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Romance Revised: Charlotte Lennox's The Female Quixote

LAURIE LANGBAUER

Writing about romance in the eighteenth century, J. M. S. Tompkins concludes:

> *It was impossible that a word so variously and disapprovingly applied should preserve any exactness of meaning. It was, said Mary Hays [in* Memoirs of Emma Courtney, *1796], "a vague term, applied to everything we do not understand, or are unwilling to imitate."* [1]

Romance was then, and is now, a vague term, especially when we try to designate by it a peculiar prose form distinct from the novel. Yet critics suffer more from these taxonomical difficulties than novelists. The novelists' concern—one heightened for eighteenth-century writers, especially aware that their novels were not only given shape by, but were shaping, their form—was not to dissect romance, but to use it to define the novel. Romance meant different things to different novelists, but for none of them was it exact; none of them needed it to be. Romance was what the novel was *not*: "everything we do not understand or are unwilling to imitate." The utility of romance consisted precisely in its vagueness; it was the chaotic negative space outside the novel that determined the outlines of the novel's form. To novelists, and, they hoped, to their readers, the novel was unified, probable, truly representational because romance was none of these. The contrast between them gave the novel its meaning.

Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote: or, the Adventures of Arabella* (1752) structures its story on the contrast between the novel and romance. Its heroine, Arabella, is a female quixote—a girl so affected by her reading of romances that they seem to have driven her mad. Yet Arabella's excesses of behavior actually reflect what is wrong with romance. She acts the way she does because she believes in romance and is simply acting out its conventions. Through her, *The Female Quixote* shows that romance is excessive fiction, so excessive that *it* is nonsensical, ultimately mad. The silly extravagances of romance that Arabella illustrates are meant as a foil for the novel's strengths.

More than simply providing a contrast to the novel, romance acts as a displacement of the novel's problems. Lennox does not explicitly define her novel against romance. Instead, she condemns romance as specious fiction, and covers up the fictiveness of her own form, implying by her blindness to it as a form, that it is real and true. Yet Lennox's equation of romance and fiction attests to a tacit recognition that the problems of romance are the problems of fiction, the novel's as well. By deriding romance, construing it as the realm of excess and nonsense, *The Female Quixote* veils its own excesses, tries to appear stable and controlled. One way to read Arabella's madness is as a danger the novelist wants

[1] J. M. S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England, 1770–1800* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 211–12.

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to displace, the novelist's own hidden danger. What takes Arabella over are the powerful, subversive forces not just of one genre, romance, but of all writing.

Even eighteenth-century critics recognized the female quixote's danger was no longer real by the time of Lennox's book, if it ever had been:

> . . . *the Satire of the* Female Quixote [writes Clara Reeve in 1785] *seems in great measure to have lost its aim, because at the time it first appeared, the taste for those Romances was extinct, and the books exploded. . . . This book came some thirty or forty years too late. . . . Romances at this time were quite out of fashion, and the press groaned under the weight of Novels, which sprung up like Mushrooms every year.*[2]

Readers had lost their taste for romances: there were no Arabellas who would believe in them. For writers, it was a different story; there were Charlottes (and Claras) whose novels, like mushrooms, needed dead wood out of which to spring. Underlying the novel's covert need for romance as a means of displacement is an even more submerged tension—an attraction to romance as the very source of writing. Another way to read the mad Arabella is as the novelist's fantasy of wish-fulfillment. She is the ideal reader, completely given over to the sway of the text, attesting to the power of romance, a power the novelist desires for her form too. But because that power resides in "everything we do not understand," the novelist is caught in a double-bind; she tries to cast out from her writing exactly that power which she also envies and wishes to usurp.

In the act of casting out, Lennox is drawn into what she rejects. What Lennox sees as the themes and conventions of romance give form to her novel, just as do those she adopts as antidote to them. Margaret Dalziel has suggested that, "unlike Don Quixote, Arabella is also created to be the heroine of a serious love-story, a story with the conventional romantic characters, and the conventional romantic ending."[3] Ronald Paulson adds: "Mrs. Lennox does not satirize Arabella's romances as much as use this form as a convenient vehicle for introducing romance into the humdrum life of Arabella and her readers."[4] The novel uses romance to define itself, but the opposition breaks down, and subverts that definition. *The Female Quixote* both mocks and lauds its heroine's quixotism, and the way it ridicules romance actually exposes the attractions of that form. What it locates as romance's problems—the disorder and rigidity of its form, the ambiguities of its language—become its own.

What *The Female Quixote* says about romance is useful because it provides a definition of the novel, one that zeroes in on elements that are troubling because also generative of form and meaning. But romance is troubling in another way as well; it acts as a lightning rod for the anxieties about *gender* at the heart of every depiction of the sexes. Romance has traditionally been considered a

[2] Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance* (London, 1785; rpt. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1970), II, 6–7.

[3] Introduction, Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. xiii.

[4] Ronald Paulson, *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 278.

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woman's form. The novel's very definition of romance echoes the way patriarchy defines women: they are both seen as marginal, the negative of the defining agents. *The Female Quixote*'s derision of Arabella lends extra force to its subordination of romance, for, as a *female* quixote, she is already subordinate—a subordinate character in the novel's social world, a subordinate sign in its formal one.

But Lennox rewrites the conventional derisive association of women and romance. Although she attacks romance for its feminine excesses, she also tries to dissociate it from women by educating Arabella out of it. Yet the novel ultimately shows that women and romance are so bound that separating the two ends the story. It suggests a positive, although wistful, alignment of them—if romance were available to women unmediated, it might be a source of power, and a ground from which they could speak.

