Transcorporeality and the Pursuit of Happiness in Leonora Sansay's Laura (1809)

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Abstract
This article examines the way in which Laura, a short novel by Leonora Sansay published in 1809, associates the theme of the search for the founding happiness of the Young Republic to the dream, full of hope but doomed to failure, of conjugal bliss within a pastoral paradise. Sansay, in this little studied novel, uses the conventions of seduction novel and pastoral landscape around Philadelphia to question the validity of the social and physical boundaries that define a set of tensions between the human body and the natural world, and, finally, to question the possibility even for the young women of the nascent Republic to participate in the collective quest for happiness.

Keywords
Early American Novel, Women Writers, Leonora Sansay, Transcorporeality, Happiness, Environment

Disciplines
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This article examines how Leonora Sansay’s 1809 novella, Laura, presents suggestive linkages between the early American pursuit of happiness and an appealing, but ultimately doomed, fantasy of conjugal bliss within a pastoral landscape. Sansay, in this largely unstudied novella, employs the seduction novel genre and the pastoral environs of early republic Philadelphia to interrogate the validity of the social and physical boundaries that demarcate tensions between the human body, the natural world, and ultimately the validity of the pursuit of happiness for young women of the fledgling republic.

Only in recent years have scholars begun to re-discover Leonora Sansay’s (1773–1821) contribution to the American literary tradition.1 Already clear, however, is the fact that she occupies an important moment in the development of the early American novel. Her work, like that of other early American fiction writers such as Charles Brockden Brown, Susanna Rowson, John Neal, Tabitha Gilman Tenney, and Rebecca Rush—to name only a few of the formative voices that arose in the earliest years of the United States—engages with key questions associated with the American socio-political and cultural project. Especially central to Laura is the question of how women should navigate a social system that promises happiness but forever deprives them of autonomy, making the pursuit of happiness itself an ironic engine of misery.

In a story typical of the sentimental romance genre, the eponymous protagonist of Laura, elopes at the age of fifteen with a dashing young medical student only to end up, by tale’s end, pregnant, destitute, and—after her lover, Belfield, dies in a duel—practically alone. The novella

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1 See, for example, Dillon, “The Secret History of the Early American Novel: Leonora Sansay and Revolution in Saint Domingue” and Hunt, “‘Fascinate, Intoxicate, Transport’: Uncovering Women’s Erotic Dominance in Leonora Sansay’s Secret History.”
closes with a didactic coda instructing young readers to “suspend awhile the arduous pursuit, and reflect for a moment on the wretchedness that will attend its attainment” (221). Despite this caution, Sansay’s book includes some alluring scenes that, while not exactly promoting pre-marital sex, certainly make it out to be an enjoyable prospect. These veiled erotic moments occur in the pastoral fields along the banks of the Schuylkill River, outside Philadelphia. There, Laura and Belfield flirt and eventually have sex in a setting that reflects a vision of the American pastoral as an eroticized space that liberates repressed passion and serves as an avenue for what was then America’s newly codified pursuit of happiness. Throughout the novella, Sansay breaks literary ground, interrogating nationalistic questions as well as exploring larger philosophical concerns. She investigates the permeable boundary between people and the land, and in so doing leverages the well-trodden genre of the sentimental romance to create a text that shines light upon the plight of women in post-Revolutionary America and the obstacles they faced in their own pursuits of happiness.

“the few happy hours of my life”

Laura adopts a proto-transcorporeal approach to interrogate the Republican pursuit of happiness, a tactic that ultimately challenges the very notion of individual autonomy. Given that Laura is a novel of seduction, a genre that served as an ancestor of our modern day romances, it is helpful to consider Stanley Cavell’s ideas about how the concept of happiness functions within the narrative space of the romantic comedy, one that is almost entirely bound within a marital (hence familial) definition of happiness. Addressing how the directors of these films employ the comic trope of marriage and re-marriage, Cavell states, “the achievement of human happiness requires not the perennial and fuller satisfaction of our needs as they stand but the examination and
transformation of those needs” (4–5). While the events of Laura are firmly planted in the realm of tragedy rather than comedy, Cavell’s recognition that any examination of happiness must take the form of a discussion of individual human needs applies well to Sansay’s tale. As the novella unfolds, the protagonists betray a host of such needs, which run the gamut from the most basic necessities of food and shelter to the far more nuanced (and socially fraught) needs of acceptance, marital fulfilment, and self-respect. With Laura, Sansay presents her readers with just such an opportunity to engage in this kind of conversation about the nature of happiness, and she telegraphs this theme by making the concept of happiness an essential ingredient of her narrative.

