"For a Single Lady to Travel": Geographic Mobility and Female Independence in Leonora Sansay's *Secret History* and *Laura*

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In Leonora Sansay’s novel *Secret History; or The Horrors of St. Domingo*, Sansay presents a pair of American sisters, Mary and Clara, who explore various Caribbean cultures while negotiating social, political, and familial threats to their happiness and personal autonomy. Mary and Clara’s extensive travels allow them to learn from their experiences with different societies, which prepares the sisters to become effective agents of their own fates. Although these sisters do encounter certain risks because of their willingness to move through society independently, risks that become apparent particularly when Mary and Clara’s decisions put them at odds with the desires of the powerful men in their lives, ultimately the sisters’ experience lends them the competency that they need to preserve themselves from the dangers surrounding them, and allows them to end the novel with the potential for a happy future. Mary and Clara’s fate contrasts dramatically with that of Laura, the eponymous protagonist of Sansay’s second novel. Laura presents, in direct contrast to Clara and Mary, an example of a woman whose extremely sheltered upbringing has not only failed to protect her from the dangerous advances of men in her world, but actually creates the mental and social vulnerability that lead Laura to “perpetual uneasiness, disquietude, and irreversible misery” (Sansay 222).

In contrasting the comparative success of the worldlier, more sophisticated Clara and Mary with the pathetic fate of the sheltered Laura, Sansay presents geographic mobility as an essential facet in the successful development of individual female agency for the women of Early
America. Although Sansay does not wholly reject the values associated with a traditional feminine role, particularly in regards to concerns about sexual morality, Sansay ultimately creates in Laura and Secret History a world in which the more experience a woman has, the better equipped she is to respond to the inequalities of power in her life. Sansay’s vision of successful femininity as that which has been cultivated through social, political, geographic, and emotional experience challenges the perception that to be a “good” woman in early America meant a quiet commitment to the domestic sphere or the marriage state, and instead reveals the need for a sense of personal independence on the part of the American woman.

Although many early American novelists were interested in women’s roles and trials, Sansay’s novel Secret History differs from many of her contemporaries’ works in that her two protagonists struggle less with maintaining morality or finding a successful romantic relationship than with developing a sense of personal agency and independence. Unlike many early American female-centric novels, in which the novelists’ “feminism is couched not in terms of individual freedom and self-realization but in those of virtue and social obligation” (Schloss 270), Secret History’s Mary and Clara are clearly seeking individual freedom, even if it means defying social expectation and escaping marital and domestic ties. This recognition of the need for personal agency for women has caused critic Melissa Adams-Campbell to describe Secret History as “an early feminist novelist's revolution from the generic conventions of her time,” arguing that the work “radically revis[es] typical early national accounts of courtship and marriage, coquetry, and unhappy marriage. Clara does not find another husband, take a lover, or die from a broken heart or shame. Rather, she uses her network of international women friends to rebuild her life and find new hope” (Adams-Campbell 134-135).
What allows Clara and Mary to envision and exhibit a certain amount of personal agency, independent of the men in their lives, is the geographic mobility that both possess. In *Secret History*, Clara and Mary’s ability to travel allows them to understand better the world in which they live and empowers them with knowledge and skills to operate independently in that world. This contrasts dramatically with the tragic fate of the protagonist in *Laura*, whose sheltered existence has left her unfit to act independently in her world.

These themes of travel and geographic knowledge were a subject of interest not limited to Sansay alone. Rather, as Martin Brückner details in his article “Geography, Reading, and the World of Novels in the Early Republic,” during this era American readers and authors demonstrated a “historically unparalleled” interest in the study of geography, a study that was not merely of the topography and locations of different regions, but included aspects of “social geography” in which different populations were “stereotype[d]…according to a geographic frame of reference” (391, 397). Writings about geography were popular publications in early America, and lessons in geography were a part of the education for both male and female children (393). Clara and Mary’s situation in *Secret History* is unique and empowering, however, because their interest in knowing the geography, physical and social, of the Caribbean is not limited to reading geographic works, but rather prompts them to explore these spaces themselves.

