Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century
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Of one hundred sonnets, it is difficult to do more than generalize. Seward personally defined the sonnet in Miltonic terms and produced masterful renditions of the “legitimate” sonnet, and at the same time she anticipated her Romantic-era successors in certain ways but also differed from them in eschewing the model of poet as outcast. Still, Seward was a poet of sensibility and therefore occasionally composed in the melancholy vein identified today with Charlotte Smith and the major Romantic-era lyricists. Seward rehearsed the pose of indomitable melancholy in several sonnets paraphrased from a translation of Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther* (sonnets 88, 89, 90). Another, sonnet 84 (*Original Sonnets* 86), expresses the sorrowful mood she sometimes described in later letters, when she contemplated her lost youth and the deaths of family and friends. Sonnet 84 perhaps originated in Shakespeare’s sonnet 72, “That Time of Year Thou Most in Me Behold,” with its famous image of yellow leaves clinging to “those boughs which shake against the could” (l. 3). Seward compares her life, sans “Youth, Health, and Hope” (l. 8), to a November day, “while one sere leaf, that parting Autumn gilds,/Trembles upon the thin, and naked spray” (ll. 1–2). Here we might also find an echo of Smith’s plaints, in the sonnet’s conclusion, that while the dying year reflects her current plight, Seward finds memories of spring more painful “than Winter’s grey, and desolate domain,/Faded, like my lost Youth, that no bright Spring renews” (ll. 13–14). Memories of health and youth remain, perhaps in the form of the pale light that “gilds” her as the day declines. But her memories seem to mock the poet, who declines like the year but will not experience its annual rejuvenation. Sonnet 85, “To March” (*Original Sonnets* 87),
however, reintroduces her characteristic note of hope. Seward describes the month as “bleak, grey,” harsh (l. 6). Nevertheless, she declares, we do not “shun” its cold winds:

But, with blue cheeks, and with disorder’d hair,
Meet its rough breath;—and peep for primrose pale,
Or lurking violet, under hedges bare. (ll. 10–12)

This image of the late-middle-aged Seward, blue cheeked, her hair disarrayed, stooping to search for primroses under a bare hedge, seems a more accurate representation of the poet who claimed sensibility as a gift rather than a curse. Enthusiasm apparently renders her indomitable, compelling her to seek out the first pale buds despite lingering winter. As the wood pile dwindles, she anticipates “the thrift of stinted grate, and sullen flame” (l. 14). The short, muted “i” sounds of the phrase’s opening cut like a knife and also like the chill due to the thin flame inadequately heating her parlor. Seward seems prepared to endure.

But while Seward characteristically reverted to hope after bouts of sorrow, passionate emotions were her boasted distinction. Indeed, the hallmark of sensibility, and hence of genius, was capacity for extraordinarily keen emotional responses. Yet as Paula Backscheider reminds us, amorous passion, the sonnet’s traditional subject, presented a dilemma for genteel women poets. She speculates that Smith may have chosen melancholy, the fashionable mood of sentimental writers (as well as of their heroes and heroines) as an alternative to erotic love for the theme of her sonnets. Smith thus selected a topic both fresh and appealing while avoiding one that was at best hackneyed and at worst indecorous (326). By creating a sonnet cycle on “the great mood of the poetry of her century,” Smith identified herself as the exemplar of that state of mind, achieving iconic stature (Backscheider 326). Seward, too, faced the dilemma that sonnet topics posed to women writers. As we have seen, she solved the challenge partly by claiming Milton as her precursor. Milton’s occasional sonnets covered an array of subjects, including religion, friendship, commendation, mourning, politics, and literary criticism. Seward wrote on all these topics and expanded her repertoire to include numerous poems on landscapes and translations. Seward was not only a poet of sensibility, however, but also a woman of strong emotional attachments. Since her chief complaint about Smith’s sonnets was their derivative quality, she by implication valued originality and genuineness. But, like Smith, she faced the limits imposed by decorum. For her, a spinster and clergyman’s daughter, the bounds were arguably stricter than they were for Smith, who was married with children. Smith might at least be acknowledged to have experienced adult heterosexual love, no
matter how chimerical, tenuous, and disappointing. As the mother of numerous children, she might express maternal love, fast becoming almost the sole passion ladies might frankly acknowledge. Seward had neither husband nor children to extol or mourn.

Seward nevertheless drew on her personal attachments for sonnets expressing such traditional love themes as yearning and remembrance. Some of these poems take up the other unexceptionable subject of women’s love, filial devotion. As with her other topics, we may often trace in Seward’s correspondence the progress of her emotions throughout her father’s final years. Sonnet 78 exemplifies her emotional tug-of-war between duty and sociability, resolved at least fictionally in favor of duty as her father’s health deteriorated. Sonnet 84 captures a mood she often described to correspondents following her father’s death in 1790. Her immediate family members and most friends now dead, she often recorded desolate feelings that intensified after John Saville’s death in 1803 robbed her of all intimate relationships. She then resembled “one sere leaf . . . upon the thin, and naked spray” (ll. 1–2). Saville, however, is never named in the sonnets; even had Seward been at liberty to write about heterosexual love, her scandalous attachment to a married man would have been a forbidden topic. Saville may well figure as the wished-for visitor in sonnet 41, “Invitation to a Friend” (Original Sonnets 43), “who always canst inspire / The soul of cheerfulness” (ll. 3–4). If Saville, the vicar choral, is indeed her addressee, the sonnet’s final lines gain additional poignancy. She often described him as singing for her or for small gatherings at the Bishop’s Palace. Here, she closes her sonnet in the hope that her friend will hurry to dispel the gloom of a December evening: “Come, that I may not hear the winds of Night, / Nor count the heavy eave-drops as they fall” (ll. 13–14). Presumably, Saville’s vocal rendering of a tender ballad, or of her favorite Handel, will distract her from the howling winds outside.

But Saville was not to be identified or even distinctly alluded to if Seward wished to preserve her already tenuous reputation. To demonstrate her mastery not only of Milton’s variants but of the entire sonnet tradition, however, she evidently determined to describe moods associated with other kinds of love besides filial. She therefore had to choose a relationship sanctioned by propriety. Without husband or children, Seward had few options. For the focus of at least fifteen sonnets, Seward chose a relationship that, instead of maintaining decorum, has perplexed readers since the poems’ publication. Seward memorialized one of the chief emotional dramas of her life: her passionate attachment to Honora Sneyd, followed by Honora’s betrayal, desertion, and death. The story of their broken relationship is scattered throughout the volume, but seven sonnets (4, 6, 10, 12, 30,
33, and 44) allude directly to Honora, while eight (13, 14, 19, 31, 32, 34, 58, and 77) and possibly others (such as 25) are associated with the story. Some contemporaries evidently found the sonnets inappropriate because they knew the principals and were disturbed by Seward’s accusation, in sonnets 31 and 32, against Honora’s husband, Richard Edgeworth, whom she held responsible for Honora’s death. “I am sorry that you disapprove the publication of such [of the sonnets] as breathe those sorrows which flowed from the cruel alienation of my forever loved Honora’s affection,” Seward remarked to Mary Powys in a letter dated October 17, 1799 (Letters 2:257–58). After describing Romney’s picture of Serena as the exact image of Honora when she used “to fold her night-robe around her lovely limbs,” Seward added, “I believe that neither man nor woman, ever loving Honora, could cease to love her” (Letters 2:259). Such statements, in the context of Seward’s elegies and sonnets about Honora, have led many scholars to conclude that Seward’s was an erotic, lesbian passion. Backscheider is the most recent to have arrived at that conclusion. In light of her review of the scholarship to date and her exhaustive reading of Seward’s published letters and poems, she argues that Seward’s elegies indeed denote her same-sex desire for Honora (296–312). Acknowledging the many permutations of affection and its expression, she nevertheless believes “it is clear that Seward’s love for Honora is in some ways ‘transgressive’” (300).