Even from its opening paragraphs, Laura presents itself as a novella concerned with the pursuit of happiness and the ways that pursuit may, ironically, result in unhappiness. Detailing Laura’s tragic origins and the plight of her doomed parents, Sansay provides an early example of the way the pursuit of happiness creates not only avenues for misery but also conditions of intense and sustained want that speak to Cavell’s idea that such narratives invite a form of participatory conversation on the part of the privileged reader. Over the mere three and a half pages that comprise the first chapter of Laura, the word “happiness” occurs three times and the word “happy” twice. We meet Rosina, Laura’s eventual mother, in a Portuguese nunnery where she receives a letter from a friend, delivered by her friend’s handsome young brother, William. The brother returns the next day and asks if she has a letter to return to his sister. Rosina responds, “why should I disturb the happiness of my dear Cecilia with a relation of sorrow … tell her that among the few happy hours of my life, those which were cheered by her friendship were the brightest” (emphasis added, 159). This opening chapter concludes with young William and Rosina falling in love, and with William securing Rosina’s escape from the convent. They
Transcorporeality and the Pursuit of Happiness in Leonora Sansay’s _Laura_ (1809)

secretly wed but soon realize they must leave Portugal to find any peace (160). So the two lovers, thoroughly engaged in their private pursuit of happiness, “embarked on board a vessel that was on the point of sailing for America; and after a long and dangerous passage arrived in Philadelphia” (160). In an event largely mirrored at the end of Laura’s story, almost as soon as Rosina and William arrive in the USA, he learns of the death of his father in Dublin and (now himself the father of the newborn Laura) takes passage back to Europe in hopes of claiming his inheritance—only to die in a shipwreck.

Among the most dramatic takeaways from this opening tale, one echoed at the conclusion of the novella, is the way Sansay directly addresses the problem of money in the pursuit of happiness. By addressing the Lockean definition of happiness, Sansay challenges Jefferson’s ostensibly egalitarian stand-in for “Property” or other forms of economic success, and, as Claude S. Fischer writes on the present-day concept of happiness in America, “Empowering a citizenry to pursue happiness requires more than merely sustaining life and safeguarding liberty. It requires, for one thing, a base of financial security. The success of the social egalitarian experiment in America has always hinged to a great extent on the promise of economic success” (x). As the tragedy of Laura’s parents demonstrates, Sansay complicates the idea that desire for economic success should serve as the predominant driver for the pursuit of happiness. When William leaves his wife and newborn daughter in Philadelphia to return to claim his inheritance, he takes a step that not only ends his own life but that also ensures Rosina will merely trade life in a Portuguese convent for another form of imprisonment in American poverty. In fact, by choosing to leave his family to seek economic success (which he had seemingly ignored when stealing Rosina from the convent and seeking refuge in America) he ultimately sets in motion the events that resound throughout the latter half of the novella, until Belfield himself, foolishly
pursuing honor over the security of his family, agrees to fight Malwood in the duel that takes his life, placing Laura and their child in an almost identical position.

In each case, Sansay questions a pursuit of happiness that has more to do with status and pride than with any actual security. And in each case, she underscores the fact that for women any pursuit of happiness, at least as either codified in the Declaration of Independence or socially agreed upon in the general culture of the early Republic, is essentially a fool’s errand. *Laura* repeatedly reminds its readers that women were not full citizens and as such were at peril when attempting to better their lives, a condition often made far worse by the short-sightedness of their male suitors. *Laura*, then, posits that those denied the traditional economic paths toward happiness (e.g., women) must seek alternative understandings of happiness. And, as I argue, Sansay likewise challenges the concept of the self as a discrete, autonomous member of both the social and natural systems of being, an idea that invites a look at how a form of proto-transcorporeality informs the novella.

*Laura*’s challenge to traditional parameters of selfhood and happiness manifests most strongly in the interactions between the novella’s two lovers and the larger natural world that surrounds them. In particular, the book’s pastoral setting functions as a vector for questioning boundaries. As Terry Gifford argues, “It is this very versatility of the pastoral to both contain and appear to evade tensions and contradictions—between country and city, art and nature, the human and the non-human, our social and our inner selves, our masculine and our feminine selves—that made the form so durable and so fascinating” (11). Given the pastoral’s decidedly contradictory and versatile character, it makes sense that Sansay chose a setting that fosters and reflects upon the interrelationship between sensuality, individuality, and happiness.
Sansay leverages these tensions, especially those related to the human body and the non-human land to create an atmosphere that at times complicates the parameters of the human self. The tension of sexual desire (and the attendant potential of marital happiness) is, after all, one of the engines of the sentimental romance, and Sansay’s *Laura* shares much in common with more canonical texts, such as William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791), and Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797), all of which to varying degrees employ the sexual desire between a young woman and a suitor to warn readers, especially those of the so-called fair sex, against the practice of pre-marital intercourse and pregnancy out of wedlock. In the end, however, Sansay’s *Laura* demonstrates that the early American sentimental romance masks a material reality that is at turns violent and life-affirming, repulsive and alluring.

