded in London as an eligible match, the young men’s friendship brings about her opportunity for marriage. Lorenzo leaves for the grand tour, confident that his sister will soon be welcomed by a loving husband to a new home. Eugenio is to be a kind of replacement brother, as well as a husband, for Louisa. Perry cites the number of fictional heroes, such as Lord Orville in *Evelina* and Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, who serve as kindly “brothers” as well as suitors to heroines. Eugenio, although destined to join his father’s business, resembles Louisa in his sensitivity to natural beauty and in finding his personal emotions reflected in the landscape. As he rides toward his family’s estate in epistle 2, for example, Eugenio discovers that the familiar landmarks “assum’d new grace, and wore a softer mein,/ From the blest thought, that soon the nuptial Hour/Would lead Louisa to my native bower!” (2:60–62). However, Eugenio shortly proves to be the era’s “ideal” young man in his role as son as well. Eugenio faces a tragic double bind when his father begs him to marry Emira. Perry emphasizes that for fictional heroes and heroines, consanguineal bonds trump conjugal interests in any given situation. Eugenio is forced to choose between Louisa and the imminent destruction of his family. Ernesto describes in heart-wrenching terms Eugenio’s frail mother and delicate sisters, even the innocent investors whose fortunes will be ruined along with his. He asks whether Eugenio is prepared to ask Louisa to join him in a life of poverty. To the reasonable objection that hard work would in time restore the family’s wealth, Ernesto responds that his wife would meanwhile surely die, and in any case, his faithless business partner will have irreparably damaged his reputation unless their debts are somehow paid. Faced with these unanswerable arguments, Eugenio makes the painful but noble decision to assist his family at the expense of his betrothed. As Perry remarks about an Austen novel, “Taking care of one’s blood relatives . . . was coming to be seen as the heart and soul of proper feeling” (142). Even the heart-broken Louisa cannot help but “approve, absolve, [and] admire” Eugenio’s sacrifice when she reads the explanation he sends to Emma (3:67). Eugenio decides against communication with Louisa not because he is thoughtless but because he knows that if he explained the circumstances, Louisa would approve of his decision to marry Emira and consequently resign herself to “fruitless Constancy, and fond regret” (2:542). If she believes instead that he deserted her for an heiress, he reasons, her “high-soul’d Scorn” will “[subdue her] rooted Love” (2:553). Only after his death is Emma to confide the circumstances of his apparent betrayal.

If Seward constructs, in Eugenio, a hero of sensibility, torn between individual preference and family needs but choosing “warm Duty” over “bleeding Love” (2:517), his father, Ernesto, likewise resembles his fictional counterparts. Like David
Simple, or Mr. Wilson in *Joseph Andrews*, he has retreated from active involvement in urban affairs. Richer than either Simple or Wilson, he occupies a rural estate in Wales with considerable property but evidently a relatively modest home (Emira refers to his villa as a “sylvan Cell” [2: 221]). Unfortunately, like Simple, or like Parson Primrose in *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Ernesto’s very innocence and retirement nearly ruin him. His partner, Belmor, has given poor advice or misled him, and the failure of their current venture is about to bankrupt everyone involved. But as the head of his family, he rallies to save his wife, daughters, son, and fellow investors from imminent ruin. Ernesto must ask his son not to marry the woman who would supply “a Daughter’s tenderness, an Angel’s care” (2:88), but to save his own daughters, Eugenio’s sisters, from poverty. Ernesto embodies paternal sensibility to such a degree that when she sees his “venerable Form” approach (3:209), Louisa responds instinctively, with “cordial confidence,” to the “rays of love, and angel-pity” beaming from his “look benign” (4:9–11). The orphaned Louisa shares with Ernesto a version of the father-daughter recognition scene familiar in other fictions. Who, she asks, is this stranger who “gazest on me with paternal love?” (4:16). Ernesto begs her forgiveness, which she immediately grants, falling to her knees as her tears wet his hands. “Oh! What a Wretch were I, should I upbraid, / Because th’ exalted Youth, whose heart I won, / Deserves the blessing, to be born thy Son!” (4:36–38). Seward implies that Ernesto recognizes Louisa as his metaphorical daughter and literal daughter-in-law, bringing her plot to near completion by restoring her to the family she coveted but nearly lost. From this perspective, *Louisa’s* conclusion anticipates that of *Mansfield Park*, in which Fanny Price proves worthier to be Sir Thomas Bertram’s daughter than either Maria or Julia. Both Louisa and Eugenio have proved they can subordinate their sensibility to higher principles. Eugenio cannot be blamed for attempting to satisfy his personal desire at the expense of his family; instead, Louisa will be absorbed into the family. Ernesto is thus absolved of any guilt for delaying their marriage, because his despairing request set the lovers a trial that has refined them.