While I differ from Backscheider in her conclusion, I am indebted to her for making the most thorough, well-researched argument based on evidence available at the time. Barnard’s recent biography, however, contradicts Backscheider’s and others’ assumptions by correcting the facts regarding Seward’s and Honora’s quarrel and clarifying the nature of Seward’s and Saville’s attachment as well revealing its endurance. Barnard studied two previous collections of Seward’s unedited letters, to Mary Powys and Dorothy Sykes, that detail the progress of Seward’s relationship with Saville, which began in 1766, throughout the 1770s (Anna Seward 74–76). Seward persisted in her attachment despite repeated confrontations with her parents and the alienation of many friends (Anna Seward 87). Throughout this period, an independent-minded Honora remained Seward’s staunch supporter and confidante (Anna Seward 75). Seward, in turn, championed Honora and Edgeworth when the pair encountered Honora’s father’s resistance to their marriage (Anna Seward 81). Although the cause of Seward’s estrangement from Honora remains mysterious, the break occurred not before but well after Honora’s marriage and was somehow caused by Sneyd’s father (Anna Seward 81, 105). In this chapter, I offer an alternative interpretation of Seward’s relationship to Honora as recounted in the sonnets, grounded in the facts that Barnard has provided. My analysis suggests that the relationship Seward describes was shaped at least in part
by the purposes of the sonnet medium. Much as Smith has not been credited with
the full artfulness of her sonnets, Seward has not been recognized for her creativ-
ity in transforming the married Honora’s ending of the friendship into sonnets
mourning a sudden and dramatic break before the marriage. Because in the son-
nets Honora deserts Seward before her wedding, Seward creates the impression
that the marriage caused the break, which in turn has misled critics and biogra-
phers into misunderstanding the source of Seward’s grief. Seward indeed meant
to convey the depth of her anguish and created, or suggested, a scenario that
dramatized her loss. Paradoxically, because her sonnets so powerfully conveyed
her anguish, she has shared Smith’s fate of having the full extent of her artfulness
overlooked. If Thomas J. McCarthy is correct and contemporaries routinely “pre-
sumed that the feelings, experiences, and events in a work of literature were those
of the author himself,” Seward’s earliest readers overlooked the subtle ways Seward
changed the incidents recorded in her sonnets to suit her poetic vision (40).

Any account of Seward and Honora’s relationship must start with the fact that
they met when Honora was temporarily adopted into the Seward home following
her mother’s death (Ashmun 9). Honora was six and Seward nearly fourteen. Ac-
cording to Seward herself, she and her beloved sister Sarah, then twelve, folded
Honora into their routines, practically superintending her education. Sarah died
tragically at twenty, and thereafter Honora took her place in Seward’s affections,
sharing her bed and providing companionship in all her daily activities. Seward
adored Honora, and her foster sister returned her affection. Seward cherished
memories such as when Honora, who suffered from chronically poor health,
went to Bath with a neighbor’s family but missed Seward so much that she re-
turned early. Seward encouraged John André’s hapless courtship of her protégée,
seemingly more disappointed than the noncommittal Honora when her family
discouaged the attachment. Honora’s father welcomed her home at nineteen.
Seward and Honora remained close when Edgeworth proposed marriage to
Honora in 1773, shortly after his first wife’s death. Although Honora’s father disap-
proved, Seward applauded her choice and happily served as Honora’s bridesmaid
after Mr. Sneyd relented (Anna Seward 80).

Seward and Honora exchanged letters and visits for several years. A brief but
profound emotional conflict seems to have ensued; perhaps Mr. Sneyd relayed
to Honora the imprecations Seward was directing toward Edgeworth, whom she
thought neglected his wife’s disintegrating health (Anna Seward 82). For whatever
reason, Seward was rebuffed, and the two friends remained estranged until Sneyd’s
death in 1780. The intense, fruitless struggle that caused their break forms the
background to one group of Honora sonnets. A second group evidently followed
the occasion of Honora’s death several years later. The depth of Seward’s response to these events has perplexed everyone who has written about them. Ashmun, who thought that Sneyd broke with Seward before her marriage, suggests that “in more than sisterly fashion, [Seward] had centered her hopes and ambitions upon the growing Honora” (60). Her remark seems to hint at possible lesbian attachment. Reviewing the women’s conflict, Ashmun asks, “Did [Seward] perhaps desire to marry Edgeworth herself?” (61). She dismisses that possibility, however, because she assumes that Seward disliked Edgeworth throughout their acquaintance.

Seward herself found nothing unseemly in either her devotion to Honora’s memory or her publication of sonnets recording their relationship. Given recent readings of Seward’s attachment as an instance of same-sex desire, her lack of reticence would seem bold indeed. But since Seward refrained from mentioning her known attachment, to Saville, in print, we should ask whether it is likely she would have thus trumpeted an illicit passion for Honora. As Backscheider and others have observed, the fact that Seward and Honora shared a bed after Sarah’s death proves nothing; siblings of the same gender usually shared beds even in well-to-do households. Shared embraces, affectionate tears, and kisses, all of which figured in Seward’s relationship with Honora, were also perfectly acceptable expressions of women’s friendship (Backscheider 299–300). Women, after all, were considered the more emotional sex. Their sentimental endearments modeled a more refined standard of behavior for their constitutionally violent male counterparts.

The circumstances Barnard has revealed, moreover, suggest another reason for what might appear to be excessive grief over the loss of Honora. 1773 was a critical year for Seward not only because of Honora’s marriage but also because of Seward’s father’s efforts to estrange Seward from Saville, who, according to Barnard, was banished from the Bishop’s Palace at about the same time (Anna Seward 71). Having been informed of Seward’s and Saville’s secret attachment, Seward’s father ordered the pair to separate. Years later, Seward guardedly described these simultaneous catastrophes in a letter to Mrs. Temple, wife of a former suitor, dated June 19, 1796. During the same period when she lost her chief confidante to marriage and departure for Ireland, family discontents combined to increase the pressure of that bosom-woe. Another friend, scarcely less dear to me than Honora, was injured, was unhappy,—and those misfortunes were of a nature, that, though my sympathy might soothe, it could not remove them. By that deprivation, and by those regrets, were the precious established habits of my life broken, and the native gaiety of my spirit
eternally eclipsed, however time might restore constitutional cheerfulness. (Letters 4:218)

Honora’s was therefore not the only cherished friendship of which Seward was deprived at this time. Her cryptic reference to a dear friend who “was injured” surely indicates the circumstances of Saville’s separation from his wife. Since he chose to avoid the scandal of divorce, Seward could only commiserate; she could not “remove” his suffering by becoming his second wife. Because her father was concerned to end Seward’s connection with Saville, her sympathy could only be expressed in attenuated fashion, to her lasting regret. Saville’s distress thus combined with Honora’s departure to eclipse Seward’s spirits.

Another dimension of Seward’s relationship with Honora also points toward a different explanation for her grief after Honora’s marriage. As we observed in chapter 3, the plot of Louisa might have been motivated by Seward’s need to control, at least on paper, the circumstances of her life following her father’s discouragement of two suitors. In the poetical novel, she achieved fictional retaliation against her father and maneuvered her heroine to the marriage of her choice. I submit that Seward’s bitter anger over Honora’s estrangement was exacerbated by her inability to control her friend’s physical decline by persuading her to remove herself from the marshy environs of Edgeworthtown. All accounts of Honora’s childhood stress Sarah’s and Anna’s command. In the letter explaining the dual loss of Honora and Saville, Seward described the critical juncture at which Honora became her bedmate and substitute sister:

When my attachment to General, then Cornet V[yse], sunk in the snow of his altered conduct, Honora Sneyd, educated in our family from five years old, was commencing woman, and only eight years younger than myself; more lovely, more amiable, more interesting, than any thing I ever saw in the female form. As a child, I had loved her with the extremest fondness. Death had deprived me of my beloved and only sister, in the bloom of youth, who had shared with me the delightful task of instructing our angelic pupil; and, when disappointed love threw all the energies of my soul into the channel of friendship, Honora was its chief object. The charms of her society, when her advancing youth gave equality to our connection, made Lichfield an Eden to me, from the year 1766 to 1771. Her father then recalled her to his own family. . . . In May 1773 she married. (Letters 4:217)

Seward transmuted her romantic feelings for Vyse into friendship. If Honora was a kind of consolation prize for a woman denied the opportunity to marry, her
eventual loss would have been bitter, a reenactment of the original disappoint-
ment. Honora entered the Seward household the very year that Saville was en-
gaged as her music instructor (Barnard, Anna Seward 83) and departed at about
the time Saville was dismissed. Honora, whom both tutored, might even have
seemed like the child Seward and Saville would never have. In retrospect, the
sonnets’ re-creation of the break with Honora resonates with the double anguish
of simultaneous losses and may even serve a metonymic function in conveying
the grief associated with both.