“earth’s cold bosom”

As *Laura* weaves together these disparate thematic strands—in which natural sexual desire becomes tangled in a pursuit of romantic happiness fettered by patriarchal control—the book comments on the ways women’s bodies become inescapably bound by an artificial system of oppression. Identifying Sansay’s use of the female body as a locus of social conflict, Michelle Burnham writes that in Sansay’s first book, *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo* (1808), “the bodies of women serve as pivot points that expose the implication of individual local desire in an impersonal global system of capitalist drive whose circuits generate violence and inequality” (179). Notably, in her second novel, Sansay shelves this global perspective that naturally sprang from her narrative of life in French-occupied Saint Domingue and instead places her narrative in the more serene locale of Philadelphia’s outskirts. She retains, however, her
Transcorporeality and the Pursuit of Happiness in Leonora Sansay’s *Laura* (1809)

concern with the problem of the female body (i.e., Laura and her sexual flowering and eventual pregnancy) as it relates to the interplay of reproduction, the natural world, and the overarching patriarchal control of the pursuit of happiness that dooms the young lovers. *Laura* thus treats sex—often coded as a vague act of passion—as both a marvelous phenomenon and a path to ruin.

Given its role in eventually scuttling Laura’s chances for happiness, it is ironic that sexual desire begins as her remedy for grief. Mourning the recent death of her mother, Laura begins to take long solitary walks in the fields lining the banks of the Schuylkill River. She finds one spot particularly comforting, and while there comes to the attention of her future lover.

In her lonely wanderings on the banks of the Schuylkill, Laura had been remarked by a young gentleman whose family lived on the borders of that beautiful stream. Her nymph-like form, the beauties of which were not obscured by her sable habit, had attracted his notice, whilst unconscious of the curiosity she had excited, she returned repeatedly to the retired spot she had chosen, and there yielded without restraint, to the indulgence of her woe.

One evening, seated on a little hillock, she retraced the many happy moments she had passed in that neighborhood with her from whom she was now forever separated, still overcome by the painful variety of her sensations, she reclined on the grass and wept aloud. (emphasis mine, 163–164)

Sansay deploys a setting that performs a variety of functions depending upon the character in question. For the grieving Laura, the riverbank offers an escape from the house of her unlikable stepfather; it is a place of solitude where she can reflect upon and mourn the loss of her mother. Indeed, Laura directly connects this retreat with her mother, recalling how she and her mother had once spent “many happy moments […] in that neighborhood.” For Laura it is not only a refuge where she may remove herself temporarily from her familial obligations but also a place intimately connected with the memory of the mother she has lost and the happiness they once shared. But this Arcadian riverside functions in other ways as well, most notably as the site where a “young gentleman,” Laura’s future suitor, Belfield (whose very name means beautiful
field), first views her from a distance and begins his plans to seduce her. Adopting imagery from Christopher Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,” Belfield figuratively transmutes the weeping Laura into what Sansay refers to as a “nymph-like form.”

At the core of their interaction—beneath the various social codes and innuendoes, beneath the veneer of chivalry and flirtatious gestures—is the pursuit of happiness through sexual intercourse. Sansay at times pulls back the curtain to look at how the natural world underlies or even invades such social constructs, and it is useful to examine how she invokes an almost subconscious recognition of the biological reality surrounding her two lovers. Examining a similar trend in Secret History, Abby L. Goode notes “the novel’s overall tendency to combine horrific and reproductive imagery” in a way that presents a “distinctly ecological horror that conceives of the environment as frighteningly close-knit, interactive, and multidimensional” (449). Goode goes on to argue that Sansay creates “an ecological gothic, a mysterious yet disturbingly intimate world where the boundaries between races, species, the living and nonliving, entity and environment are already blurred” (emphasis in the original, 449-450).