Lennox is well aware that novels borrow from romance. She has Sir George, one of Arabella's suitors, claim:

> *he was perfectly well acquainted with the chief Characters in most of the* French *Romances; could tell every thing that was borrowed from them, in all the new Novels that came out.*[5]

Lennox herself seems to exercise exactly the same kind of recognition of and control over romance. The attraction of her novel, in fact, is that it contains romance within a new setting. It is like the attraction Arabella has, when dressed for the Ball as a romance heroine:

> *This Story was quickly dispers'd, and for its Novelty, afforded a great deal of Diversion; every one long'd to see a Fashion of such Antiquity; and expected the Appearance of the Princess* Julia *with great Impatience (271–72).*

Lennox wants to suggest that what her novel borrows from romance is just stage-dressing. The faded costumes have been brought out to draw a crowd. But Lennox's language belies her; romance isn't simply ornamental. What the above passage also suggests about her book is that its very novel-ty depends on its relation to romance. Sir George, who makes such confident claims about romance, certainly can neither regulate nor restrain it. The romance he tells Arabella about himself to win her love backfires. When he actually tries to stage one, romance gets completely out of his control. His romance plot at the end of the book, meant to discredit Arabella's lover, Glanville, in her eyes, and staged with actresses, costumes, and a script, becomes dangerously real: it so riles Arabella that she nearly drowns herself; it ends with Glanville running Sir George through.

Instead of being in control of romance, the novel is drawn into and repeats it. It does so especially in its depiction of Arabella. Although presented as a

[5] Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote or the Adventures of Arabella* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 129–30. All further references to this book will be given in parentheses in the text.

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spoof, she is very much a romance heroine herself. Like them, she is an impossible paragon—"the Perfection of Beauty, Wit, and Virtue" (151). The book actually affirms her identification with romance heroines, that identification imperceptibly taking over from the mockery. At what should be her greatest public disgraces—the Ball and Vauxhall gardens—the ridicule dissolves. Arabella confronts the "design'ed Ridicule of the Whole Assembly," but

> *Scarce had the first tumultuous Whisper escap'd the Lips of each Individual, when they found themselves aw'd to Respect by that irresistable Charm in the Person of* Arabella, *which commanded Reverence and Love from all who beheld her (272).*

The tone of the book changes into the same tone it has been belittling before as romantic. Arabella and the crowd are frozen in uneasy, wishful moments—uneasy because the romance within the novel comes out of hiding, wishful because such moments acknowledge a fantasy the novel can't acknowledge elsewhere. In these moments, the line between the novel and romance disappears. Arabella *is* a romance heroine, and receives the respect and obeisance that are a romance heroine's due.

Such moments of collapse between the novel and romance suggest that the answer to Arabella's question—"May not the same Accidents happen to me, that have happened to so many illustrious Ladies before me?"—is "Yes." Part of the jest of the book, of course, is that romantic accidents happen to its determinedly unromantic characters. For instance, Arabella sees another of her suitors, Hervey, as a prospective ravisher, and expects Glanville to defend her. Glanville, angry at Arabella for being so ridiculous, and angry at Hervey for ridiculing her, unwittingly winds up doing exactly what Arabella expects of him—he attacks Hervey, and by so doing, becomes romantic, "the Champion of this fair lady" (157). This kind of joke is part of the debunking of romance, suggesting that the duels between romantic heroes might have more to do with spleen than with honor.[6] But some of the characters' romantic actions we are meant to take seriously. We are not to see it as an excess of romantic sensibility when Arabella sickens from grief at her father's death, but to approve of her filial devotion. And not only is Arabella's behavior here similar to the extravagances of romantic heroines, but even the language Lennox uses to describe the event is almost identical to romance language she has earlier mocked. Arabella explains away the supposedly lovesick Edward's excellent health with "as for his not being sick, his Youth, and the Strength of his Constitution, might, even for a longer time, bear him up against the Assaults of a Fever" (23). Lennox explains that Arabella recovers from *her* fever because "her Youth, and the Strength of her Constitution, overcame her Disease" (59).

Crucial to the book's depiction of her, and its derision of romance, is its

[6] That the conventions of romance assert themselves even in the face of determined opposition—most of Glanville's anger comes from how strenuously and how unsuccessfully he tries to defuse Arabella's romantic expectations—also suggests the power of romance, its indivisible shadow-relation with whatever tries to disclaim it.

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assertion of a natural, sensible Arabella, superior to and distinct from her romantic self. This essential self is not very convincing, however, since the book mostly tells us it exists rather than shows us. Our access to this Arabella, like Glanville's, is supposed to be through her conversation, which, "when it did not turn upon any Incident in her Romances, was perfectly fine, easy, and entertaining" (65). But we get very little of Arabella's conversation that is not romantic, and the little we do get shows an Arabella no more "real" because less literary than the self drawn from romance. The speeches which are to impress us are, if anything, even more artificial—set-pieces modelled on historical writers or moral essays.[7] The most sustained of these is Arabella's discourse on raillery, which "charms Mr. Glanville with her rationality" (267–69). Yet source study shows that this example of the unromantic Arabella turns out to be very romantic after all; it is *taken* from a romance, a speech in *Artamenes*.[8] Although ostensibly defined against romance, Arabella's character grows out of it, needs it to give her shape.

Ridicule is the tool the novel uses against Arabella and, through her, romance. During her climactic renunciation of romance, it is only when Arabella recognizes that she can be absurd (and has been in regard to the rules of the debate about romance between her and the Doctor) that her "Heart [can yield] to the Force of Truth" (381), and she can see the absurdity in romance and in her romantic behavior. What convinces her to give up romance is not so much the Doctor's logic as her own shame, and it is later "Reflections on the Absurdity of her past Behaviour, and the Contempt and Ridicule to which she now saw plainly she had exposed herself" (383) which clinch her rehabilitation.

Yet the function of ridicule in this novel is not as simple as it seems. Ridicule seems to be something the book *does*; it holds up Arabella and romance for our laughter and derision. But actually, ridicule is not so much what the book does as what it is *about*. Over the course of the story, we notice that we are not so much laughing at Arabella; we are watching the other characters laughing. Again and again, just at moments when Arabella causes them great uneasiness, they can barely choke back their laughter at her absurdity. This ongoing laugh-track may at first seem like an unsophisticated cue, Lennox telling her readers: laugh here, this is funny. Yet what it does is subtly to change the effect of the laughter. Because the characters laugh first, the author and the readers are slightly dissociated from the ridicule.

Ridicule is set up as an issue, rather than used as a tactic, as something we consider rather than participate in, from the first page, when we learn of Arabella's father's unjustified public disgrace. Ridicule most explicitly stands out as an issue when Arabella lectures about it in her disquisition on raillery.