In a later letter, Seward commiserated with Anna Rogers Stokes on the anni-
versary of her daughter’s death, which was also the birthday of her own late sister,
Sarah. But, she adds, Mrs. Stokes has since had a second child. “Honora Sneyd
was my child of recompense, as your little Anna is of yours—yes, through nine
happy years; she then became lost to me, body, mind, and heart, although not to
life till seven years later” (Letters 5:327). When the two letters are put together,
Honora emerges more as Seward’s adopted child, the child she would never bear
herself, but a child given in recompense for her failed courtships. Since con-
temporaries were beginning to celebrate maternal love, Seward’s passion for her
“lovely, amiable, interesting,” and “angelic” foster sister, raised more as her foster
child, would have seemed less extreme than it does today, especially if viewed in
the context of her lost suitors and deceased sister. Even Seward’s bitterness is more
explicable in these terms. Betty Rizzo’s Companions Without Vows, although
about a different kind of domestic relationship, illuminates Seward’s predicament.
Rizzo observes that when eighteenth-century ladies had the opportunity to act in
the role of “spouse”/employer, as they did when they engaged companions, they
sometimes failed to establish anything like the dignified, respectful relationship
they claimed to long for in marriage. Instead, they replicated the controlling be-
haviors to which they were subject as wives because it was their sole model for
relating to a dependent, even if socially equal, associate.3

Seward may have adopted an analogous, controlling posture toward her be-
loved Honora. Writers often note that when André courted Honora, Seward ap-
parently took the lead, encouraging him and writing to him and chaperoning
their meetings. Seward romanticized the impecunious young émigré, insisting
years later “all the dark colour of André’s fate took its tint from disappointed and
unconquerable attachment to [Honora]” (Letters 5:259). Backscheider suggests
that Seward was courting Honora herself, through André (301–4). But an equally,
if not more, plausible interpretation of their triangle is that Seward was sponsor-
ing Honora’s courtship by a young man who was as penniless as her own youthful
suitors but far more charismatic. Through Honora, she might relive those affairs
but achieve a satisfactory conclusion. When Honora demurred, accepting her family’s disapproval, Seward clung to the fiction of André’s tragic love. Since she had manipulated the couple’s romance from the start, she proceeded to turn the young man’s rejection and ultimately, his death, into a grand tragedy. Likewise, Honora’s decision to marry a man whom Seward grew to dislike caused permanent heartache. Honora, her “child of recompense,” first removed herself physically and then broke the emotional and intellectual bonds that had sustained Seward after Sarah’s death. Honora was truly lost “body, mind, and heart.” Her mythical status was established by the epithet Seward habitually referred to her by; she became “lost Honora.” Since young women were usually described as “lost” after a sexual scandal ruined their reputations, Seward’s formula acquires the regretful tone of a mother’s eternal mourning for a disgraced, estranged child. Her many incantations of the epithet function throughout her letters somewhat like the phrase “Oh lost” in Thomas Wolfe’s twentieth-century novel Look Homeward, Angel. Like Wolfe, Seward invokes the hopelessness of her own loss and the poignancy of Honora’s early death and makes clear her despairing recognition that neither the young woman nor their shared youth can ever be restored through sentences that resemble his refrain, “O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again” (1). Since Honora was one of the few people Seward trusted, her sudden rejection would have been devastating. On Honora’s part, Seward must have seemed to have shockingly violated their friendship in her harsh criticism of Edge worth, assuming that is what led Honora to break with her friend (and it is the most likely explanation in light of the one established fact in the break, namely that Mr. Sneyd played a part). Honora’s beloved mentor might have seemed to have mutated into a sort of wicked stepmother, trying to harm her marriage. Seward’s criticism presumed an authority she had long practiced but was not entitled to, particularly after Honora’s marriage. Honora’s anger would have been understandable.

Looked at from this perspective, Seward’s sonnets about Honora become coherent if not quite conventional. In their representation of the drama of a self-nominated foster mother whose “child of recompense” turned against her, these occasional poems resemble Shakespeare’s sonnets about his false mistress or unreliable friend or any sonnets narrating the permutations of unsatisfactory relationships. As Smith chose melancholy for her theme, Seward chose her thwarted friendship with an ungrateful young woman. Although the sonnets are scattered, they are thematically linked. Seward carefully arranged her volume for publication in 1799, so she could have placed the sonnets together as a cycle if she had wanted, but she preferred to follow Milton’s practice of writing about discrete
occasions (such as Honora’s departure or final illness) rather than construct semi-autobiographical chains in the manner of Smith, Mary Robinson, William Lisle Bowles, and other competitors. She may have perceived what Esther Schor has observed about such narrative sonnet sequences: they severely test a poet’s “ability to assimilate ethical and logical appeals to the task of arousing pathos” (61). In successive editions, Smith’s prefaces note her continuing sorrow, implying her poetry’s rhetorical inefficacy in moving her patrons to intervene in her legal battles with her estranged husband (Schor 64). Bowles’s later sonnets lose confidence in the power of fancy to provide comfort on his spiritual journey and turn toward God (Schor 68–69). Seward might have noted how these two rivals’ sequences strayed from their original confidence in the power of verse to provide solace or create sympathy. The attendant risk of failure to engage sympathy or achieve consolation could have dissuaded her from assembling her Honora sonnets into a sequence. The last thing Seward desired was to be perceived as an ineffectual manufacturer of “everlasting lamentables.” Most likely, though, she preserved the occasional nature of her sonnets to conform to her Miltonic model. Nevertheless, embedded within her collection is a discernable narrative similar to Shakespeare’s record of false friendship, which takes the poet from lyrical celebrations of his patron’s masculine beauty to “Farewell! Thou art too deare for my possessing” (sonnet 87). Seward’s sonnets move from a tender recollection of Honora’s fragility (sonnet 4, “To Honora Sneyd, Whose Health Was Always Best in Winter”) to plaintive expressions of regret for lost friendship (sonnet 77).

“To Honora Sneyd” (Original Sonnets 6) is dated 1770, the year when fear of possible consumption led the Sewards to send Honora to Bath. Seward often recalled to Mary Powys her delight when Honora returned early from her sojourn, although she was “at that instant, the toast of that gay city” (Letters 1:156). Writing shortly after Honora’s death, Seward was already idealizing her memories, since Honora would have been about ten years old, too young for all the social engagements this letter implies. Nevertheless, Seward remembers how delighted she was with Honora “for having exchanged balls and plays, and malls and parades, for books and conversation with me, and with a few chosen friends!” (Letters 1:157). Even better, Honora returned with health restored, although she was frail throughout her brief life. Seward evidently wrote the sonnet during this period of assured and unclouded friendship. The sonnet begins as a delicate tribute to spring, invoked as a “youthful, gay, capricious” being that paints the sky with rainbows and “bids all her Warblers sing” (ll. 1, 4). While the lark and thrush carol, hedges burst into bloom and “young Cowslips fling/rich perfume o’er the fields” (ll. 8–9). Hav-
ing evoked all the sensory joys of the season in her octet, however, Seward turns in her sestet to a paradox:

—It is the prime
Of Hours that Beauty robes:—yet all they gild,
Cheer, and delight in this their fragrant time,
For thy dear sake, to me less pleasure yield
Than, veil’d in sleet, and rain, and hoary rime,
Dim Winter’s naked hedge and plashy field.  (ll. 9–14)