Near the end of the poem, Louisa develops a biblical simile to describe her relief at the outcome of her suffering. She recollects Abraham’s joy when an angel interrupts his imminent sacrifice of Isaac:

Thus, on Moriah’s consecrated height,
Flow’d the obedient Patriarch’s fond delight,
When o’er the filial breast, his faith to seal,
On high had gleam’d the sacrificing Steel;
Thus flow’d, when at the Voice, divinely mild,
His raptur’d hands unbound his only Child!

(4:533–38)

Seward deliberately leaves the simile’s referents vague, because the comparison applies to all three witnesses of Emira’s death. Louisa has observed the unbinding of her lover’s marital chains. Eugenio, who believed himself to be sacrificing Louisa’s happiness to serve his family, now sees his victim released from her suffering. Ernesto, the family patriarch, believed he had sacrificed his son’s potential marital happiness and now weeps for joy because of Eugenio’s unanticipated freedom. However the simile is construed, it identifies Louisa and Eugenio as well as Ernesto with the role of patriarch. The patriarch’s perspective is the perspective from which to view the poem’s events; to share that viewpoint is to understand the narrative correctly. But certain details of the poem contradict such a reading of it and complicate Seward’s relation to the conventional kinship plot.

Louisa enjoys the close relationship with her brother that is typical, as Perry observes, in many fictional plots. But Lorenzo, having arranged his sister’s betrothal, leaves for the grand tour. When Louisa is desolate, she has no brother to console her, let alone defend her honor. Lorenzo is not mentioned after the first epistle; at the poem’s conclusion, he has evidently been gone for nearly four years, leaving Louisa to fend for herself. Eugenio, likewise, fails to offer crucial support to the innocent woman he must desert in order to fulfill his duty as a son and brother. Although he explains his motive to Emma, and Louisa accepts his reasoning, his plan fails to prevent Louisa’s prolonged suffering. In fact, Louisa is only informed of Eugenio’s intention when Emma senses this knowledge might prevent her grief-stricken death. This scenario derives from Seward’s third model, Prior’s “Henry and Emma,” in which a young man tests his beloved’s fidelity by inventing a tale of his disgrace. After she declares she will follow him into exile, he reveals the truth. Seward found undignified Emma’s continuing attachment to a self-professed criminal, and so she replaced Henry’s false story with a true test of Louisa’s strength of character. On the other hand, “Henry and Emma” ends with the revelation that the trial has been illusory; Emira’s timely death, which reunites the chastened lovers, follows Prior’s framework. Although Seward refined Prior’s plot, then, Louisa still had to suffer under false pretenses, such as Eugenio’s decision not to inform her, even though he might easily have communicated his predicament. Louisa properly recoils when she believes he deserted her for a wealthy bride and forgives him only when, several years later, she learns the truth. Meanwhile, despite Louisa’s admiration and her eagerly renewed devotion after Emira’s death, careful readers must ask why Eugenio failed to realize that knowl-
edge of his circumstances, rather than ignorance, would have assisted his fiancée. The structural necessity, imposed by Prior’s plot, for Louisa to face a fictional test before there can be a happy conclusion, requires Eugenio to share Henry’s impulse toward deception.