[7] Margaret Dalziel suspects "that the originals could be found for other speeches made by Arabella, as for example her disquisitions on glory, indifference, and suicide (303f., 310f., and 318f.), in which the style seems different from that of most of her conversation." Explanatory Notes, *The Female Quixote*, p. 414, n. to p. 368.

[8] According to Dalziel, from Madeleine de Scudery, "The History of Pisistrates," *Artamenes; or, the Grand Cyrus. That Excellent Romance,* 1690–91, IX. (Explanatory Notes, p. 406, n. to p. 267).

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What Arabella says there suggests the way raillery works in this book. She says that

> *the Talent of Raillery ought to be born with a Person; no Art can infuse it, and those who endeavour to railly in spite of Nature, will be so far from diverting others, that they will become the Objects of Ridicule themselves (268).*

Although Lennox blunts her statement by imagining some ideal of raillery (which obviously doesn't exist if, as Glanville suggests, *Arabella* is meant to exemplify it), this passage suggests that Lennox recognizes ridicule as tricky and shifting, a form of scapegoating that rebounds on the one who does it. That ridicule can especially be a form of literary scapegoating is affirmed by Glanville, when he accuses Sir George of

> *Rail[ing] with premeditated Malice at the* Rambler; *and, for the want of Faults, turn[ing] even its inimitable Beauties into Ridicule; The Language, because it reaches to Perfection, may be called stiff, laboured, and pedantic; the Criticisms, when they let in more Light than your weak Judgment can bear, superficial and ostentatious Glitter; and because those Papers contain the finest System of Ethics yet extant, [you] damn the queer Fellow, for over-propping Virtue (252–53).*[9]

If, as Glanville suggests, ridicule works to hide the attractions of a literary form, what are the attractions of ridiculed romance?

Perhaps the answer lies in romance's diversion. "Diverting" is the word the novel uses most to describe Arabella's romantic absurdities, and the word suggests not just that they are funny, but that they distract us from something else. The Doctor gives us the key to what we are diverted from when he says about romances, "If they are at any Time read with Safety, [they] owe their Innocence only to their Absurdity" (374). Lennox's mockery of romance allows us to partake of it *innocently* in her novel, to feel at a distance from what is actually the source of our pleasure. What we especially enjoy, the Doctor tells us, is fantasy. The novel projects onto romance all the titillation and wish-fulfillment of fiction:

> *But who can forbear to throw away the Story that gives to one Man the Strength of Thousands; that puts Life or Death in a Smile or a Frown; that recounts Labours and Sufferings to which the Powers of Humanity are utterly unequal (378–9).*

Fielding, in his review of *The Female Quixote,* sees the attraction slightly differently:

[9] Fielding picks up the same thread in his review of *The Female Quixote.* Extreme criticism of the book, he says, reflects only on the critic: "no Persons presume to find many [faults]: For if they do, I promise them, the Critic and not the Author *will be to blame.*" Henry Fielding, "*The Covent Garden Journal,* No. 24, Tuesday, March 24, 1752," in *The Criticism of Henry Fielding,* ed. Ioan Williams (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 194.

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> [The Female Quixote] *is indeed a Work of true Humour, and cannot fail of giving a rational, as well as very pleasing, Amusement to a sensible Reader, who will at once be instructed and very highly diverted.*[10]

Fielding's emphasis on the rational, sensible, and instructive suggests that what the humor of this novel diverts the reader from acknowledging are the pleasures of the irrational, mocked in the novel as romantic foolery. Figuring fantasy and the irrational as romance, the novel seems safely to encapsulate them, to cast them from itself, while still relying on their attractions.

The novel cannot admit it has such forces in its midst because having them there is dangerous, dangerous because disordering. Disorder is certainly the effect they have had on Arabella. Encountering them in romance has disordered her brain, driven her "out of her senses," and that mental disorder has disordered all around her—contradicted her father's will, disrupted the line of inheritance, created such day-to-day havoc that even her retreat at tranquil Richmond ends in "a Scene of the utmost Confusion and Distress" (365). But disorder is also a formal danger. Arabella is described as being "turned" and "out of the Way," and those are also apt descriptions of what the novel sets up as the formal problems of romance—its loose plots, its digressiveness, its endlessness. Order is what makes Fielding prefer *The Female Quixote* to *Don Quixote* as a response to romance:

> *here is a regular Story, which, tho' possibly it is not pursued with that Epic Regularity which would give it the Name of an Action, comes much nearer to that Perfection than the loose unconnected Adventures in* Don Quixote; *of which you may transverse the Order as you please, without any Injury to the whole.*[11]

It is not simply that Arabella is out of her senses, but that the irregularities and improbabilities of romance are ravings, "senseless Fictions" (374).

Yet the formal problems of romance are exactly what Lennox worried about most in writing her own novel. Length is what she attacks romance for most effectively (certainly the most quoted scene from the book is the one in which Glanville, to please Arabella, attempts some romances, but "counting the Pages, he was quite terrified at the Number, and could not prevail upon himself to read them" [50]). And length is what plagued her most in writing her book. Her letters to Richardson, perhaps not the best advisor in this matter, consult him about the problem: how to fill volumes without being prolix?[12] According to her critics, it is a problem he did not help her resolve. Mrs. Barbauld is one of the first to find *The Female Quixote* "rather spun out too much and not very well wound up."[13] And romance's other formal excesses make their way into the

[10] *Criticism of Fielding*, p. 194.

[11] *Criticism of Fielding*, p. 193.

[12] Duncan Isles, Appendix, *The Female Quixote*, pp. 418–27.

[13] Quoted by Dalziel, Introd., *The Female Quixote*, p. xviii.

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novel. In having Arabella enumerate romances, Lennox goes too far. Arabella conjures up too many characters, cites too many texts, repeats too many similar scenes, so that her recourse to romances ultimately takes away from the *novel's* order, makes *it* digress. In the end, romance splits the book wide open: Lennox's attempts to evict romance are loose-ended—she introduces the Countess only to whisk her away—and ultimately fracturing—the Doctor comes out of nowhere and introduces a chapter that jars with the rest of the story, rather than smoothly resolving it.

That the novel cannot escape from what it casts as the madness of romance is already evident in its own treatment of madness. What the novel shows us is that Arabella's madness is contagious; part of its threat to Glanville is that it will make *him* mad: Arabella's confusion and disorder leave him in confusion and disorder. His perpetual cry is "You will make me mad!" (156). As Glanville's threatened madness shows, to define madness is already in some part to include and reflect it. To repudiate romance is to subject oneself to its essential disorder.