While Sansay’s choice of the sentimental romance as genre requires a different approach than Secret History, a version of this transgression of boundaries between humanity and the non-human occurs in Laura as well. The connection between Laura, Belfield, and the land not only pertains to their metaphorical bond but also involves a material link between the characters and the pastoral environment. Sansay invokes a subtle but intimate melding between these two lovers and the land, a melding often linked by the imagery of tears and weeping. Upon meeting the charming, and wealthy Belfield, Laura’s emotions shift from mourning to a silent but tear-drenched relief (164). The following day, tears and crying again dot the narrative, but the source of those tears shifts. The focus moves from “the tear-swoln eyes of Laura” (165), to the
handsome Belfield, who has fallen in love with the girl and returns to the pastoral location of their first meeting, a place where Laura’s tears have literally entered the soil. There, the lovesick Belfield encounters one of the novella’s most powerful descriptions:

The crystalline surface of the Schuylkill glowed with the first blush of the morn, and reflected back the craggy rocks glittering with dew. The refreshing coolness of the hour, the cloudless sky, the tranquility that reigned around, soothed his agitation, expanded his feelings, and ushered in the soft emotions of new-born affection. Tears filled his eyes as he regarded the hillock on which Laura had reclined. (166)

Moved by his desire for Laura and the pastoral beauty of the scene, Belfield is, himself—in imagery akin to that of the dew-speckled rocks—moved to tears. Sansay writes, “His tears fell on the ground that had been moistened by her tears, he kneeled on the grass on which she had rested, and sensations of pity for a creature so young and afflicted blended themselves with the warmer sentiment which had been excited by her beauty” (166). Sansay completes her conceit of the lovers’ tears melding with the dew-moistened soil in what amounts to a literal co-mingling of Laura, Belfield, and the pastoral environment. The result echoes the type of environmental boundary crossing Goode notes in Secret History: “The novel’s environment transforms from a contested territory, a stage of brutal revolutionary conflict, into a frightening collection of interactive and heterogeneous elements in constant transformation” (450). In having Belfield’s tears of passion fall and mix with the land in the same place where Laura’s tears of mourning fell the day before, Sansay creates conditions in which conventionally sound borders are crossed in ways that meld the non-human and human realms.

In what amounts to a sort of transhuman fluid-bonding between Laura, Belfield, and the pastoral earth, these repeated references to weeping and to tears falling upon and mingling with the soil promote an intimacy between human bodies and the natural world. Stacy Alaimo, in coining the term transcorporeality writes, that western culture has a tendency to “deny the rather
biophysical, yet also commonsensical realization that we are permeable, emergent beings, reliant upon the others within and outside our porous borders” (156). Sansay, writing more than a century before the birth of modern ecology, certainly did not approach her novella with anything resembling a modern biophysical understanding of the interconnectedness of all life on earth. She did, however, as indicated in the passage in which the tears of the two lovers meld with the pastoral soil, have something of an proto-biophysical instinct, one that gave rise to an interest in the relationship between her characters and the land upon which their drama plays out. What emerges from this connection between the earth and the passionate tears of Sansay’s lovers is an intimacy between these three entities, one that manifests from the lovers’ pursuit of conjugal happiness.

Near the end of the novella, Laura, delighted by her impending betrothal to Belfield, experiences the purest moment of happiness in the story: “Laura could not resist the overwhelming torrent of pleasing sensations [...] she was penetrated with the delicious conviction that she filled his soul [...]. The moment was exquisite, was sacred, and embraced in itself a whole existence. Her thoughts, her tears, were suspended; she asked no further questions, she only felt” (emphasis added, 215). Belfield’s death soon punctures Laura’s happiness, but this moment remains notable in part because while described in terms both spiritual and violent, her attainment of happiness seems for once entirely realized, and notably, free of tears.

“As if the place breathed infection”

In addition to the repeated imagery of tears and weeping, Sansay also connects her two lovers to the land through references to trees, moonlight, and shadows, sometimes all in the same vignette. For example—in a passage joining the imagery of moonlight, tree shade, and
weeping—Laura lays in bed thinking about Belfield as “the moon’s silver light […] restored her to the mild lustre of his expressive eye, and the breezes that played along the branches which shaded her windows […] . She wept but there was a luxury in her tear” (168). The moonlight touches them all—mother and daughter, daughter and lover, lovers and land—connecting them in ways similar to how their tears mingle with the soil, a conceit Sansay employs perhaps to most powerful effect when Laura rushes to the side of her dying Belfield: “The moon shone bright, as in the night when Laura lay on her mother’s grave. The tide, not having yet turned, no rapid current endangered or retarded their progress; they glided along, in perfect silence, amid the floating cakes, whose margins glittered with the brilliancy of diamonds” (219–220). Here Sansay paints a watery riverside sublime with the nocturnal pallor of moonlight and shadow, and beneath it all lies a doomed pursuit of happiness.