Ernesto most strikingly departs from the model patriarch beloved in the fiction of the time. Louisa, we have seen, reveres Ernesto for his efforts on behalf of his family. She drops to her knees at his approach in a gesture resembling the recognition scenes between fathers and daughters in many novels, including Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), Henry MacKenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771), and Frances Burney’s *Evelina* (1778). Ernesto is rewarded after his family’s trials with his son’s happiness and a new “daughter.” Seward apparently endorses popular yearning for consanguineal fidelity, signaled by Eugenio’s sacrifice followed by Louisa’s seamless absorption into Ernesto’s family. Again, however, Seward undermines this familiar plot. Even if the novel’s first readers ignored the fact that Ernesto requires Eugenio to overturn an established betrothal—a far more serious breach in the eighteenth century than it would be today—they must have been dismayed by the frankly mercenary nature of the marriage he proposes:

We know that Fortune on Emira pours
Her golden treasures in unstinted showers.—
Eugenio! she stands ready to replace
Thy Father’s comforts on a lasting base! (2:402–5)

Ernesto’s plea on behalf of his wife and daughters is made in the guise of just the sort of capital-building matches that kinship proponents usually abhorred because they advanced the family’s wealth and status at the expense of individual members’ security and happiness. Seward has mixed the terms so that her family patriarch espouses precisely the sort of alliance such characters ought to despise. Trapped in his own double bind, Ernesto succumbs to Emira’s offer. Ideally, he would have dissuaded the frantic heiress and not accepted her bribery. Ernesto is forced to choose the lesser of two evils; even Louisa absolves him of culpability under the circumstances. But those circumstances have caused Ernesto to act in a manner that, while preserving the welfare of others, resembles the morally weak choices deplored in contemporary accounts of avaricious matches.

As if to underline Ernesto’s weakness, Seward ultimately renders meaningless his sacrifice of Louisa’s and Eugenio’s happiness. Susan Staves has remarked on the routine occurrence “in sentimental plots [of] paragon characters who offer to make dramatic sacrifices . . . only to find that their proffered services will not be
required” (Literary History 332). Seward’s variation on this standard plot element, as we have seen, was to require genuine sacrifice from her hero and heroine, who are ultimately rewarded for it. Unlike other sentimental plots that seem constructed principally so that, as Staves observes, readers might enjoy spectacles of distress (331), Louisa seems designed to interrogate such scenes. While recounting Emira’s dissipated career, Ernesto expresses his relief that the “vast debt” he owed to his daughter-in-law has been canceled (4:107–8). As in The Merchant of Venice, the ships he thought lost have returned, not only restoring but increasing his wealth. Ernesto reiterates his gratitude to Emira for rescuing him from certain ruin (4:115–18). But he laments that Eugenio has been the “youthful Victim to his Father’s good” and confesses his happiness that he has been able to repay Emira’s bounty, because nothing is more painful “than much to owe, where owing we despise” (4:120, 126). Nothing can ameliorate, however, the fact that as a result of Ernesto’s panic-driven request, Eugenio has believed himself tied for life to a despicable woman, while Louisa feels consigned to spinsterhood. Ernesto could not have foreseen the “smiling Chance” that restored his wealth (4:113). But the fact that chance has restored his wealth, canceling the need for a finance-driven alliance, suggests on some level the ill-advised nature of such expedient marriages as well as the foolishness, if not cruelty, of parents to demand them.

Louisa, then, has suffered under both the kinship and conjugal systems of loyalty, as outlined by Perry. Her brother has been an ineffectual protector, and she nearly dies of grief after her fiancé deserts her to save his blood kin. On the other hand, Eugenio deserts her for the kind of marriage despised in most of the literature of the time as the bane of a capital-driven, individualistic society. This is the kind of marriage Emira seeks, one engineered to gratify her vanity and salvage Ernesto’s fortune. Once she saves Ernesto from ruin, she has no concern for how his family’s reputation might suffer as a result of her scandalous pastimes. Emira is obsessed with her own lacerated ego and would rather destroy herself than attempt the difficult effort of self-healing. Meanwhile, Louisa sits alone as a result of Emira’s marital “triumph.” Surveying Louisa’s predicament, the reader intuits Seward’s dissatisfaction with women’s situation under both systems. At the novel’s conclusion, Louisa and Eugenio anticipate their marriage, the fulfillment of a choice based on individual preference rather than on family considerations. On the other hand (and in true wish-fulfillment fashion), Eugenio’s individual choice is best for his family, since it brings his parents an additional “Daughter’s tenderness, [and] an Angel’s care” (2:28). Seward, who enjoyed the protection of her father’s home and the use of his fortune throughout her life, might have been expected to espouse the older fashion of kin-based loyalty. But Louisa seems, if
tentatively, to embrace the newer idea of conjugal-based, rather than family-based, allegiance. Eugenio and Louisa’s match suggests that such marriages, if not contracted for mercenary reasons, benefit not only the individuals concerned but also their families. Why might this have been so?