The disorder of romance, its failure to stay within bounds, is one of the ways the novel figures its madness. But another part of romance's madness is just how strictly bound it is. Through Arabella, the novel mocks romance's intricate and unbendable rules. As Ronald Paulson writes: "Quixotism in Arabella means a rigidity of behavior." [14] Arabella's relation to romance is a form of repetition compulsion; she forever re-enacts the same romance conventions in the face of wildly different experiences. Romance's especial madness is that its rules are so rigid and yet so empty: that the novel sets it up as a form without sense becomes clear in Arabella's explanation of its special provinces, love and honor:

> *The Empire of Love, said she, like the Empire of Honour, is govern'd by Laws of its own, which have no Dependence upon, or Relation to any other (320).*

It is an empire "dependent upon nothing but itself" (321), and it is that kind of empty relationality the novel attacks. Romance is mad because it elevates rules for their own sake—and, in fact, we see that Arabella is attracted not just to the laws of romance, but to law in any form. It is she who insists upon and dwells upon the laws of disputation in her discussion with the Doctor.

The problem with romance is that it suggests that writing can be made up of non-referential relations, and that rule and form can be attractive in themselves. This is a dangerous suggestion,[15] and Lennox tries to get around it in her own book by foisting it onto romance. Yet what informs this novel is a structure fully as formal as romance's. Lennox's playful treatment of Richardson's *Clarissa* suggests how much the rules of the *novel* are on her mind, and suggests too that

[14] Paulson, p. 276.

[15] See, for example, Fielding's fear that words wrenched from their fixed meaning can cause very real moral danger. His attack on the degeneration of language is complicated, because his ironic stance has him doing the very thing he is arguing against—presenting the popular misapplication as the real sense, as in his definition of "ANGEL. The name of a Woman, commonly of a very bad one," or "HONOUR. Duelling." Henry Fielding, "*The Covent Garden Journal*, No. 4, Tuesday, January 14, 1752, in *Criticism of Fielding*, pp. 90–93.

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the novel is not simply a mirror of the world but, like romance, has rules—conventions. At one point in the story, Sir George, playing at romance, slides easily into the role of Lovelace. Supposedly dying of love for Arabella, he writes to her: "Let my Death then, O Divine *Arabella*, expiate the Offence I have been guilty of!" (174). At another point, Arabella, about to flee from her home, pauses to consult romance convention:

> *The Want of a Precedent, indeed, for an Action of this Nature, held her a few Moments in Suspense, for she did not remember to have read of any Heroine that voluntarily left her Father's House, however persecuted she might be (35).*

The joke, of course—and one Richardson might not have appreciated—is that Clarissa, the heroine of a novel, has done what is unnatural, improbable, beyond even romance heroines. Lennox attests to the importance of novelistic convention in her initial plan for Arabella's cure. Duncan Isles has argued that the Countess, whose appearance is such a loose thread in the book's final version, was initially to be the agent of Arabella's cure, and to affect it by having her read *Clarissa*.[16] The conventions of the novel were (perhaps too) explicitly to be the antidote for the conventions of romance.

The novel suggests that language is most at fault in romance: to halt Sir George's romancing, Glanville admonishes, "Pray, Sir *George* . . . lay aside this pompous style" (196), suggesting that romance *is* its style, that one disappears with the other. The trouble with romance's language is that it can be downright "injurious" (90, 105)—romance has addled Arabella partly because its language is so bad; Lennox makes a point of telling us that Arabella has read romance in bad translations. Its effect on Arabella is to make her unintelligible; the other characters simply cannot understand what she says. Arabella, for her part, cannot make any sense of them either, and the languages of romance and the novel are so foreign to each other that Arabella and the others often mean wildly different things by the same word—words such as adventures, histories, heroes, favors, servants, fair-ones, and knights. This troublesome diction is all romance's because the book insists the other characters' meanings are not really mysterious; language is romance's problem. The novel makes a sharp distinction between its own "plain *English*" (182) and the language of romance, which it establishes as the offender through parody.

The Countess, in reasoning with Arabella, confronts this problem of language:

> *Tho' the Natures of Virtue or Vice cannot be changed . . . , yet they may be mistaken; and different Principles, Customs, and Education, may probably change their Names, if not their Natures (328).*

Sophistry is what the Countess is criticizing here, the sophistry of romance, which speciously makes distinctions on the basis of names, not natures. When

[16] Isles, p. 425.

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first presented with Mr. Glanville, Arabella employs romance with such sophism:

> *What Lady in Romance ever married the Man that was chose for her? In those Cases the Remonstrances of a Parent are called Persecutions; obstinate Resistance, Constancy and Courage; and an Aptitude to dislike the Person proposed to them, a noble Freedom of Mind which disdains to love or hate by the Caprice of others (27).*

The foundation underlying this kind of irony is the belief that words have easily accessible, stable meanings and are transparently referential to them.[17] One of Lennox's very few discursive footnotes, in fact, objects to romance precisely because it does *not* use language this way:

> *This Enigmatical Way of speaking upon such Occasions, is of great Use in the voluminous* French *Romances; since the Doubt and Confusion it is the Cause of, both to the Accus'd and Accuser, gives Rise to a great Number of succeeding Mistakes, and consequently Adventures (351n).*

Romance is especially damned because enigmatic language is not just an element of it, but its very source and impetus, the basis for its adventures. And not only does Lennox wish to argue against the uncertainty of language being the foundation for fictional texts, she even suggests that language regulates, brings multiple meanings and erring associations back into line: chiding Arabella for her cockeyed, extravagant notions, the Doctor tells her: "Your Imaginations, Madam . . . are too quick for Language" (370), suggesting the very casting into words will organize and rationalize her fancy.