This underlying doom rises to the surface in dramatic fashion when Sansay references another, direr example of how people can become connected to each other and to the non-human world—yellow fever. Upon learning that Philadelphia has been wracked by an epidemic of the disease, Belfield (an apprentice physician) returns to Philadelphia to help tend to the sick. A much worried Laura stays behind in the country, but when Belfield is three days late in returning, she decides to walk to Philadelphia to find him. As Laura approaches the outskirts of the city, she encounters several disease victims that in their literal contagiousness represent a form of transcorporeal misery:

On the road she met numbers of people, some in carts, some walking, who seemed to fly in confusion from the town. Near the footpath she observed a young lad endeavoring to raise on a bank an aged woman, perhaps his mother, who had just fallen to the ground; he had scarcely succeeded when she uttered a heart-piercing groan and expired. Not far from them sat a female shrieking in agony over a child that had just died on her knees. The people from the town, their faces pale with terror, kept the opposite side of the road, and hastened on as if the place breathed infection.
Laura shuddered passing on. She had not walked far when she was stopped by a voice from beneath a fence. It was a young woman dressed in black, who begged for God’s sake for a drop of water. At her feet sat a child crying bitterly; at her breast hung another, who seemed with languid eyes to supplicate that sustenance the exhausted bosom could no longer supply. (178)

Laura asks a man standing on his porch for some water to give to the young woman, the man “bade her begone, saying he would suffer nobody from town near his house” (178). At its root the horror of this scene derives not only from the intense suffering of young and old alike (especially women), but also from how the indiscriminate virulence of the disease encourages a lack of charity toward others, as embodied by the man standing on his porch watching the nightmarish procession. The narrative space of the road functions as a conduit for movement from the city back to the country, through which the moribund Philadelphians engage in a reversal of the traditional movement from country to city. In discussing the movement of characters between urban and pastoral settings, Leo Marx writes, “The contrast between ‘city’ and ‘country’ in the pastoral design makes perfect sense as an analogue of psychic experience. It implies that we can remain human, which is to say, fully integrated beings, only when we follow some such course, back and forth, between our social and natural (animal) selves” (70). Thus, the yellow fever epidemic (itself an instance of detrimental transcorporeality) forces its victims to reinscribe their animal status while also abandoning the very city where the Declaration of Independence was signed, essentially trading the New Republic’s pursuit of happiness for a desperate retreat from misery.

Sansay again re-inscribes Laura’s and Belfield’s animal natures when the two lovers finally have sexual intercourse. Though cloaked in the descriptive fog typical of sexual encounters at this point in literary history, the moment Belfield and Laura consummate their relationship (and likely impregnate her) occurs in the final scene before the two make their way
to Philadelphia’s urban landscape. Sansay intervenes in the narrative by directly addressing the reader, and, in a gesture typical of this genre, opens the scene with the almost requisite apology for the actions of her two characters:

Deprived of parents and of friends, no one taught her to distinguish the visions of a luxuriant imagination from the soberer pleasures which life affords and reason sanctions! no one showed her the tranquil path of virtue, nor warned her of the dangers of that into which love now lured her.

Belfield intended no wrong, but Laura was beautiful, and both were glowing with youth and health; both felt the power of the same irresistible impulse. Their walks were solitary; their meetings without intrusion; nature in the finest season shed over them her magic influence. Yet many weeks elapsed ere Love’s last tribute was demanded, and when at length the fatal moment arrived, the deepest shades of night veiled Laura’s blushes. (176)

This physical union represents the pinnacle moment in their pursuit of happiness, a goal that eventually leads to their mutual doom, but Sansay does not condemn her characters from a moral standpoint. Their actions are neither the product of poor character nor of deceit. Rather, the two are “glowing with youth and health,” and—deprived of the guidance of parents or friends—simply do what comes naturally. Sansay absolves her lovers of moral wrongdoing, ascribing their fall from innocence to the failings of their families and communities (“no one showed her the tranquil path of virtue”).