The figure of Ernesto, both the poem’s honored patriarch and the cause of all its distress, points toward an answer. According to Seward’s correspondence, when she began Louisa, she had yet to experience any emotional entanglements. The twenty years between the poem’s beginning and completion, however, brimmed with experiences most often influenced decisively by Canon Seward. He chose as suitor for her beloved younger sister Sarah, for example, Samuel Johnson’s stepson, a wealthy middle-aged merchant named Joseph Porter. According to Seward’s letters, Sarah was engaged shortly after meeting Porter but died before the wedding could take place. Anna’s first love, for a Major John Wright in 1764, was terminated by her father when he discovered their clandestine relationship (Barnard, Anna Seward 61). She subsequently engaged herself to a Captain Temple, but that affair too was ended by her father, her suitor being indigent (Barnard, Anna Seward 62). Ashmun comments that although Reverend Seward seems to have been “no more of a tyrant than most fathers of the period,” “his willingness to see his daughter Sarah sacrificed in a loveless marriage with a moneyed man, and his refusal to give his daughter Anna where the amount of money which he had anticipated was lacking, show him conventional and mercenary, if no worse” (26). Her dismissive assessment surely does not reflect the pain experienced by Seward throughout these events. Although Seward apparently healed quickly after the Temple debacle, ensuing years brought additional disappointments. By her own account, she refused several marriage offers promoted by her father. Nobody joined with her romantic wish that her foster sister Honora Sneyd might marry the engaging but far from prosperous young John André. Eventually, Seward championed Sneyd’s decision in 1773 to marry Richard Lovell Edgeworth despite the initial disapprobation of both Honora’s father and Reverend Seward, who later performed the wedding ceremony (Barnard, Anna Seward 80–81). Unfortunately, Honora’s frail health deteriorated at Edgeworth’s Irish estate, and Seward blamed Edgeworth for his wife’s demise. A final, but perhaps chief, example concerns Seward’s relationship with John Saville, the married but separated vicar choral whom she loved for many years. The year before Honora married Edgeworth, in 1772, Seward almost lost Saville to her father’s anger when he was warned of the impropriety of their relationship (Barnard, Anna Seward 69–71). Saville suffered
the “altered eye of hard unkindness” from him, and bled under the sense of it. No prospect of worldly disadvantage—and I was threatened with the highest—could induce me to renounce the blessing of a tried and faithful friend; but by ill-advised and mistaken authority, most of its sweetest comforts were mercilessly lopt away. (Whalley 1:344)

Saville was banished not only from Seward’s private sitting room, an upstairs parlor where he had spent many happy hours visiting with the Seward sisters, Honora, André, and other intimate friends, but from the Bishop’s Palace for most of the 1770s (Barnard, Anna Seward 71). Although Seward refused to alter her own feelings and frankly claimed her devotion to Saville for the rest of her life, her father’s less high-minded response to local gossip must have rankled. Seward ensured her father’s care throughout his long, slow physical and mental decline and sincerely mourned his death. But even though she loved him, she may have expressed in the figure of Ernesto her resentment of the paternal authority that had robbed her when young of at least two potential suitors, failed to introduce any other satisfactory suitors, and nearly disinherited her over her attachment to Saville. Her father had failed to engineer Sarah’s marriage to the unattractive but rich Porter only because Sarah died, but he successfully discouraged André before finally advocating Honora’s marriage to the wealthy Edgeworth. Louisa comments obliquely on all these situations. Louisa herself is young and, although her brother owns property, she does not command a huge dowry. We first meet her as a writer, composing the tale of her woes for Emma, much as the youthful Seward confided in an Emma. Like Seward, too, Louisa is characterized by her passion for music and landscape and by her voluntary confinement—one to a cathedral enclosure, the other to her bower. Filial devotion pushes Eugenio to abandon Louisa for Emira, who, while young and beautiful, is identified with the wealth that evidently attracted Reverend Seward when considering mates for his daughters and for his ward Honora. Emira has physical allure but she is morally unattractive. Ernesto is of course the central figure behind Eugenio’s maneuver. Seward’s dedication to Saville despite the fact that he was married may lie behind Louisa’s decision to live single; she believes with Eugenio that their souls will be united after death (2:582, 3.14). In this regard, Louisa’s trust in fate and the short shrift given to any mourning after Emira’s (convenient) death might likewise veil the wish-fulfillment aspect of Louisa’s and Eugenio’s unexpected reunion. Barnard, too, has observed the fantasy involved when the virginal Louisa inherits Eugenio’s child (Anna Seward 14); Seward’s letters demonstrate her quasi-maternal
care for Saville’s daughter Elizabeth. From another perspective, the feminized Eugenio, who flees the bed of his debauched, masculinized wife, resembles in his plight not only Saville but also daughters forced into marriages engineered to gratify their fathers, the destiny Seward evidently thought she escaped only by repudiating marriage.