The novel dismisses the autonomy of language by clever scapegoating; stumbling over words as things, being caught up in language for itself is, it tells us, something that servants do. By reacting in this way, the servants not only expose themselves, but expose Arabella's romance language for the nonsense it is. Arabella's maid, Lucy, listens not to the matter but the sound of Arabella's words: in repeating them, she thinks "Solation" is the same as "consolation" (315). Yet, although the willingness to divorce words from sense is presented as part of romance and as nonsense, the opposite view is also part of romance and is just as patently nonsense. This is Arabella's own view, which reads words so literally it allows them only one sense (as when Arabella interprets Lucy's "die for Joy" [181] to mean just that). When language, whether overly loose or literal, is in excess of meaning, Lennox stamps it as a problem of romance. But the transparency she assumes for the language of her own book is a mirage. It too spins out rich associations, proliferates beyond contained meanings: Lucy's solecism, "solation," is also part of a larger undercurrent of the *book*'s language —a metaphor of fire and light that continually asserts its illogical connections over the sense of a scene. For instance, Glanville, discussing the romances

[17] Although Arabella's ability to use language for her own purposes also suggests that meaning is not as stable as it might seem, that language admits play even though that play might be seen as wrong.

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Arabella's father is about to burn, refers by-the-way to "that Incendiary *Statira*" (56), a connection which is hopelessly muddled when viewed causally, but figuratively quite apt—Statira, in a sense, really does cause the flames, which are a reflection of and response to smoldering passions inside the romance.[18] And, like romance, this novel reduces associations to startling literalness that also calls attention to its language. At one point, in the midst of wild word-play about height—the drunken Glanville, "elevated, with Wine," is displeased at Arabella's pride; he "ris[es] up in a Passion at seeing her again in her Altitudes" —Lennox's language abruptly comes back to earth; the scene changes to a literal image of an elevated man: Miss Glanville warns that Glanville will be hanged and swinging from a gibbet if he follows Arabella's bloodthirsty romanticism (124–129).

And the novel does attest to the power of language by attesting to the spoken word. Just as Arabella makes a firm distinction between being loved and being *told* she is loved, the novel itself also emphasizes the force of talking. Glanville, for instance, is able to counter Arabella's ravings with words of his own, to talk people into believing her sane (309). Similarly, it is for her words that he depends on the Countess, trusting that "the Conversation of so admirable a Woman would be of the utmost use to *Arabella*" (323). And it is ultimately conversation that cures Arabella—the Doctor talks her out of her delusion at the end.[19] With this thematic recognition of the importance of language to its own story, the novel once again winds up confirming what it has initially criticized as romantic.

The novel buttresses its genre distinctions with gender. It associates the dangers of romance with sins of women, and through this association clinches its derision of the form. Romance's faults—lack of restraint, irrationality, and silliness—are also women's faults. Fielding makes this connection in his review of *The Female Quixote*, where he finds that novel better than Cervantes's because more credible. A woman *would* be drawn into romances:

> *as we are to grant in both Performances, that the Head of a very sensible Person is entirely subverted by reading Romances, this Concession seems to me more easy to be granted in the Case of a young Lady than of an old Gentleman. . . . To say Truth, I make no Doubt but that most young Women . . . in the same Situation, and with the same Studies, would be able to make a large Progress in the same Follies.*[20]

[18] This metaphor conventionally ties together fire and sexuality, as in Sir George's mock-romantic description of the (sexual) radiance of a fair one's charms kindling a reflected desire in himself (p. 214). The Doctor also connects fire and sexuality (as well as violence). Romances "give new Fire to the Passions of Revenge and Love. . ." (380). Seen in this light, Arabella's consuming interest—her "Glory"—is tacitly aligned with her sexuality.

[19] For a fuller discussion of the role of conversation in this novel, see Leland E. Warren, "Of the Conversation of Women: *The Female Quixote* and the Dream of Perfection," in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, ed. Harry C. Payne (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), XI, 367–80.

[20] Fielding, "*The Covent Garden Journal*, No. 24," *Criticism of Fielding*, p. 193.

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To Fielding, the strength of *The Female Quixote* is that it tells us something not just about romance or Arabella, but about all women.[21] Genre and gender collapse into each other; by exposing romance, *The Female Quixote* exposes women:

> . . . *tho' the Humour of Romance, which is principally ridiculed in this Work, be not at present greatly in fashion in this Kingdom, our Author hath taken such Care throughout her Work to expose all those Vices and Follies in her Sex which are chiefly predominant in Our Days, that it will afford very useful Lessons to all those young Ladies who will peruse it with proper attention.*[22]

In fact, what Fielding identifies as its relation to "those Vices and Follies in her Sex" is what expressly underwrites romance as unrealistic and irrational. As Peggy Kamuf has written, "what a particular society judges to be logical or probable is always bound up with a prior determination of what is deemed proper."[23] Romance is associated with women and, as the pun on romance (a love affair) suggests, with women's sexuality—a sexuality that, because it is women's, is necessarily "improper," in the sense of the root of that word—not her own or peculiar to her. It is seen instead as borrowed from men. And so Fielding calls it folly, because it is ridiculous the way everything second-hand is ridiculous, and vice, because it is stolen and therefore illicit and dissipated.

The Female Quixote does in part agree with Fielding's reading of it; it equates romance and women's sexuality by focusing on romance's improprieties, emphasizing how romance's wildness offends against sexual decorum. When Arabella asks the Countess to narrate her adventures, the Countess is properly shocked at the romantic term. She answers:

> *The Word Adventure carries in it so free and licentious a Sound in the Apprehensions of People at this Period of Time, that it can hardly with Propriety be apply'd to those few and natural Incidents which compose the History of a Woman of Honour (327).*

And the book affirms that the only history or adventures a woman can have are sexual ones: when Arabella *does* hear the adventures of other characters, as she does about Miss Groves from her maid and about people at the ball from Mr. Tinsel, what she hears is scandal. The sharp-eyed Miss Glanville points out that the madness romance has caused in Arabella is definitely sexual. Arabella's romantic behavior is a way of "exposing" herself, of displaying sexual signs. Miss Glanville's jealous solution is not to keep Arabella from romances, but from men. She observes

[21] Fielding seems initially, in the passage quoted above, to be distinguishing between youth and age as much as between the sexes. He is nowhere in the review interested in young men, however, and his interest in young women reflects the assumption that, because their sexual history is still open-ended, unlike married or fallen women, they have a story to be told.

[22] Fielding, "*The Covent Garden Journal*, No. 24," *Criticism of Fielding*, p. 194.