The sonnet opens with a personification, spring as the embodiment of youthful health and joy. Its conclusion, however, connects Honora with winter, her fragility somehow compatible with its precarious weather. To the robust figure of spring, Seward opposes the bleak winter landscape and, by association, Honora’s pale face and slender figure. She may have been thinking of that evening when Honora, home from her Bath journey, joined her by the hearth and “exchanged balls and plays . . . for books and conversations with me.” That winter, indeed, held pleasures for Seward unsurpassed by her memories of following seasons. Sonnet 6, “Written at Lichfield, in an Eastern Apartment of the Bishop’s Palace, Which Commands a View of Stow Valley” (Original Sonnets 8) is an incremental repetition of “To Honora Sneyd” in the traditional manner of sequences. Its octet even features the same “-ing” rhyme. In this poem, Seward gazes at the view framed by her window in the palace. The late-winter morning is pointedly uninviting: “chill,” “wintry,” “gloom’d and rainy,” “sullen,” and “stormy” (ll. 1–3). Somehow, however, the dreary view is as precious “as when it bloom’d in Summer’s gale” (l. 7):

—When Sorrows fling,
Or slow Disease, thus, o’er some beauteous Form
Their shadowy languors, Form, devoutly dear
As thine to me, Honora, with more warm
And anxious gaze the eyes of Love sincere
Bend on the charms, dim in their tintless snow,
Than when with health’s vermilion hues they glow.  (ll. 8–14)

Honora’s face metamorphoses into the landscape, her features becoming “tintless snow” compared with the “vermilion hues” of health, which in turn resemble a spring scene “ting’d by setting sun” (l. 8). As in “To Honora Sneyd,” winter is prized for its connection with Honora, but here Seward’s emphasis is not on the season, dear because it promoted Honora’s health. Rather, just as a lover of the
picturesque appreciates early spring, so too do we gaze on the languid features of a friend, seeking “with more warm and anxious gaze” the signs of returning health. The landscape’s dreary features recall memories of summer’s pleasures, which we hope will recur with advancing spring. The sonnet offers a muted hope, suggested principally by its setting in a “wintry spring.” These two sonnets prepare the scene for the ensuing conflict. They establish Seward’s love but also voice her anxiety. Honora’s fusion with Seward’s sense of place and of the seasons confirms her importance to the poet, while her association with winter might connote a degree of emotional coldness and her physical fragility, a hint of her friendship’s brittleness as well.

These two sonnets were supposedly written in 1770, but they may have been composed later and projected back into that halcyon era. Likewise, sonnet 10, “To Honora Sneyd” (Original Sonnets 12) is dated April 1773, four months before Honora’s marriage to Edgeworth. Seward may have recognized the danger posed by Edgeworth’s hasty courtship and responded with this apprehensive sonnet. Or she may have composed the poem in retrospect, as one of a number of sonnets recording their friendship’s demise. This sonnet is closely related to the other two, confirming Honora’s identification with both literal and metaphorical chill:

Honora, shou’d that cruel time arrive
   When ’gainst my truth thou should’st my errors poise,
   Scorning remembrance of our vanish’d joys;
   When for the love-warm looks, in which I live,
But cold respect must greet me, that shall give
   No tender glance, no kind regretful sighs;
   When thou shalt pass me with averted eyes,
   Feigning thou see’st me not, to sting, and grieve,
And sicken my sad heart, I cou’d not bear
   Such dire eclipse of thy soul-cheering rays;
   I cou’d not learn my struggling heart to tear
From thy lov’d form, that thro’ my memory strays;
   Nor in the pale horizon of Despair
Endure the wintry and the darken’d days.

Those who wish to construe Seward’s love as transgressive might well describe this sonnet as the record of a lovers’ quarrel, perhaps recording an occasion when Seward overstepped the bounds of propriety, alienating her more reticent beloved. The poem can be read more convincingly as a foreboding of the period when Honora rebuffed Seward. The sonnet reviews exactly the course of events Seward
claims only to fear, her rejection followed by the alienation she describes in her letters. The nature of their quarrel and Honora’s break from Seward is unspecified, but its substance is hinted in the sonnet’s opening lines. Honora weighed Seward’s “errors” against the her “truth” and cast her aside. The sonnet’s date suggests a “truth” such as that life among loving friends and familiar “joys” was preferable to accepting Edgeworth’s proposal and moving to Ireland. Since the real break occurred later, was that “truth” an unpalatable revelation about her husband or criticism of Edgeworth’s apparent hesitation to seek medical help for his wife? Was Seward’s error her failure to desist in or soften her criticism, a characteristic trait? Or might Honora have finally been convinced by her father of Seward’s “error” in attaching herself to a married man currently embroiled in a scandalous separation, with little hope for Seward of a positive outcome? By predating her apprehensions, Seward diverts attention from the real offense and implies a conflict over Honora’s marriage. The scenario resembles a typical, if brutal, parent-child separation crisis. Seward offended and Honora responded not with forgiveness but by recalling her quasi mother’s errors.

The rest of this sonnet recapitulates the aftermath of their break, when Seward proved literally incapable of tearing Honora’s memory from her struggling heart, even though the living Honora distanced herself from Seward. Her behavior confirmed Seward’s association of Honora with winter, not because she was physically fragile but because her “love-warm looks” changed to “cold respect” when she and Edgeworth visited Lichfield. In the sonnet, Honora has withdrawn her “soul-cheering rays,” leaving Seward struggling in a bleak landscape. In sonnets 4 and 6, Seward associates Honora with both spring and winter, hope and fear, but winter and fear dominated owing to Honora’s poor health. Here, a different fear has prevailed, crippling Seward rather than her young friend. Honora gone, Seward beholds only “the pale horizon of Despair” and fears she cannot “Endure the wintry and the darken’d days.” Since she previously cherished winter as Honora’s avatar, her ascendant season, Seward’s vision of life as an endless winter without Honora is despairing indeed given her generally friendless environment throughout the 1770s. Honora has withdrawn the rays that transfigured winter for Seward, leaving a doubly dark landscape, or life, in prospect.

Sonnets 12, 13, 14, and possibly 19, “To — —” narrate the period immediately after their quarrel, when Seward struggled to reconcile herself to the loss of her “child of recompense.” Dated July 1773, the month of Honora’s wedding, the first three sonnets explore, in typical sonnet-cycle fashion, the emotions associated with rejection. Sonnet 12 (Original Sonnets 14) asks why Seward cannot be thankful for the many privileges left her despite Honora’s desertion. She concludes by
resolving to appreciate her remaining blessings, including the newfound knowledge that “The Heart estranged no anguish can regain” (l. 14). Sonnet 13 (Original Sonnets 15) rehearses yet another mood. Far from expressing the stoic, if not Byronic, acceptance of sonnet 12, this sonnet confesses that sleeplessness and anxiety have haunted Seward since Honora’s alienation. “Thou child of Night, and Silence, balmy Sleep” is invoked in the poem’s opening and closing lines, the entire line in small capitals at the conclusion. The repetition, with the heavy emphasis conveyed by the small capitals, suggests the poet’s desperation and the circular nature of her thoughts, preying endlessly upon her consciousness. The sonnet refers to but does not name Honora as “th’ Enchantress” who formerly protected Seward from “Care, and anxious Dread” (l. 7). Seward blames her mental anguish on Honora’s absence, which has caused ceaseless “thoughts of whence, or how/Vanish’d that priz’d Affection” (ll. 3–4). Since Honora is both cause and cure of Seward’s woes, she is unlikely to achieve rest, a predicament captured by the repetitious final line: Seward’s mind is caught in the loop typical of such fruitless preoccupations.

Sonnets 14 (Original Sonnets 16) tests yet another response to friendship’s cessation. “INGRATITUDE, how deadly is thy smart/Proceeding from the Form we fondly love!/How light, compared, all other sorrows prove!” (ll. 1–3). After attempting stoicism, then searching in herself for the cause, Seward defines the nature of the unnamed Honora’s betrayal. This sonnet echoes King Lear’s cry, “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is, to have a thankless child!” (King Lear 1.4.288–89). Seward addresses a personified Ingratitude, but the human source of her suffering is implied throughout. “Thou shed’st a Night of Woe,” she complains (l. 4). Ingratitude is a kind of murderer, robbing victims of their peace of mind. “O! thy dart/kills more than life,—e’en all that makes Life dear” (ll. 8–9). Trust, self-confidence, contentment, we may guess from the other sonnets, are among its victims in Seward’s case. Worse, Seward is not a stoic; she has suffered “till we, ‘the sensible of pain’ wou’d change/For Phrenzy, that defies the bitter tear” (ll. 10–11). Even madness would be preferable to her daily anguish. Her poem closes with a horrific image, as she professes that rather than endure further torment, she is willing even “in kindred callousness, to range/Where moon-ey’d Idiocy, with fallen lip,/Drags the loose knee, and intermitting step” (ll. 12–14). This sublimely awful idea, the poet’s readiness to exchange complete mental vacuum for the torture inflicted by ingratitude, marks the nadir of the sonnets’ account of her misery. Here, Seward might have outdone Smith in claiming superior anguish; to find life as an idiot preferable to her tormented existence surely fulfills at least her criterion of original imagery. That a person who boasted about
her sensibility would express such a wish implies agony commensurate with Lear’s tragic exclamation over his perfidious daughters.