Nature, then, fills the void, and this personified pastoral realm casts a spell of sorts over the lovers, imbedding their sexual desire within the larger natural scheme, making it part and parcel of the very land where the duo take walks and shed tears. Such aligning of human bodies with the natural world forms what Annette Kolodny terms “probably America’s oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine” (4). Notably, Sansay largely avoids this trope and instead presents the rural environment in a sensuous but asexual manner. When she writes that the lovesick Belfield enters a pastoral realm marked by “The crystalline surface of the Schuylkill,”
she crafts a scene that exudes warmth while also remaining alien and slightly foreboding, as when the river “glowed with the first blush of the morn, and reflected back the craggy rocks glittering with dew” (166). Figuratively, Sansay’s description draws attention not to the potential feminization of the area but to a preponderance of water, both in the form of the river itself and in the droplets that dot the “dewy rocks.”

Sansay’s Laura serves then as an example of how a more European version of the pastoral emerges in an early American novella, and the pastoral of her book remains a complicated setting. The scene of Belfield meeting Laura in the riverside fields functions not only as Laura’s introduction to her future lover but also as the point where these two become bound to each other and to the land itself. This bond takes both a conventionally emotional form and also a complicated physical one. The emotional bond manifests in fairly straightforward terms. Laura is drawn to the pastoral setting in part because of her happy memories of walking through the same fields with her now-deceased mother. For Belfield, however, the emotional connection emerges from his attraction to Laura, demonstrating how at the point of their meeting, the setting simultaneously embodies solitude and mourning as well as sexual desire and the need for general happiness. Indeed, Sansay’s passages dealing with the early meetings between Laura and Belfield take on a veiled sensual tone that demonstrates how the Arcadian landscape serves as a binding agent between these two doomed lovers. Belfield becomes so powerfully enamored with Laura after their initial meeting that he suffers a sleepless night, and then, as Sansay writes, “at earliest dawn he left his bed, and went to the spot where she had first met his eye; to that spot where he had beheld her sinking to the earth, and had obeyed the impulse of his heart in flying to her assistance” (165). Here, in allowing a view of the location through Belfield’s eyes, Sansay highlights his strong association of Laura with the setting itself.
Once the lovers move to the urban environs of Philadelphia, the transcorporeality that influenced the earliest days of their relationship remains. For example, the passage that relates Laura’s visit to the churchyard gravesite of her mother echoes several of the conceits established in the book’s earlier pastoral scenes: “Kneeling by the grass-covered hillock, she pressed with her icy lips the sod, wet with the dews of midnight: then falling to the ground, she exclaimed, ‘I come, dearest mother!’—open thy cold bosom—receive thy child’” (187). This pastoral, transcorporeal imagery—never far from the events of the novella—re-emerges at the end of the book when Belfield suffers a mortal wound in a duel and dies under the weeping gaze of his pregnant bride-to-be. In his final letter to Laura, Belfield cites their happiness as his motivator: “When I return, you will love me more than ever; and in the evening, our happiness will obtain the sanction of the world and of heaven” (emphasis added, 217).

Sansay closes her narrative with not so much an indeterminate ending as a morally ambiguous one, variably adhering to genre conventions while also serving up a paradoxical moral lesson. In a narrative so shadowed by death, Laura—unlike many of her less fortunate analogs in other novels of seduction—does not perish at the end of the book. Rather, Sansay sums up Laura’s fate as that of an unmarried mother possessed of beauty and intelligence but who “thro’ every stage of her varying existence, happiness remained a stranger to her bosom” (emphasis added, 222). The book ends with the further caution “that perpetual uneasiness, disquietude, and irreversible misery, are the certain consequences of fatal misconduct in a woman” (222). This caution against pre-marital sex, while predictable for a book of this genre at this moment in literary history, seems tacked on, especially when we remember the narrative’s moments of happiness, which are intricately woven into the various rural scenes spread across
the book. In all, the connection between Laura and Belfield’s tragic romance, Laura’s pregnancy, and their transcorporeal connection to the land, betrays a more complicated conclusion to this brief tale. The bond between the land and the lovers; the joy Laura finds in Belfield’s arms; and their temporary escape from the social fetters that bind their fates all point to the idea that in the fledgling Republic the pursuit of happiness—a pursuit too often beyond the reach of the Lauras of the world—must incorporate not only the acquisition and security of wealth but also an appreciation for the intangible, but ever-present, human linkage to an all-encompassing, all-connecting natural world.

Drexler notes this duplicity of the book’s conclusion when he writes, “Though Sansay appended a heavy-handed moral signature to the end of Laura … her indictment falls as squarely on Belfield and his reckless participation in the violent code of gentlemanly honor (dueling)” (“Introduction,” 33).
WORKS CITED