Seward does not explicitly blame Ernesto for any of the novel’s unhappiness, although he blames himself for the anguish he has caused his son and Louisa (4:17–22). Eugenio never reproaches his father, and Louisa herself greets Ernesto with “deepest reverence” (4:28). There is no reason to assume that Seward was publicly accusing her own father of causing his children’s misery: Louisa, conspicuously, does not have a father. But the hero’s and heroine’s protestations notwithstanding, the plot points toward Ernesto as the chief cause of grief. His misplaced trust in a deceptive business partner, his panic-stricken request, his willingness to sacrifice a child to maintain his family’s refined way of life make Ernesto ultimately responsible for all Louisa’s woes, no matter how strenuously the other characters deny his guilt. In involuntarily bowing to him in what we have noted as a variant of the classic father-daughter recognition scene (4:27–28), Louisa not only acknowledges Ernesto as Eugenio’s father but as her own—and, indirectly, as the parent whose indisputable but misguided authority wrought all the complications that have marred her life.

Seward’s relationship to the typical later eighteenth-century novels of sensibility is therefore complicated. Her plot overtly adheres to such novels’ preference for kinship loyalty over individual conjugal alliances: Ernesto is treated sympathetically, Eugenio’s choice is lauded as exemplary, and Louisa praises both father and son before entering their family as another “daughter.” But Louisa finally occupies a liminal position in relation to the novel’s kinship structures. Throughout the narrative, she literally occupies a space outside her home, near the estate’s boundary, suspended between her brother’s absentee guardianship and Eugenio’s uncompleted marriage vow. Both she and Eugenio admit that their passion was too great and merited chastisement; in other words, Eugenio’s choosing his mate without speaking to his family was rash, and so they deserved to be punished. After a period of intense suffering, however, their individual choice is finally blessed and acknowledged to surpass Eugenio’s father’s choice. Louisa is at last within bounds, as it were, with Ernesto’s granddaughter in her arms for safekeeping, but she is nevertheless an outsider whose personal happiness with Eugenio has been endorsed. Seward’s personal history is probably responsible for this conclusion. Conservative in most ways, she would never have publicly defied her father’s
wishes or disgraced her family, and thus she maintained the family solidarity under a patriarch that distinguished kinship orientation. As a single woman, she benefited from the old-fashioned belief that daughters were valuable family members, to be cherished and provided for rather than marginalized. But she must have resented the degree to which her own feelings and those of her sister were ignored by Reverend Seward. His control over her romantic attachments and marital prospects had led to her spinsterhood and almost stifled her relationship with Saville. Although Seward enjoyed great privileges throughout her life as Canon Seward’s daughter, chatelaine of the Bishop’s Palace in Lichfield, she was denied marriage by her father’s insistence when young and then by Saville’s inability to divorce. Louisa represents a fantasy in which the father’s sanctioned but brutal marital arrangement is undone so that the lovers can fulfill, with his blessing, their personal wish to marry. Louisa eats the bitter herbs of exile but has her wedding cake, too. Louisa at first appears to fulfill the nostalgic demands of the kinship-oriented plot, typical in novels of sensibility. But on closer inspection, Seward reveals her ambivalence toward the romance of family, and tentatively endorses the individually fulfilling conjugal bond she was denied in her own life.