For many early American women, tied to the domestic sphere of the home, the exploration of distant regions was only to be read about, or experienced solely with the protection of a male guardian. Abigail Adams comments on this situation in a letter of April 20, 1771 to her husband, in which she writes:
“Women you know sir are considered domestic beings, and although they inherit an equal share of curiosity with the other sex, yet but few are hardy eno’ to venture abroad, and explore the amazing variety of distant lands. The natural tenderness and delicacy of our constitutions, added to the many dangers we are subject to from your sex, renders it almost impossible for a single lady to travel.”

(quoted in Bontatibus 11)

Clara and Mary of Sansay’s *Secret History* do travel, however, together and as individuals, and their interactions with different cultures foster an empowering sense of “cosmopolitanism” in both women (Dillon, “Caribbean Revolution…,” 141). As their first site of foreign geographic exploration, Saint Domingue is a somewhat remarkable choice because of its provocative gender relations. Even prior to their arrival there, Mary and Clara may have had some knowledge about the nature of the colony’s “libertine” reputation, as “representations of Saint Domingue in the eighteenth century [were] characterized…in terms of a geography of sexual license and moral degeneracy – of sensual pleasure, excess, and ‘voluptuousness,’” traits that Mary and Clara note as well (Dillon, “The Secret History…,” 86). This colony, in which “the complexities of sexual exchange” bring to light the “arbitrary nature of gender power and gender performance,” allows Mary and Clara a chance to critique the roles of women in the society and, more importantly, reassess their own situation (Adams-Campbell 126).

On Saint Domingue, the travels of these sisters are limited somewhat by the presence of the revolutionary forces that surround Cape Francois, but within the French-controlled region, Mary and Clara explore the social and physical geographies they encounter. Mary in particular exercises what mobility she has, traveling and chronicling her findings for her correspondent. Unlike Clara, who is at one point “locked up” by her husband in a futile attempt to cut her off
from the colonial society, Mary has the freedom to physically explore her surroundings, “walk[ing] at all times, merely for the pleasure” of leaving the domestic sphere and exploring her urban and natural surroundings (Sansay 89). Mary feels comfortable exhibiting this independent mobility because, as she recounts, she has been “accustomed from [her] earliest infancy to wander on the delightful banks of the Schuylkill, to meet the keen air on Kensington bridge, and to ramble over the fields which surround Philadelphia,” a childhood habit that has laid the foundations for self-reliance in adulthood (77).

Although Clara is less able to explore the physical geography of Saint Domingue, she, like Mary, is certainly interested in the social geography of the colonial culture. Neither Clara nor Mary feels an obligation to operate primarily within the domestic sphere, and both women not only observe but participate in the colonial culture they encounter, with Clara’s flirtation with General Rochambeau, commander of the French forces at Saint Domingue, placing her at the heart of the social and political action of the colony. Mary, though less influential a participant in the society of Cape Francois, is no less interested as an observer, however, and her letters reveal an intelligent engagement with the issues at hand. Although Mary claims in her earliest letters that she is merely interested in “novelty,” in “pretty things…new fashions and elegant trinkets,” it quickly becomes clear she is interested and capable of producing a nuanced commentary on the larger social, political, and military situation of the region (65). Even in the military conflict with the forces of former slaves, in which the success of the French forces is key to the interests and safety of herself and her sister, Mary recognizes that the “oppressed creatures” fighting the French are doing so in order to “claim…the rights of which they had been so cruelly deprived” and to escape the “state of brutal subjection in which they were kept” (76, 77). Likewise, in Mary’s assessment of the different groups of women in Saint Domingue, Mary
is able to recognize certain positive aspects of these women’s lifestyles yet also comment on the moral, educational, and practical failings she sees in their lives.

When she leaves Saint Domingue, a departure that takes place approximately halfway through Secret History, Clara’s ability to travel and engage with different geographies begins to come to the forefront of the novel. Clara and Mary first find themselves in the Spanish-speaking community of Barracoa, Cuba. Although both women are initially “ignorant” of the language, Clara demonstrates a great capacity to learn Spanish, as she had with French in Saint Domingue, and within a short time, “Clara…speaks the language with the facility of a native,” and is nearly as active a part of the Hispanic culture she finds in Cuba as she was in the French and creole culture of Saint Domingue (105, 112). Mary too is able to adapt linguistically to this new island (133). Despite the fact that Clara and Mary now travel without the protection of a male friend or guardian, their past experiences with encountering new cultures have given them a shared sense of self-sufficiency, and the sisters feel comfortable “rambling about the world” on their own (108). Their removal from one city or island to another offers Mary and Clara fairly little concern, and at one point Mary even comments that just having a few letters of introduction to people in St. Jago de Cuba is enough for her to know that “on arriving, we shall feel at home” (110).