If “To ——” (Original Sonnets 21) was inspired by the same occasion, as I believe it was, it concludes Seward’s poetic investigation of the pains attending broken friendship. “Farewell, false Friend!” seems to echo Shakespeare’s cynical leave taking of his patron. Honora has apparently written a letter that contains some “falsehood” (l. 8), perhaps a profession of continuing esteem. We can guess her identity because her resort to a lie concludes “scenes of kindness” (l. 1):

To cordial looks, to sunny smiles farewell!
To sweet consolings, that can grief expel,
    And every joy soft sympathy bestows!
For alter’d looks, where truth no longer glows,
    Thou hast prepar’d my heart.

(ll. 2–6)

In this sonnet, Seward claims to achieve an indifference that was impossible in life. But the tone of this poem is scornful, from her staccato invocation of past endearments to her mock thanks for the lying missive that confirmed Honora’s alleged shamelessness. Seward concludes with the wish that when the former friends meet, they will refrain from any reference to their past attachment, “nor one sigh / Flatter with weak regret a broken vow!” (ll. 13–14). Addressed to Honora, the lines express Seward’s hope that she will not exacerbate her lie. Of herself, the same lines request stoic endurance. Dignity requires that she stifle any “consciousness of eye” (l. 11) or sigh of regret.

Sonnet 19, like the three preceding, rehearses a pose. In her rich discussion of Smith’s sonnet cycle, Backscheider reminds us that the speaker of Elegiac Stanzas is partly Smith herself but also partly a conscious creation. Failing to recognize that fictional element, we fail to credit Smith for her artfulness in transmuting the walks and meditations of daily life into poetry. In Smith’s case, some contemporaries including Seward refused to acknowledge Smith’s use of incremental repetition, for example, in creating her sequence, and her fabrication of an isolated, wandering persona. Seward, likewise, exercised a great deal of artfulness in creating her Honora sonnets. Although her letters and elegiac poems reveal the origin of these sonnets in real-life experience, we must admire the degree to which Seward transformed her friendship’s rupture into poems that capture different states of mind associated with loss and grief. Seward would be the first to claim these poems as autobiographical, but she introduced fictional elements when crafting her experience into sonnets. Seward’s dating several of the sonnets to 1773, when we know from Barnard that her break with Honora occurred several
years later, suggests that as in her sonnet about tending her father, Seward had taken liberties with her context. She may have backdated the poems because the idea that the friends’ estrangement was instigated by Honora’s projected marriage seemed more dramatic to her than the actual circumstances of the break, whose cause was less explicable or less sympathetic to Seward, after the marriage. Perhaps sonnets written in 1773 became a self-fulfilling prophecy: Barnard describes a cryptic letter to Mary Powys during that year confiding Seward’s knowledge of Edgeworth’s “baseness” (Anna Seward 82). This revelation, however, does not seem to have affected her happiness regarding Honora’s wedding or their initial correspondence. We must be cautious, therefore, in reading into these sonnets or any of Seward’s poems (or her heavily edited letters, for that matter) an accurate record of her life.

Honora’s “betrayal” became the occasion for Seward to write a series of poems re-creating, and in part creating, her experience of desertion and recovery. Sonnet 30 (Original Sonnets 32) reminds us of the fictional dimension, because the scorn Seward professes never surfaces in her remaining letters or in her other elegiac poems. As the conclusion of a series of poems exploring the events of a friendship broken but survived, however, the scornful posture provides a satisfying resolution. The poems indeed suggest the plot Ashmun and others accepted as fact, that Honora defied the pleas of the friend who had raised her to resist a marriage arranged by her father. Certainly, the controlling impulse revealed in Seward’s earlier effort to manage André’s courtship may have led to a rupture later, when her impetuous insistence on telling “truth” became an irreparable “error.” We have no record of Honora’s thoughts, but having turned down Thomas Day’s proposal and acquiesced in, rather than pursued, André’s courtship, she evidently preferred Edgeworth to her other admirers and suitors. Seward’s criticism of Edgeworth’s behavior may well have forced Honora to choose her husband over her friend. In any event, Seward was probably not forced to endure the pain of frequent meetings that she anticipated in sonnet 19. Edgeworth and Honora resided at first in Ireland, then in Hertfordshire until Honora’s palpable decline brought them back to Lichfield.

The second group of Honora sonnets clusters around the events of her illness and death. They brim with pain but also with anger against Edgeworth, whom Seward held responsible for marrying a woman whose health was manifestly inadequate for bearing and raising children. What we know of Edgeworth’s behavior exonerates him from Seward’s charge. Jenny Uglow observes, on the contrary, his decision not to trust the skills of local physicians but to convey Honora to England instead. They visited London to consult Dr. William Heberden, among
the most celebrated physicians in Britain. Afterward, they went back to Lichfield. Honora continued to decline, but at least now she would die among friends and family (Uglow 316–19). Seward, however, persisted in her adverse interpretation of Edgeworth’s attachment and motives. She structured Honora’s death into a tragedy, complete with villain. Sonnet 30 opens the drama. Seward may have composed the sonnet when news of the Edgeworths’ impending return brought fond recollections. Or she may have inserted a sonnet written later as context for the four following. The sonnet’s reference to “days long fled . . . Pleasure’s golden reign” (l. 12) resembles her epistolary account to Mrs. Temple in 1796. But whenever composed, the sonnet evokes the mythic time when Honora’s companionship “made Lichfield an Edenic scene” (Letters 4:217). After the tumultuous emotions recorded in the previous sonnets, this poem describes a mood of resignation, broken suddenly by a once-familiar melody:

That song again!—its sounds my bosom thrill,
   Breathe of past years, to all their joys allied;
   And, as the notes thro’ my sooth’d spirits glide,
   Dear Recollection’s choicest sweets distill,
Soft as the Morn’s calm dew on yonder hill,
   When slants the Sun upon its grassy side,
   Tinging the brooks that many a mead divide
   With lines of gilded light; and blue, and still,
The distant lake stands gleaming in the vale.
   Sing, yet once more, that well-remember’d strain,
   Which oft made vocal every passing gale
In days long fled, in Pleasure’s golden reign,
   The youth of chang’d Honora!—now it wears
   Her air—her smile—spells of the vanish’d years!

The sonnet’s octet carries its speaker back to a springtime Eden, a reverie so compelling it persists into the sestet. Seward turns her speaker, herself, into an exemplar of sensibility, her nerves “thrilling” to a melody. The song’s notes glide through her “spirits,” carrying the impulses that evoke her sentimental response. Perhaps, in life, Saville performed the nearly forgotten song that spurred her memory. Here, sensibility induces synesthesia, as nervous “thrills” produce a sweet mood comparable to the effect produced by a lovely morning. Seward details the visual pleasures of such a morning in a landscape familiar from her descriptions of Stowe valley. She admires the soft effect of dew on the contours of a hill. Her gaze wanders from sunlight slanting across the hills, down to fields divided by
brooks “gilded” by the sun, and on to the “distant lake” shining in the same gentle sunlight. The soft light bathes not only the scene but Seward’s recollection, demonstrating memory’s power to “distill” experience of all but its “choicest sweets.” Seward’s rhyme words, “thrill,” “distill,” “hill,” and “still” enforce her description of sensibility’s power to evoke powerful, here placid and pleasurable, memories in a listener. The delayed turn of the sestet suggests Seward’s awakening from a kind of song-induced trance. She begs to hear the song again, finally explaining its significance. The recollected landscape is gilded because it belongs to a “golden” past. Honora herself gilded the past before she “chang’d.” As in sonnet 13, Honora is figured as an enchantress, who cast her spell over their shared experiences during those “vanish’d years.” Did Honora sing the song herself? Was it a favorite song of Honora’s that Saville sang for his companions? Was it simply a popular song of the time that Seward now connects with that lost era? We learn only of the song’s power to evoke memories of a “golden” past. The sonnet’s conclusion suggests, if subtly, that the memories, too, are “gilded” by the sunshine of recollection. The passage of time has transformed Honora’s youth into “Pleasure’s golden reign,” a spell renewed by the once-familiar song.