[23] Peggy Kamuf, "Writing Like a Woman," in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, ed. Sally McConnel-Ginet, Ruth Borker, Nelly Furman (New York: Praeger, 1980), p. 292.

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that it was a Pity there were not such Things as Protestant Nunneries; giving it as her Opinion, that her Cousin ought to be confin'd in one of those Places, and never suffer'd to see any Company, by which Means she would avoid exposing herself in the Manner she did now (314).

And this sexual madness is seen as particularly dangerous. Although Arabella refrains from going to routs with Miss Glanville, romance prompts her to have routs of her own. She creates a scene in the gardens over a woman disguised as a man:

Mr. Glanville *almost mad with Vexation, endeavour'd to get* Arabella *away.*
Are you mad, Madam, said he in a Whisper, to make all this Rout about a Prostitute? (336)

While Miss Glanville indulges her sexuality in the carefully controlled world of London parties, the license of romance makes Arabella's indulgences extreme, links her with a prostitute. Her routs are not the consoling, appropriated domestications Miss Glanville enjoys; in Arabella's case, the hint of revolution is now back in the word; it contains the power of overthrow associated with any return of the repressed.

On this level, Lennox accepts the derision of romance; her strategy is to separate Arabella from it, to educate her out of romance and dissociate her from its realm. This strategy lends itself to one kind of feminist reading, a kind outlined most clearly in *The Madwoman in the Attic.* There, although they never directly treat this novel, Gilbert and Gubar accept the traditional derision of romance for much the same reason Lennox does—its negative effects on women through its obsession with love. Gilbert and Gubar argue that romance trivializes women because it reflects a male idea of them; to Gilbert and Gubar, all narrative structures mirror male desires, but romance is the worst offender, and emblematizes the rest, because it is the most bankrupt and the one to which women have been especially relegated.[24] In this reading, Lennox would be the madwoman trapped in this male form; she cannot completely escape it, but she can critique it, stand outside it through parody. Gilbert's and Gubar's solution is the same as Lennox's—to mock romance in order to leave it behind. Educating Arabella out of romance becomes a symbol of Lennox's own struggle as a writer.

Yet, in *The Female Quixote,* the parallel between women and romance is so complete that a woman cannot take herself out of romance without disappearing altogether. The text shows that Arabella's only escape from romance is to stop being a woman. Indeed, Arabella's association with women is tenuous throughout the book: she is really a man's woman. Women are jealous of and reject her; men are attracted and sympathetic. The men view her identification with romance's heroines as something from which they must reclaim her, and that reclamation

[24] See for instance their discussion of romance as "the prison of the male text" (p. 44), "the glass coffin of romance" (p. 68), and so on in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

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involves her complete identification with men. We are told that Arabella's romanticism reflects very badly on Glanville; he fears that her absurdity makes *him* ridiculous. Instead of casting light on him, she needs to become sane in order to be his reflection. At the end of the book, Arabella *is* inaugurated into man's realm and becomes indistinguishable from the men in it. She leaves romance by participating in the patriarchal discourse of moral law, and in that discussion loses her voice; her words become literally undistinguishable from those of the Doctor.

Arabella's education out of romance and absorption into the male realm may indeed represent Lennox's own movement; it certainly tallies with the biographical legend that has passed down about her. Her early critics, Austin Dobson and Miriam Rossiter Small, emphasize her contemporaries' feeling that she, too, was a man's woman. Small tells of a "feminine disapprobation which is steadily and impressively cumulative through her life." [25] And Dobson writes:

> *It is also stated, on the authority of Mrs. Thrale, that, although her books were admired, she herself was disliked. As regards her own sex, this may have been true; but it is dead against the evidence as regards the men.*
>
> . . . . .
>
> *A woman who could thus enlist the suffrage and secure the service of the four greatest writers of her day [Johnson, Richardson, Fielding, and Goldsmith] must have possessed exceptional powers of attraction, either mental or physical; and this of itself is almost sufficient to account for the lack of a corresponding enthusiasm in her own sex.*[26]

Lennox was especially Dr. Johnson's favorite. Boswell quotes him:

> *I dined yesterday at Mrs. Garrick's, with Mrs. Carter, Miss Hannah More, and Miss Fanny Burney. Three such women are not to be found: I know not where I could find a fourth, except Mrs. Lennox, who is superior to them all.*[27]

The most complete story we have of her relation to Johnson is from Sir John Hawkins's *Life,* and concerns expressly her relation to writing as a male institution. After the publication of her first novel, Johnson held a party for Lennox, in which he initiated her into the fraternity of male letters by crowning her with laurel.[28] And just as Arabella, once in this world, loses her voice,

[25] Miriam Rossiter Small, *Charlotte Ramsay Lennox, An Eighteenth Century Lady of Letters* (1935; rpt. Hamden, Connecticut: Archeon Books, 1969), p. 10.

[26] Austin Dobson, *Eighteenth Century Vignettes* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1892), pp. 59, 60.

[27] James Boswell, *Life of Johnson,* ed. George Birkbeck Hill, revised and enlarged, L. F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), IV, 275. The slightly ribald talk that follows the above passage suggests that, talent notwithstanding (for Johnson quoted from Lennox under "talent" in *The Dictionary*), a woman's position (in male eyes) in regard to letters is always sexual: "BOSWELL: 'What! had you them all to yourself, Sir?' JOHNSON: 'I had them all as much as they were had; but it might have been better had there been more company there.' "

[28] Sir John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1787; rpt. in *Johnsoniana,* New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1974), XX, 286–7. The sexual undertones of a woman's relation to the male enclave of literature continue here. Johnson refers to Lennox's book as her "first literary child" (286) and Hawkins

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when Lennox calls on it in the penultimate chapter of *The Female Quixote,* so does she. Like Arabella's voice with the Doctor's, Lennox's blends with Dr. Johnson's, so much so that it is impossible to know who really wrote the chapter —but whether Dr. Johnson wrote it or whether he influenced a most faithful pastiche is immaterial. What is important is that Lennox herself, literally or figuratively, must disappear; power and authority can enter her text only as a man; only a man can dispel romance.