The greatest test and demonstration of Mary and Clara’s ability to travel independently occurs when Clara flees from her abusive husband in St. Jago de Cuba. Clara, absolutely alone, travels the twelve or so miles from her husband’s house to a place of safety in the nearby village of Cobre, a journey to freedom that not only establishes Clara as an active agent of her own fate, but also marks Clara’s “authorial liberation” as well, in that Clara finally begins to have a narrative voice in the novel (Drexler 33). Clara’s departure from St. Jago de Cuba precipitates
Mary’s exit, which Mary announces to her correspondent with the confident declaration, “I shall leave this place immediately with a lady who is going to establish herself in Jamaica. I have always desired to see that island” (Sansay 128). It is interesting in this situation that Mary not only feels comfortable in traveling to another island accompanied only by a female acquaintance, but that Mary feels herself justified in choosing a destination based solely on her “desire…to see that island” (128).

The fact that Mary and Clara travel a great deal during their time in the Caribbean, and feel comfortable doing so either without the protective presence of a man, as when they sail from island to island, or with no companion whatsoever, as sometimes occurs when Mary or Clara travels by foot, is certainly a unique aspect of Secret History, but this novel does more than merely demonstrate the capacity for women to travel on their own. Rather, the geographic mobility that Clara and Mary experience is remarkable because it empowers these women to develop a sense of personal agency. Through their travels, Clara and Mary come to understand the reality of the social, political, and highly gendered world in which they live, a world that they are then equipped to successfully subvert and escape in what becomes a search for happiness and independence from male tyranny.

Mary and Clara’s travels and experiences amongst different cultures equip them to understand their own situations more fully, particularly in regards to the dangers that face them as women. Both Mary and Clara are able to protect themselves somewhat against forming unwise romantic connections because their experiences in public society have provided them with knowledge of men. Neither sister is wholly immune to flirtation or flattery, but because they both have experience with male society, they are able to guard their hearts and persons
against the advances of men in ways that women of more sheltered backgrounds, such as Sansay’s Laura, cannot.

Unlike Clara, whose interactions with men are primarily recounted in connection with a few key figures – St. Louis, General Rochambeau, and Don Alonzo – Mary’s connections with men are often of a fairly casual nature, and are kept as such primarily through Mary’s unwillingness to permit a more serious flirtation. Mary is well aware of the means used by men of her acquaintance, especially in Saint Domingue, to flirt with women, and her awareness of these techniques helps her guard against falling prey to flattery. Mary is so well-acquainted with the nature of the “beaux” that she encounters, that she at one point claims, “the gallantry of the French officers is fatiguing from its sameness,” and she repeatedly notes that the “profuse” compliments paid to her are “common place” and “have been offered, perhaps, to every woman in town” (77, 89, 102). Mary’s skepticism of the compliments of the French officers is perhaps aided by the fact that Mary has had two significant connections with men in the past that have taught her the nature of a true relationship: her friendship with her correspondent, Aaron Burr, and a past love affair with a man that ended when Mary was “deprived by the unrelenting hand of death, of him who had taught me to feel all the transports of passion” (79).

Although Mary’s knowledge of men allows her to keep those who might be a threat to her reputation or peace of mind at a distance, she is not so fastidious as to fear all men as a potential threat. Rather, Mary has a number of male friends, including Burr, with whom she feels comfortable interacting, and in fact, when Clara flees her husband’s house, Mary requests “one of [her] friends” to seek out information on her whereabouts, a friend who is not a woman but “a man of intelligence and discretion” (128). While this male friend seeks Clara in Cuba, Mary relocates to Jamaica, where she lodges at a boardinghouse that has a predominately male
population after the British send officers from a captured Spanish ship to reside there. Mary first encounters these men one evening when she realizes it will be only she and this group of sailors at dinner, but rather than “retreat” to her room, Mary stays out of “curiosity” and within a few days has become friends with several officers (133).