Sonnets 31, “To the Departing Spirit of an Alienated Friend,” and 32, “Subject of the Preceding Sonnet Continued” (Original Sonnets 33, 35), form the dreadful catastrophe of Seward’s plot. “To the Departing Spirit of an Alienated Friend” contrasts her anguish with Edgeworth’s callousness. While Seward spends her sleepless nights hoping “that Morn’s returning light / Shall dawn for thee” (ll. 3–4), Edgeworth socializes in London. Edgeworth is painted as a villain: “I hear him, who shou’d droop in silent woe, / Declaim on Actors, and on Taste de-cide!” (ll. 13–14). The sestet juxtaposes the “glow” of Edgeworth’s eyes with the “woe” he should feel; his wife’s “ebbing tide” with his petty conversations that “on Taste decide.” The sonnet is angry, and its accusation is repeated in the next sonnet, which presents Honora’s death as the tragic outcome of her decision to trust Edgeworth. Seward is vindicated but magnanimously pardons her late friend. Edgeworth’s callousness confirms the justice of Seward’s fears:

    Behold him now his genuine colours wear,
    That specious False-One, by whose cruel wiles
    I lost thy amity; saw thy dear smiles
    Eclips’d; those smiles, that us’d my heart to cheer,
    Wak’d by thy grateful sense of many a year
    When rose thy youth, by Friendship’s pleasing toils
    Cultur’d;—but DYING!—O! for ever fade
The angry fires.—Each thought, that might upbraid
Thy broken faith, which yet my soul deplores,
Now as eternally is past and gone
As are the interesting, the happy hours,
Days, years, we shar’d together. They are flown!
Yet long must I lament thy hapless doom,
Thy lavish’d life and early-hasten’d tomb.

The poem constructs Honora’s death as Seward’s bitter triumph. Edgeworth’s persistence in social activities during his wife’s illness proves his hypocrisy. A man who truly loved his dying wife would never leave her, especially for London’s distractions. Edgeworth’s behavior proves that he won Honora by “cruel wiles,” presumably pleading love that he did not feel. His persuasion was “cruel” because not only has marriage shortened Honora’s life but he has deserted her on her deathbed. Seward tried to intervene, but her advice was rejected and she “lost [Honora’s] amity.” This version of their break sustains the reading of a rupture between quasi parent and child. Seward had expected gratitude for the many years of Honora’s childhood when, channeling her hopes for marriage into friendship, she focused her energies on the “pleasing toils” of educating her foster sister. We might deduce that Seward considered herself to be investing in future companionship, or trying to escape future loneliness, by her efforts to cultivate Honora. But, as her letters and poems reveal, Honora chose marriage soon after their relationship blossomed into equality, or genuine friendship. Seward was at first pleased by Honora’s marriage but their friendship was ruined, she hints, when she tried to warn Honora that Edgeworth’s behavior was unworthy. The octet’s succinct recapitulation addresses Honora, demanding acknowledgment of her husband’s revealed nature (“Behold him”) and of her folly in rejecting Seward’s counsel. She also demands, indirectly, that Honora admit to ingratitude after years when her “smiles . . . / Wak’d by [her] grateful sense” of Seward’s “toils” more than repaid those efforts.

The poem’s turn, however, occurs when Seward recollects that Honora is dying or possibly even dead. Centered in the seventh line and printed in small capital letters, the word “DYING” precipitates the poem into its sestet just as the fact of Honora’s death changed Seward’s attitude, her cause of grief, her life. Justice demands recognition of Honora’s “broken faith,” but angry thoughts are no longer appropriate. They are “past and gone” like the “Days, years, we shar’d together.” Seward’s lament—“They are flown!”—is ambiguous. She seems to regret her wasted anger as much as her lost happiness. Both are part of Honora’s story,
conserved and mourned in these poems and for the rest of Seward’s life. Seward describes Honora’s early death as a “hapless doom.” Honora has been unlucky in her choice of mate; marriage hastened her death. Instead of conserving her life, remaining in Lichfield, and enjoying the pleasures of healthful rambles, books, and conversation with Seward and other friends, she “lavish’d” her precious health on six children (two of whom were her own) and a careless husband. The epithets of the concluding couplet—“hapless,” “lavish’d,” and “early-hasten’d”—stress Honora’s mistake, her luckless decision to waste herself on Edgeworth. Marriage, as well as early death, has been her “doom,” or rather, she doomed herself to death when she married. However we read the lines, Seward continues to blame Honora even after she claims to have stopped blaming her. Her death itself seems a gesture of ingratitude, of “broken faith.” Although Seward lamented the flight of “happy hours” in previous sonnets, it is as if she hoped that somehow Honora might be restored, that the ungrateful child would return and confess her error. Now, all recriminations are futile, but this sonnet conveys Seward’s lingering anger toward both Edgeworth and Honora. A modern psychologist might deduce that Seward was mired in an early stage of grief, at least when she composed this sonnet. Oddly, however, Edgeworth vanishes after his brief appearance as the villain. Honora’s marriage seems less important than her unfinished business with Seward, who remains as the real “hapless” victim. The passionate confrontation implied by Seward’s command (“Behold”) will never take place; her superior love will never be acknowledged. Seward has lost control of Honora.

Sonnet 34 (Original Sonnets 36) records the falling action of the tragedy. It is dated June 1780; if that is accurate, Seward composed the poem less than two months after Honora’s death on April 30. In the aftermath of that event, and in the context of sonnets 31 and 32, sonnet 33 completes the narration of Honora’s demise. Taken out of context, this poem might be read as the expression of transgressive desire, a nightly plea that Honora visit Seward’s bed, if only in dreams. But in the context of previous poems about the circumstances of Honora’s death and contemporary brain science that posited “the continual activity of the brain, even during sleep,” the sonnet yields a different reading (Richardson 6). In sonnet 31, Edgeworth deserted his wife’s deathbed while Seward spent sleepless nights worrying about her friend’s fate. In sonnet 32, Seward seems to regret that she will never be able to confront Honora and receive the justice of acknowledgment and apology. Anger is futile after her friend’s death; all that remains is lament for Honora and for their pleasanter past. Now, her feelings still raw, Seward again wishes for a glimpse of Honora:
Last night her Form the hours of slumber bless’d
Whose eyes illumin’d all my youthful years.—
Spirit of dreams, at thy command appears
Each airy Shape, that visiting our rest,
Dismays, perplexes, or delights the breast.
My pensive heart this kind indulgence cheers;
Bliss, in no waking moment now possess’d,
Bliss, ask’d of thee with Memory’s thrilling tears.
Nightly I cry, how oft, alas! In vain,
Give, by thy powers, that airy Shapes controul,
Honora to my visions!—ah! Ordain
Her beauteous lip may wear the smile that stole,
In years long fled, the sting from every pain!
Show her sweet face, ah show it to my soul!

In earlier sonnets, Seward often referred to Honora’s figure as her “form,” her appearance. Sometimes that form was only present in memory. Here, Seward invokes Honora’s form in a slightly different sense: Honora’s “Shape” only can appear, her empty form, a dream vision. Seward begins by recounting the dream that “bless’d” her with Honora’s visitation and especially with a glimpse of Honora’s eyes. Seward’s poem becomes an incantation, invoking the “Spirit of dreams” to repeat the previous night’s delusion. Seward claims that the dream restored a pleasure never again to be experienced “waking,” the approach of her smiling friend. She ends the octet begging “with Memory’s thrilling tears,” a reference to the keen sensibility that caused her nerves to produce tears from even an imagined sight.