Louisa finally represents Seward’s attempt to answer the kinds of questions posed about sensibility by skeptical contemporaries as well as by Claudia Johnson and Susan Staves. If masculine identification with feelings left women with no options besides an extreme, debilitating capacity for emotion or the abandonment of all pretension to emotional response, Seward poses those alternatives as an edifying spectacle for her heroine. Emira is the classic “unsexed” female or, rather, the classic female libertine. Stifling all sympathetic impulses, she lives only to satisfy her appetites. Impervious to threats that usually constrained women’s behavior, she ignores social ostracism and takes advantage of Eugenio’s hesitation to sue for divorce. When she finally succumbs to a contagious disease, Emira’s fate is symbolically apt; women who “exposed” themselves courted self-destruction. Eugenio more intriguingly represents the debilitated extreme of sensibility. As Staves remarks in Eighteenth-Century British Women Writers, exemplary fictional heroines often found themselves interrogating their propriety in acceding to loveless marriages in order to obey their parents or in contemplating the morally correct response to spousal adultery (344, 349). Such heroines usually resolved to wait patiently for a reform ultimately won by silent tears if not by uncomplaining endurance. Eugenio, much like these heroines, nurses his baby daughter and hesitates to lecture his wife until motherhood urges her reformation. Like the heroines whom Staves describes, Eugenio must suffer for contracting a loveless...
Situated outside these extremes, Louisa develops a moderated response to her woes. While Staves finds that the midcentury bluestockings preferred the life of reason to that of sensibility and moreover suspected that “sentimentalism too often entailed moral incoherence” (358), Seward envisioned a heroine whose sensibility is refined by the self-respect and moral principles that Emira lacks. Because we learn from Louisa herself about her battle with despair, while we hear of Eugenio’s endurance through Ernesto’s narrative, her psychological struggle appears more dynamic than his. Louisa emerges as a figure of exemplary because disciplined sensibility. As Emira recognizes, Louisa will be a superior mother to her child, raising the infant for “Eugenio’s sake!—who gave her birth” (4:497), as if Eugenio were the mother and Emira the baby’s libertine father. Louisa appears at Emira’s deathbed long after conquering her own suicidal impulse. She is the ideal spectator of Emira’s miserable death, a death she earned as an offender against “Truth—and Love!” (4:508). Having offended neither, Louisa will finally become Eugenio’s wife. In *Equivocal Beings*, Johnson questions whether even Mary Wollstonecraft, who struggled to reconcile sensibility with female dignity, could imagine a heterosexual marriage that satisfied a “sturdy, purposive, mutually respecting, and rationally loving couple”; *The Wrongs of Woman* envisions such a marriage only between females (69). In *Louisa*, Seward offers an alternative for women unhappy with contemporary marital configurations. The heroine, not the hero, appears to release the suffering spouse and restore a happy marriage. Louisa, moreover, assumes attributes of the husband when she agrees to raise the child of another parent “who gave her birth.” Louisa, in other words, takes back the admirable sensibility along with the capability and effectuality that Johnson believes had been usurped by male proponents of sentiment. When Ernesto implores her forgiveness, she even triumphs morally over the novel’s patriarch, although she believes his error was justified and reverently seeks his blessing.

Louisa is more than a private wish-fulfillment fantasy. Seward’s verse novel replaces the patriarchal tales of Eloisa’s and Julie’s suffering with an updated, feminine “translation,” a version in which the heroine’s exquisite feelings are privileged instead of punished and in which she is granted some agency after completing her emotional trials. Louisa flees her bower in response to Ernesto’s plea, not like Eve in the wake of transgression but like an angel of mercy emanating from heaven. Her gesture of absolving Eugenio and Ernesto makes possible a final tableau that she invites Emma to view as paradise restored. She and Eugenio will
resemble the redeemed Adam and Eve, “as thro’ the Vale of Life [they] stray” in a starlit, spring environment (4:551). But in this version, Eugenio and his father have sinned more than Louisa, who was guilty of nothing but too heedless a love for her fiancé. Like novels from *Pamela* to *Pride and Prejudice*, *Louisa* imagines a conclusion that was almost impossible for most women as it certainly was for Seward herself. But by rewriting Pope’s and Rousseau’s fictions of feminine sensibility and subtly challenging her father’s authority, Seward acknowledged women’s superior capacity for feeling while claiming sensibility’s potential for moral growth and emotional maturity. Her poetical novel deserves recognition among those of other late-century writers, including not only Wollstonecraft and Hays but also Charlotte Smith, Eliza Fenwick, Frances Sheridan, Elizabeth Inchbald, and other women who explored the paradoxical gift of sensibility.