Mary’s knowledge of her world and the different types of men in it, whether they be flirts, friends, or threats, allows her to maintain a fairly stable equilibrium throughout the novel, at least in terms of the men she encounters in the Caribbean region. Clara’s relationships with men are of a different nature, yet her fate also demonstrates that experience is key to acting wisely as a young woman, even if that experience has to come through learning from mistakes. While in Saint Domingue, Clara, a new and unhappy wife, had allowed a flirtation to develop with General Rochambeau, and although “her only intention had been to find amusement,” this creates a treacherous jealousy between her husband and the general, both of whom become highly possessive of Clara (100). These men, both deeply flawed characters anyway, become “monster[s]” in their attempts to claim Clara as their own, and “Clara…[felt] for the first time the danger of awakening the passions of those who are capable of sacrificing all considerations to gratify their wishes or revenge their disappointment” (104, 105, 139).

The desperate situation in which Clara finds herself is, to a certain extent, connected with her resistance to being trapped within the domestic sphere of a home in which there is little happiness. Mary claims that Clara was “destined by nature to embellish the sphere of domestic felicity,” yet because of the “torments” of her husband, she has been forced to “seek relief” in the social life of the Saint Domingue community (80). This decision to seek enjoyment in social pastimes is what prompted the nearly lethal flirtation between Clara and Rochambeau, and yet Clara’s resistance to being trapped in an unhappy home and her determination to participate in
society also supply the means of escape from this situation for Clara. Clara’s active life outside
of the domestic sphere not only provides the travel experiences and sense of independence that
she needs to be able to flee the situation, first traveling by ship away from the city in
Rochambeau’s power, then slipping on foot out of her husband’s house, but Clara’s participation
in Cape Francois society also provides Clara with an acquaintance, Madame V———, who offers
Clara a safe refuge from her husband.

Clara’s potential for happiness at the end of the novel, however, depends not merely on
the fact that she was successfully able to negotiate an escape from the confining, abusive
relationships with St. Louis and Rochambeau. Rather, Clara’s ability to learn from her
experiences with these two men is what creates such a possibility of happiness for herself and her
sister. Having escaped from St. Louis and Rochambeau, Clara has one final test before reuniting
with her sister, in the form of another love interest, Don Alonzo. Handsome, charming, and
clearly admiring of Clara, Don Alonzo is a powerful temptation for Clara during her stay in the
isolated region of Bayam. Although Clara is “fully sensible of his advantages,” Clara’s
experience with her husband and the general have taught her to doubt that “a man can be
sincere,” and to “avoid the dangerous intercourse” of putting herself in the power of another
would-be lover (126, 148, 150). Instead of risking a repeated cycle of a relationship with a
possessive man, Clara has learned to rely on the “resources of her own mind” and the
companionship of her sister and a few close friends for happiness, and thus she feels confident,
as Mary does, that their future in Philadelphia promises a life of “peaceful obscurity…free from
the cares…and…anxiety” they have gone through (67, 137).

Unlike Clara and Mary, whose struggles end with these words of hope about the future,
the protagonist of Sansay’s second novel, Laura, is doomed to “perpetual uneasiness,
disquietude, and irreversible misery” at the close of her novel (Sansay, 222). This deeply
dissimilar fate for the female protagonist is just one of many elements that at first glance seem to
be utterly different between Secret History and Laura. Secret History is an epistolary novel that
touches on real historical events and figures, Laura a seduction novel that begins with a nearly
gothic first chapter about the young “Rosina, a destined victim to monastic gloom” (157).
Moreover, the protagonists of Secret History are concerned with escaping or avoiding dangerous
relationships, while Laura’s unaltered interest is in furthering her relationship with her lover, Belfield.