And in *The Female Quixote,* there is a price for renouncing romance and acceding to male order. With Arabella's foreswearing of romance and her rehabilitation by the Doctor, the story—abruptly—ends. That the story must end with the end of romance is something the book has consistently foreshadowed. We learn, for instance, that Arabella prefers the heroines of romance to the women of her day because the heroines at least have a story to be told:

> *What room, I pray you, does a Lady give for high and noble Adventures, who consumes her Days in Dressing, Dancing, listening to Songs, and ranging the Walks with People as thoughtless as herself? How mean and contemptible a Figure must a Life spent in such idle Amusements make in History? Or rather, Are not such Persons always buried in Oblivion, and can any Pen be found who would condescend to record such inconsiderable Actions?* (279).

The insubstantial Countess confirms this conclusion; her presence in this book is only in proportion to how much she retains of the romances she once read. Unlike the adventures of romance's heroines, her unromantic story can be told in a very few words:

> *And when I tell you . . . that I was born and christen'd, had a useful and proper Education, receiv'd the Addresses of my Lord——— through the Recommendation of my Parents, and marry'd him with their Consents and my own Inclination, and that since we have liv'd in great Harmony together, I have told you all the material Passages of my Life, which upon Enquiry you will find differ very little from those of other Women of the same Rank, who have a moderate Share of Sense, Prudence and Virtue* (327).

Arabella, of the same rank and with a moderate share of the same virtues, wishes for more of a story than this, and she recognizes the greatest curtailment of a woman's adventures in that other union with patriarchy, marriage. Early in the novel, Lennox has figured the effects of marriage on writing and women. Book Three ends with some words of Arabella's which forecast the end of the novel: explaining the laws of romance to Glanville, Arabella tells him that a heroine puts off marriage about twenty years, for when "she at last condescends to

is mildly ashamed of the party "on the resemblance it bore to a debauch" (287). That a male order sexualizes every aspect of a woman's experience *The Female Quixote* bears out, for Glanville finds Arabella's very rationality titillating: "Mr. *Glanville* . . . fancied to himself the most ravishing Delight from conversing with his lovely Cousin, now recovered to the free Use of all her noble Powers of Reason . . ." (382).

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reward him with her Hand . . . all her Adventures are at an End for the future" (138).

Shoshana Felman's reading of Balzac's "Adieu" suggests why, with the exorcism of romance, *The Female Quixote* is finished. Felman reads the curing of the mad heroine in "Adieu" as a curing of the text, an attempt to bleed writing of everything contrary to univalence and closure, of the free play, contradictions, and excess essential to it. She writes: "when transparency and meaning, 'reason' and 'representation' are regained, when madness ends, so does the text itself.[29] It is those elements of free play which romance represents in Lennox's novel, elements which, although it denies them, give it its form and movement. Curing woman of romance, rather than giving her voice as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, ends her story and ends *the* story.

In fact, the book suggests the conventions of romance are what give women voice. Arabella, defending her romance expectations, asks Glanville:

> *And may I not be carried into* Macedonia *by a Similitude of Destiny with that of a great many beautiful Princesses, who, though born in the most distant Quarters of the World, chanced to meet at one time in the City of* Alexandria, *and related their miraculous Adventures to each other?*
>
> *And it was for that very Purpose they met, Madam, said Mr.* Glanville, *smiling.*
>
> *Why, truly, said* Arabella, *it happened very luckily for each of them, that they were brought into a Place where they found so many illustrious Companions in Misfortune, to whom they might freely communicate their Adventures, which otherwise might, haply, have been concealed, or, at least, have been imperfectly delivered down to us. (261).*

Glanville here is jesting with Arabella about how unreal romance conventions seem, how obviously they exist for their own sake, even in contradiction of the probable. But he suggests something else, too, something to which Arabella immediately responds—that the conventions of romance are important because they allow women to tell their stories, which otherwise might be lost or altered. Beautiful princesses come together in Alexandria, spinning tales—with this image of a convention establishing itself right at antiquity's library, Lennox suggests how the collusion of romance and women can be a generative one, providing a meeting-place for women, a ground from which to speak.

The entire novel is about Arabella's conviction that romance is an appropriate sphere for her. The reason it is attractive is because it is empowering, not imprisoning. No matter how much the novel travesties romance, it also presents romance as what gets Arabella out of the boredom and seclusion of her father's house, and when she abandons romance at the conventionally happy ending, she is trapped again, into marriage and submission. Ellen Moers has looked at the association of romance and female power; she suggests that women writers and readers don't see romance as a male prison but as a woman's form, and find in

[29] Shoshana Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy," *Diacritics*, 5, No. 4 (Winter 1975), 9–10.

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that recognition a source of feminism. It is *male* writers, reacting to the association of women and romance, who have degraded the form, identified its heroines as passive, and erotic in their passivity.[30] Nancy Miller, too, looks at the ways women's fiction rejects the passivity and eroticism conventionally read into them. A repressed content underlies eroticism, a content with all the customary charge and evasiveness of an unconscious desire. Miller sees that content as

> *not erotic impulses, but an impulse to power: a fantasy of power that would revise the social grammar in which women are never defined as subjects; a fantasy of power that disdains a sexual exchange in which women can only participate as objects of circulation.*[31]

The Female Quixote quite clearly makes fun of romance's emphasis on the erotic. Not so clearly, however, it is compelled by an underlying emphasis on what Miller calls "disdain." Arabella is obsessed with the disdainful ladies, the lordly ladies, of romance not simply because she is obsessed with sex, but because even more deeply she yearns for power. As we have seen with Arabella's routs, the association of women and romance touches on revolution, and it hints at a rebellion of the oppressed as well as the repressed, at women's ambitious as well as erotic fantasies.

One fantasy of romance is its emphasis on individual power, the will unchecked and omnipotent. For example, Arabella tells of Artaben, "disposing the Destinies of Monarchs by his Will, and deciding the Fates of Empires by a single Word" (210). Arabella, who feels "I am not allowed any Will of my own" (43) is especially drawn to such a fantasy. What she most often cites from romance are instances of heroines' power—the preeminence of their every gesture, their absolute authority over their lovers, their mastery over life and death. The greatest threat to the heroine's power is the threat to her will that love poses—although love may seem to be the motive force in romance, its dangers are also very present; it is figured throughout romance as chains and fetters. Schooled by romance, Arabella's first thoughts of Glanville are that his "Aim was to take away her Liberty, either by obliging her to marry him, or by making her a Prisoner" (35). Instead of love being the sole business of romance, as the Doctor, spokesman for patriarchy, contends, it is at odds with the power Arabella craves, and her first impression of Glanville, although extravagant, shows how her ultimate love for him requires a painful submission of her will.