The sestet begins by revealing that Seward repeats her incantation each night, usually to no avail. She asks specifically that the form appear smiling. Seward’s previous sonnets claimed the healing power of Honora’s smile, and here, she begs to see that smile again. “Show her sweet face, ah show it to my soul!” Sadly, the smile can never greet her while waking. The smile that relieves all pain can no longer appear to her while she is awake. It will always be an illusion, a form, an airy shape. We gauge the depth of Seward’s grief by her willingness to beg for an apparition, since Honora herself will never reappear. This poem does not seem to be about an erotic wish. We know, from the previous sonnets, that Seward was angry that the husband who might have seen Honora throughout her final illness chose not to do so, while she, who truly cherished her friend, could only wait for
news of her condition. Sonnet 33 continues the themes of absence and of longed-for presence. In this poem, Honora herself completes the narrative by visiting Seward, albeit as a ghost. In the previous sonnet, Seward longs to cry “Behold,” to demand Honora’s recognition that her husband had been, in a phrase from sonnet 31, “Rashly-Chosen” (l. 7). She ends sonnet 32 in lament, mourning her friend but also their friendship’s lack of closure. Now, Honora has appeared with her familiar healing gesture, the sweet smile that habitually “stole / . . . the sting from every pain.” Although an illusion, the dream Honora has administered the balm enabling Seward’s gradual recovery from Honora’s death. By “seeing” Honora, even in dreams, Seward achieves some peace after the tumultuous period of her friend’s death.

Sonnet 34 provides a denouement to Seward’s version of Honora’s demise. Dated June 1780, it meditates on the pain of mourning and the rarity of true sympathy. “When Death, or adverse Fortune’s ruthless gale,/Tears our best hopes away, the wounded Heart/Exhausted, leans on all that can impart/The charm of Sympathy” (ll. 1–4). We know from the previous poems that Seward considered Honora’s departure a hapless or luckless venture and her death the end of Seward’s “best hopes.” Surely her father and Saville, and other confidantes such as Anna Rogers Stokes and Mary Powys to whom she often wrote about Honora, must have offered sincere condolences. They and many Lichfield residents knew Seward’s devotion to Honora and her devastation when Honora died. They would have commiserated with her anguish. This poem, however, suggests that most sympathy is feigned. Perhaps Seward believed few could understand her exquisite misery and so pretended concern they did not really feel. The sonnet declares that even artificial commiseration is helpful. The wounded heart finds any “mutual wail/. . . soothing” (ll. 4–5). Pretended sympathy is better than “cold neglect, or Mirth that Grief profanes” (l. 11). Seward concludes with an image that recalls some of her loveliest landscape poetry: “Thus each faint Glow-worm of the Night conspires,/Gleaming along the moss’d and darken’d lanes,/To cheer the Gloom with her unreal fires” (ll. 12–14). Glowworms are not stars, but they provide a bit of light for the foot passenger at night. Feigned sympathy likewise provides some relief for the mourner otherwise enveloped in grief. Sonnet 34 confesses that Seward has taken a step toward composure, that she has made a gesture toward reclaiming herself from the depths of woe. Seward’s personality emerges, for example, from the throes of self-pity, pain, anger, and other emotions informing her previous four sonnets. Her acerbic nature reasserts itself; she is aware that most acquaintances offer the pretense of a “mutual wail.” Most revealing, however, is the renewed musicality of the sonnet. Sonnets 31, 32, and 33 contain powerful
imagery and suggestive rhymes, but they are not dominated by musical patterns of assonance and consonance like so many of Seward’s other sonnets. Here she seems again to take pleasure in orchestrating her verse. The long “a” sound is repeated not only in end rhymes but in “vain,” “feign’d,” “penetrate,” and “sable” within the octet. Other phrases repeat vowel sounds, as in “mutual . . . soothing,” “bleeding grief,” and “Night conspires.” This sonnet shares with others the characteristics of a performance piece. Although Seward may well have read her sonnets about Honora’s death to a select audience, it is easier to imagine her reading, somewhat archly, this sly tribute to hypocritical condolers. In that sense, as well as in the poem’s confession that sympathy is welcome and effective, sonnet 34 concludes the traumatic drama of Seward’s Honora sonnets.

Several other sonnets, however, illuminate these poems, although placed elsewhere in the collection. Sonnet 44 (Original Sonnets 46) is apparently a companion to sonnet 33; Seward either wrote the pair soon after Honora’s death or later reworked the theme as an exercise in incremental repetition. In sonnet 44, however, she invokes not the spirit of dreams but of “Rapt Contemplation.” The sonnet is set not at night but in an “umbrageous vale” at noon, where breezes, shadows, flowers, and streams invite reverie. Like the dream spirit, however, Contemplation has the power of illusion:

Give thou Honora’s image, when her beams,
   Youth, beauty, kindness, shone,—what time she wore
   That smile of gentle, yet resistless power
   To sooth each painful Passion’s wild extremes.
   Here shall no empty, vain Intruder chase,
   With idle converse, thy enchantment warm.  (ll. 5–10)

Seward often suggests that Honora’s function in life was to “sooth” her “painful Passions.” Honora’s gentleness was the antidote to Seward’s fiery sensibility. (We hear as often of Honora’s eyes brimming with sentimental tears, but her sensibility seems to have been of a complementary nature.) Honora seems to have had the power to calm Seward, smiling in a way that put experiences into perspective or rescued the poet from ill humor. Seward longs here, as in sonnet 33, for a glimpse of that restorative smile. We sense her impatience with those who offered a “mutual wail” in “idle converse,” her longing to be alone in a shadowy spot that conceals her from society while prompting daydreams. Seward admits that, like the dream, Contemplation offers only a “persuasive, visionary Form,” an empty shape, but as she concludes in the sonnet 33, with its plea for the simulacrum of “waking” experience, the vision is more precious than any that “real Life” can
provide (l. 13). Contemplation is now preferable to activity. Like Narcissus bending over the pool or the “bending flower” “trembl[ing] o’er the shadow’d streams” (ll. 3–4), Seward longs to spend her time beholding illusory images. Seward’s confession of her feelings resembles Earl R. Wasserman’s description of Percy Shelley’s adult skepticism: “When the inconstant world can no longer be a source of hope, the solitary mind is driven to project itself as its own narcissistic object . . . a ‘ghastly presence’ ever hovering ‘Beside thee like thy shadow’” (9). Honora has become, to some extent, Seward’s “elusive Other Self that walks beside one through life” (Wasserman 9) or at least the link in Seward’s mind with her youthful self before adult vicissitudes of all kinds ruptured her happiness. Like Shelley, however, Seward did not permit herself to languish indefinitely in narcissistic self-pity.

Sonnet 44 links with sonnet 33 to portray Seward sleeping and waking in hope of a healing vision. The sonnets illuminate her later revelation to Mary Powys that she kept Romney’s fictional portrait, Serena Reading (an illustration of Hayley’s The Triumphs of Temper) in her bedroom. The print, which she considered an accurate image of Honora at sixteen—the height of their “Edenic” years—was so placed “that it may be the last object I behold ere I sleep.” She even took the picture along for the same purpose when she traveled (Letters 3:173). Surely Seward believed that gazing on Honora’s image would induce the dream vision she craved, convey the soothing effect of Honora’s smiling gaze. Sonnet 58 (Original Sonnets 60) addresses another dimension of recollection. Seward describes the appurtenances of mourning: the “slow Hearse,” “Parian Statue,” and “pomp of sorrow” (ll. 1–2, 5). She declares all the fashionable parade of the funeral industry inadequate (ll. 5–8). We must remember the departed throughout our lives:

—if, thro’ each day,
[Memory] with whate’er we see, hear, think, or say,
Blend not the image of the vanish’d Frame,
O! can the alien Heart expect to prove,
In worlds of light and life, a reunited love?  (ll. 10–14)

Seward argues the rationale for what might seem to us a morbidly tenacious grip on Honora’s memory. An Anglican, firmly convinced that deceased family and friends rejoined one another in an afterlife, she wonders whether those who forget “the for ever absent” (l. 7) will be welcomed at their reunion. By continual meditation on deceased loved ones (as, for example, in sonnet 81, “On a Lock of Miss Sarah Seward’s Hair, Who Died in Her Twentieth Year”), Seward thought she was preparing a joyful reception for herself by Honora and her family after
death. The belief expressed in this sonnet helps to explain what would otherwise appear a fetishistic devotion to the Romney portrait, a copy of which she sent her friends the Llangollen ladies, who “enshrined” it in their parlor (which delighted her). Like Sarah’s hair, the Serena print became a relic that Seward meditated on to refresh her memories so that after death, she would not feel estranged.