In examining this pattern of contrasting features in the characters, plots, and conclusions
of the two novels, one finds that much of the difference in the fates of Laura and Clara and Mary
lies in a crucial binary from which all the other differences arise, a binary that centers on the
issue of geographic mobility. In terms of their personal qualities, Laura and Clara, in particular,
are in many ways remarkably similar. Both have been orphaned, both have remarkable beauty,
both resist committing their lives to the men chosen for them by their guardians, and both
possess a natural “refinement,” extraordinary powers of memory, and other “intellectual
treasure[s]” (152, 170). Both young women have a close female companion in their distress, as
well; Clara has Mary and Laura has Sophia; and both are capable of inspiring great devotion in
their closest female relations: Mary “love[s Clara] with more than a sister’s affection” and
Rosina “loved [Laura] with more than a mother’s love!” (136, 162). Laura and Mary even come
from the same region near Philadelphia. Stranger yet, all three protagonists share a peculiar
connection with individuals of Irish-Hispanic backgrounds: Clara is deeply fond of the “Irish
Spaniard” governor of Bayam, Mary befriends and almost falls for the young Irish officer of the
Spanish naval crew, and Laura’s mother and father were both of Irish decent yet met in a Portuguese convent (134, 149, 158).

Despite the similarities in terms of character traits, however, the story of Laura is vastly different than that of Clara and Mary, and this difference in fate is linked to their differing degrees of geographic mobility and the effects that this produces on their lives. Whereas Clara and Mary are capable of traveling, and thereby have had experience with the world and society, particularly the men of society, Laura’s life has been one of confined seclusion, and her subsequent troubles arise from being kept in this perpetuated state of inexperience. Clara and Mary’s geographic mobility allows them to envision and ultimately create a future in which they can be independent of oppressive obligations, but Laura’s secluded upbringing and adult life have not prepared her for independent existence, and she cannot comprehend or hope for a world outside of her very limited domestic sphere, in which Laura has always held a subservient position, first to her mother and then to Belfield.

Laura’s life, both as a child and a young woman, is extremely secluded, and not knowing or caring to envision a life outside of her various places of confinement, Laura is fairly content with her domestic sphere. Raised until the age of fifteen by her mother, Rosina, who herself had been educated in a convent, Laura has been taught to value seclusion and fear the “worldly” nature of society (162). Laura lives in the same house from her earliest childhood until the day she leaves it for a life with Belfield, and her ventures outside of this home seem to have been limited in the extreme. Although, like Mary in *Secret History*, Laura does go on walks along the Schuylkill River, she does not “wander” and “ramble” freely as Mary had, but rather Laura follows the same path and “returned repeatedly to the retired spot she had chosen,” a “sequestered place” where Laura mourns her mother’s death (77, 163, 164).
This “seclusion in which [Laura] had lived” seems to have been at least partly intended for the protection of Laura from dangerous influences and “worldly” temptations, but rather than protect Laura, her retired lifestyle makes her vulnerable to the advances of Belfield, as she does not know how to defend herself against seduction, never having faced such a situation before (162, 163). When the handsome young Belfield first appears, he immediately captivates Laura, as she has little experience with any men, and “his refined and elegant manners were strongly contrasted by those of the few men she had sometimes conversed with” (169). Laura has very little to judge him in comparison with, as “of the world, [Laura] knew nothing but what she had learned from books,” and soon, as Laura later confides to Belfield, her “inexperienced heart fancied in [him] perfection” (171, 200).

When Laura conveys to Belfield the information that she has another suitor, whom she is expected to marry, Belfield removes Laura from this place of “singular seclusion,” but rather than expand her contact with the outside world, Belfield places Laura in a situation in some respects even more secluded than her original dwelling (203). In the “small farm-house” that Belfield chooses for her, Laura “passed the day in reading the books Belfield brought,” and seemingly ventures out on country walks only in the evening in Belfield’s company (175). Here, as before, Laura is removed from the realities of the world; she lives in a state of “singular seclusion…which…has kept [her] totally unacquainted with the affairs of the world, and the interests that govern mankind” and because of this, “Laura…extended not her views beyond the passing moment, nor ever cast one look on the world of reality” (176, 203).