Sonnet 77 (Original Sonnets 79) provides a coda to the Honora sonnets. Like sonnet 58, it is a pious reflection. But where sonnet 58 urged continual mourning as her duty to the dead, with memory as a shrine, sonnet 77 seeks alternatives to constant recollection. Like sonnets by Smith or the later Romantics, Seward finds in the landscape an image of her state of mind. Less Romantic is her hope of finding relief from her distress in learning and religion:

O! hast thou seen a vernal Morning bright
   Gem every bank and trembling leaf with dews,
   Tinging the green fields with her amber hues,
   Changing the leaden streams to lines of light?
Then seen dull Clouds, that shed untimely night,
   Roll envious on, and every ray suffuse,
   Till the chill’d Scenes their early beauty lose,
   And faint, and colourless, no more invite
The glistening gaze of Joy?—”Twas emblem just
   Of my youth’s sun, on which deep shadows fell,
   Spread from the pall of friends; and Grief’s loud gust
Resistless, oft wou’d wasted tears compel:
   Yet let me hope, that on my darken’d days
   Science, and pious Trust, may shed pervading rays.

Seward compares her youth to her favorite landscape, the lovely view she often described with its bedewed fields and gilded streams. Light, so often invoked as the source of transformative beauty in her sonnets, here evokes a “glistening gaze of Joy.” The brimming tears of sensibility, moved by natural beauty, gleam like the gemmed banks, trembling leaves, and glittering streams. Youth seems blended with this magical place. When “dull Clouds” obscure the sun, they drain the scene of light and color. “Untimely night” robs the landscape of its beauty, so that sensibility’s eye can no longer respond, just as Seward’s youth was cut short by untimely deaths. Her central phrase, the “pall of friends,” refers not merely to their draped coffins but to the “deep shadows” cast over her life by early losses. We might also include Saville’s melancholy, the effect of his failed marriage, but this must remain a metaphorically buried inference.
For all its gloom, sonnet 77 is artfully composed. Her Miltonic structure here gives way to a more Shakespearian arrangement, as the octet is divided into two quatrains contrasting sunny and clouded landscapes. A third quatrain explains her metaphor, before a rare couplet that appears to turn, in a fashion Seward usually deplored, from the inevitable conclusion to be drawn from the landscape image toward alternative consolations. Seward prepares for the reversal by admitting that her frequent “gusts” of grief are useless. But the poem’s dominant metaphor has identified Seward with the landscape, blending tears of joy with beams of light and tears of sorrow with gusts of wind. The couplet conclusion seems to extract Seward from the natural world, replacing it with intellectual and spiritual resources that might “shed pervading rays” through the gloom of identification with a blighted landscape. The natural sun may be supplemented with a metaphorical sun, the light of religion offering recourse from endless mourning. As Seward’s final Honora sonnet, sonnet 77 turns rather dramatically, perhaps desperately, from repeated immersion in the natural world, and particularly in the Stowe Valley landscape, toward other sources of comfort and healing that the devout Seward would have endorsed. Here we feel her kinship not with Smith, who turned toward heaven but only in hope of relief after death, nor with the Shelley of “Adonais,” but with the mature Wordsworth, who turned to Anglicanism as the surest protection against “individual or collective fanaticisms” (Hartman 334). This sonnet’s abrupt and pious conclusion need not be considered facile. It is the gesture of a woman long used to finding comfort in nature but recognizing, at last, that nature is as likely to perpetuate her grief as to lighten it.

The fifteen sonnets I have assembled tell the story of Seward and Honora’s friendship, its loss, and Seward’s ensuing struggle for composure. Seward evidently thought her contemporaries would understand both the story and the special nature of her attachment to Honora. Today, it is difficult for us to imagine a powerful affection, amounting at times to obsession, without an erotic component. In centuries when privileged people lived to a great extent sequestered by gender, the continuum spanning varieties of same-sex friendship must have been much broader. We now find poetic sequences devoted to earlier same-sex friendships puzzling, whether Shakespeare’s sonnets to the Earl of Southampton or Tennyson’s In Memoriam about Arthur Hallam. Both those sequences have been studied for clues to the writers’ sexual orientation. It is unlikely we will ever know for certain. But I have offered here a reading that makes sense to me and makes sense of the sonnets and that I believe would have been comprehensible to Seward’s early readers. Seward’s correspondence and her other elegiac poems confirm the autobiographical dimension of the sonnets, but she changed the date of Honora’s
break with her to give it a dramatic crisis, Honora’s marriage. We can also see that
Seward turned her fluctuating moods into variations on the theme of lost friend-
ship. She invented her timeline and omitted episodes such as André’s courtship
that would have diluted her emphasis. She achieved enough distance to construct
poems that, when read together, narrate a story, whose plot begins with the crisis
of Honora’s betrayal and then moves on to the climax of her death, which is fol-
lowed by the poet’s mourning and, finally, her turn to religion. Seward habitually
boasted her capacity for feeling, and she mythologized her attachment to Honora
as if the latter had been the ne plus ultra of young womanhood. But perhaps be-
cause of her capacity for self-aggrandizement, she recognized that her broken
friendship was the stuff of sonnets, material apt for shaping into the sonnet form’s
traditional celebration of beloved, yet unattainable, figures. Eschewing, as she
believed Milton had done, the “mistaken idea, that sonnets should be either amorous
or gay” (Letters 2:306), she chose a doomed friendship for her recurring
theme. She scattered the poems throughout her volume as if to obscure the co-
herent narrative I have detected, most likely to emphasize their sincerity as re-
sponses to particular instances rather than their artifice as links in a cycle or chain.

Transmuting Honora’s rejection of Seward and her death into occasional son-
nets provided an additional form of comfort for Seward. As we have seen, she
seems to have struggled throughout her adulthood to wrest some control over her
life and career. The Honora sonnets likewise fulfilled Seward’s need to control or
even transform her circumstances. Honora’s persistent attachment to Edgeworth
was apparently both surprising and ultimately humiliating. Seward’s carefully nur-
tured “child” rejected her. We will never know the substance of their disagree-
ment. Honora’s point of view was never recorded. Did Seward hint too broadly
at Edgeworth’s “baseness,” provoking Honora’s defiance of the older woman’s
presumption? In the sonnets, Honora is first a traitor but then becomes a victim
of her poor judgment and Edgeworth’s neglect. Seward tailors the story to her
specifications. Speaking throughout, she robs Honora of a voice: we never hear
Honora speak, except for one reference to her “condolings.” We see Honora’s eyes
and her lips, but her capacity to soothe is always conveyed through tears and smiles.
Even when Seward associates a song with Honora, we are never told whether
Honora sang the song herself. If Seward derives comfort from dreams of Honora,
from her smiling but empty form, the beloved, living Honora she describes was
always, to an extent, a form or shape rather than a human being. When the shape
finally spoke, she evidently exchanged words with Seward that provoked their
complete rupture. By muting Honora, Seward once again controls experience, if
only in retrospect. Of course, sonnets are always about the poet’s states of mind
rather than about those of other individuals who figure in his or her relationships. For this reason, Paul Oppenheimer has called the sonnet “the first lyric of self-consciousness, or of the self in conflict” (3). The “Dark Lady” never defends herself to Shakespeare, Stella never explains her position to Astrophel, and Honora will never present her case for trusting Edgeworth, if that indeed caused the dispute. Seward chose the perfect vehicle for her poems exploring ruptured friendship. “Lost Honora” became the subject of a number of poems scattered throughout her volume of *Occasional Sonnets*. Assembled, they enrich our knowledge of Seward’s emotional life and of the varieties of eighteenth-century friendship. They also demonstrate Seward’s mastery of her cherished Miltonic sonnet form. Written in response to, and imaginatively dramatizing, various episodes of her friendship’s decline, they testify to the power of the occasional sonnet.