Laura continues to be “a young creature who…seldom stepped beyond her domestic precincts” for the first few months of her affair with Belfield, but in the autumn, an event occurs that causes Laura to journey from her small country home to the city (181). When Belfield falls
ill during a yellow fever epidemic, Laura ventures into the city to nurse him back to health. As she travels to Belfield’s rooms alone, Laura is, for the first time in the novel, in public and a part of a crowd. But although Laura finds herself among a group of people, she is still rendered distinct from them. Healthy rather than fever-ridden, headed into town rather than away from it, and a solitary figure rather than a member of the numerous pairs of sufferers that she sees, Laura pities those she passes but is never swayed from her purpose, nor are her thoughts long diverted from her goal of reaching Belfield. Laura eventually reaches her lover’s room, where she remains for the following week, once more the inhabitant of a small, confined domestic space, with no real change in her character or situation resultant from the nightmarish experience, except for a lingering sense of the “horrors” of the scene (181).

Laura remains an inhabitant of Belfield’s urban apartment until, upon suddenly learning of an unexpected visit by his family, Belfield places her in a room elsewhere, in a place of lodging that turns out to be little more than a brothel, although neither Belfield or Laura know it at that time. Even without knowing fully the nature of the establishment, however, Belfield warns Laura that she is “on no account to go out of the room,” and Laura again finds herself in a small, isolated, domestic space (182).

It is in this location, however, that the innocent-minded Laura meets the far worldlier “landlady” of the establishment, a “ruddy faced woman of monstrous size” who lets herself into Laura’s private room and through her conversation brings to Laura’s attention the exact nature of her relationship with Belfield (183). For the first time, Laura is directly confronted with the fact that she has earned the “degrading title” of Belfield’s “mistress,” and recognizes the need to think critically on her situation, rather than merely drifting through her life in a “continual trance” of “delusive tranquility” (171, 174, 184). Laura finally begins to realize the emotional
and practical vulnerabilities that she has created for herself by allowing herself to be charmed by the “enchanting illusions” of her life with Belfield, illusions that were possible to sustain only in her state of seclusion from the world (171). Indeed, although Belfield was an active seducer of Laura, her state of seclusion had already rendered her vulnerable to the powers of a man like Belfield. Unlike Mary and Clara, whose experiences with men and society safeguard them to a certain extent against the common flirtations of men and the dangers of forming illicit attachments, Laura is utterly without experience in interacting with men and possesses certain traits that render her particularly vulnerable to the advances of Belfield, such as her “busy fancy,” her “heart, overflowing with sensibility,” and her “luxuriant imagination,” which are not tempered by a rational understanding of the world (165, 175, 176).

Laura is like a “happy child” during the first months of her relationship with Belfield because she has not had to think on her actions and the consequences of her actions in a rational, adult manner (181). However, when the landlady at the establishment in which Belfield places her brings sharply to Laura’s attention that she is Belfield’s mistress, and not the only one he has had, Laura is suddenly confronted with the reality of her situation, a reality that worsens when the landlady brings up another man to enjoy her “agreeable…acquaintance” (186).

At this moment of crisis, Laura is finally brought to a point at which she must become an agent of her own destiny, but unlike Clara, who was also forced to flee in the night from a dangerous house, Laura has no plan of action, no logic to her flight. Instead, she wanders blindly, and eventually finds herself near her mother’s gravesite, upon which she throws herself in a “frenzy” and longs for death to free her from her situation, because without her perfect belief in Belfield’s love for her, Laura is “weary of an existence which seems no longer to have any end or object” (187, 190). When morning comes, however, Laura is rescued by a gravedigger,
and within a few days has found her way to a place of refuge with Sophia, an old acquaintance, more by chance than rational design. Sophia is willing to take Laura in, not only because of an affection she bears Laura’s deceased mother, but also because, being a woman who had been “unfortunately married and abandoned by her husband after he had embittered her days,” Sophia is in a position to offer compassion to Laura (194).

Unlike Sophia, however, whose “mind had matured by affliction,” much as Clara’s does in Secret History, Laura is unable to learn from her recent experience or use it as motivation to choose a different lifestyle for her future (207). Laura’s years spent in secluded domestic bliss left her with a void of practical knowledge of the world, and when Laura is faced with the choice to end her connection with Belfield or return to him as his mistress, she cannot choose to leave him. Unlike Clara, Mary, and Sophia, who find that an existence in which they have independence and agency offers them “many sources of happiness,” Laura cannot conceive of an identity apart from Belfield in positive terms (199). Laura’s sheltered life has so conditioned her to a role as an emotional and practical dependent, first on her mother and then Belfield, that Laura not only returns to Belfield on his first invitation, but she apologizes for having doubted him and tells Belfield that “to be yours is all my pride,” pledging that her “life shall be devoted” to him (206). This is not merely an impassioned outburst at the moment of reconciliation; rather, Laura’s “idolatry” of Belfield has been a part of their relationship since the beginning (173). Even before their sexual affair began, Laura avowed to Belfield, “I am your creature,” and during their months together, “she saw, she heard, she thought of nought but Belfield. On him she rested, to him she listened, for him she studied; nothing had value but in its relation to him” (171, 172).
Belfield encourages Laura’s devotion, and he views her with a possessiveness that is nearly as passionate as her love, boldly telling Sophia that she has no right to keep him from Laura for “she is mine,” a claim of possession that Laura is eager to accept (199). Laura’s willingness to submerge her entire identity in her relationship with Belfield is troubling, and a stark contrast to Clara of *Secret History*, who refuses repeatedly to allow her independent selfhood to be subsumed into the identity of either her husband or her suitor. Mary writes of Clara’s competing would-be possessors that “[Her husband’s] soul cannot raise itself to a level with that of his wife, and he will strive in vain to reduce her to that of his own” but “the heart of Clara acknowledged not the empire of general Rochambeau” either (81, 88). Clara is capable of living and enjoying a life in which her emotions, body, and future are all her own, rather than the property of a husband or lover, a state of being of which Laura, who “loved Belfield to idolatry” is incapable (173).

This inability to envision a life that can be successful and happy without the presence of a male lover to guide her is ultimately the real tragedy of Laura’s fate. Laura chooses to devote her life to her lover, deciding to continue their affair despite the “established rules of society” that label her relationship to Belfield as “degrading,” and her commitment to her love is seemingly on the brink of being rewarded, as Belfield finally makes plans to marry Laura, when Belfield dies, on the very day of their wedding, from a gunshot wound incurred during a duel (184, 209). It is perhaps unsurprising that upon Belfield’s death, Laura suffers excessively, experiencing fits, unconsciousness, and “the ravings of a disordered mind” (221). Not only has Laura lost the love of her life on the very day they were to wed, but with him she has lost “the whole fabric of [her] thoughts and feelings, of [her] wishes and…prospects,” the “whole superstructure” of her life has “tumble[d] into chaotic confusion” (190). Laura cannot ever truly
recover from this loss because, unlike Sophia, Mary, and Clara, who understand not only that it is possible for a woman to lead a life in which her agency and identity are situated within herself, but that this lifestyle places “many sources of happiness…within her reach,” Laura cannot conceive of a life in which she is an independent, active agent (199). Raised in seclusion, lacking practical knowledge of the world and how to operate within it, Laura poured all her passion and identity into her relationships, first her childhood relationship with her mother, who died, and then her affair with Belfield. Without a beloved person to direct her life, Laura is lost, and thus, despite the fact that the novel ends with Laura gaining still more beauty and intelligence, bearing a child, and living under the protection of a friend of Belfield’s “who discerned her worth” despite her situation, “happiness was a stranger to her bosom” and “perpetual uneasiness, disquietude, and irreversible misery” are ever after her fate (222).

Sansay’s “two strange and important narratives” of *Secret History* and *Laura* are very different novels in terms of style and plot (Ianini, 703), yet these works share a consistent vision for the need for women to be able to experience the world outside of the limited domestic sphere. Not only are women who possess the ability to travel and participate in society better able to understand their world, but this increased understanding of their culture permits these women to be more effective agents of their own destiny. Characters like Mary and Clara who not only travel, but travel well, engaging in the cultures they encounter and using these experiences to reflect on their own situation, are better able to protect and promote their own happiness than female characters like Laura, whose limited travels are merely transitions from one small domestic space to another, and fail to teach her the independent agency that she so sorely needs when “the whole superstructure” of her life “totters [and] tumbles into chaotic confusion” (190).
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