Female power is an issue from the opening of the novel—it is the Marquis's loss of power, his disgrace at court and subsequent withdrawal, that allows the story to begin. The Marquis indeed falls "a Sacrifice to . . . Plots" (3), especially to the plot of this novel, which gets its impetus for its story about a woman from this symbolic diminution of male authority, an authority seen as exclusive, as precluding any woman's power. Arabella's first adventure, with Mr. Hervey,

[30] Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1976), p. 137.

[31] Nancy K. Miller, "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," *PMLA*, 96 (January 1981), 41.

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which seems tacked-on and unrelated to the Glanville plot, is important precisely because it sets up this ratio of male/female power. Arabella's history begins with this adventure because in it she bests Hervey. Aware of his attraction to her, she deprives him of any erotic power; she forces him to surrender to her his "Hanger," his short sword, and with this symbolic castration can leave him at perfect liberty; instead of preying on her any more, he escapes to London in humiliation. Her triumph over Hervey confirms her as a heroine because with it she defeats the conventional male appropriations of women's stories: by humiliating Hervey, she is neither seduced by him nor marries him, and her story can continue.

The disgraced Marquis is Lennox's wishful symbol of an ailing patriarchy. In fact, although he continues to exercise power as a petty despot in his retreat, his main function in the novel is to be ailing: we see him on his sick-bed twice, and he is dead before a quarter of the book is done. We see almost all the other male characters ailing too: Hervey suffers from headaches, Glanville nearly dies of a fever, midway through the novel Sir George has a violent cold, and at its end lies in danger from his wound. Although Lennox ridicules Arabella's romantic notion that she is responsible for these illnesses, in a sense, of course, she really is; Lennox weakens the men around Arabella in order to give her strength: Glanville, for example, must sicken in order for Arabella to feel herself powerful enough to risk admitting him as a lover. It is perhaps a measure of Lennox's world that in her book female power can exist only as a delusion;[32] only as long as Arabella sticks to romance and remains blind to reality, can she have her own way. Significantly, to make her abjure this power, Lennox must have Arabella herself eventually sicken. The last scene of the book depicts the invalid Arabella renouncing romance, as the rejuvenated men gather around her bed. But in saying that power resides in delusion, Lennox is indicating what is partly also compensation for women's weakness. Arabella's madness does keep her world in an uproar: a subversive power exists in playing upon the hidden delusions which reside in and undo any seemingly fixed order and logic.

One of the things male contemporaries of Lennox objected to about female quixotes was their pride, which prompted disobedience to fathers and imperiousness with lovers. In a *Rambler* essay written shortly before *The Female Quixote*, Johnson depicts one Imperia:

> *She had newly inherited a large fortune, and, having spent the early part of her life in the perusal of romances, brought with her into the gay world all the pride of Cleopatra; expected nothing less than vows, altars, sacrifices; and thought her charms dishonoured and her power infringed, by the softest opposition to her sentiments, or the smallest transgression of her commands.*[33]

[32] Certainly, in the world of her book, the helplessness of women is starkly rendered in a digression, in which we are casually told of the fate of Miss Groves's second child—a girl. Mr. L——— has simply disposed of it; how he will not say (76).

[33] Samuel Johnson, "*Rambler* No. 115, Tuesday, 23 April 1751," in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Walter Jackson Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), IV, 252.

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And to a contemporary reviewer of *The Female Quixote*, what is most objectionable about Arabella's romanticism is her pride, her "punishment of [what she considers] presumptuous lovers." [34] Women's pride is the subject of male attack in the novel as well. Arabella's pride is what especially wounds Mr. Glanville; he immediately leaves her when he finds her "haughty and contemptuous" (33). Arabella's pride hurts him because it mortifies his own; it is unbearable because it usurps a male prerogative, a male assumption of power.

The Amazons of romance come up again and again in *The Female Quixote*, and become the symbol for women's usurpation of men's power. Their repeated mention suggests that both Lennox and Arabella find them attractive and noteworthy, and, conversely, they are what men in the story find most farfetched about romance. Glanville dismisses the hero Orontes's battle with Thalestris the Amazon with "I suppose he scorned to draw his Sword upon a Woman: That would have been a Shame indeed" (125). Sir Charles later concurs:

> *O Shameful! cried Sir* Charles, *offer a Woman the Command of an Army! Brave Fellows indeed, that would be commanded by a Woman! (205).*

The shame that both men emphasize is sexual; to them, the only way women can share in conventional male strength is by emasculating men. They find the Amazons farfetched because they are threatening. Miss Glanville, wanting to expose Arabella's romantic delusions, knows the most damning way to do so is through a reference to the Amazons, for they point out the gender battle underlying the genre. Hoping to embarrass Arabella before the men, Miss Glanville asks "Whether in former times Women went to the Wars, and fought like Men?" (204). And it is this Amazonian power that Arabella, to a degree, inherits from romance: her refutation of the false pedant, Mr. Selvin, is comic because founded on the lies of romance rather than the facts of history. But our sympathy in this context is mostly with Arabella, our laughter at Selvin's expense; we are meant to enjoy "the Shame he conceived at seeing himself posed by a Girl, in a Matter which so immediately belonged to him" (265).

Arabella's romances are an inheritance from her mother. Such an inheritance seems to be an indictment of women; in the innocent retreat the Marquis has tried to provide, corrupt culture and sexuality intrude through the (even absent) mother; it is she who introduces Arabella into the realm of language and convention through the romances she passes down to her daughter. But underlying this indictment is a wistful picture of romance as a women's form, providing a bond between women. The book's depiction of the Countess—Arabella's surrogate mother—grows out of this same longing. When Arabella talks to the Countess, we're surprised to realize that she simply hasn't had anyone she could really *talk* to (which also explains Lucy's importance to her). She and the Countess can understand each other because they have both read romance; it gives them a common language. In this bond between Arabella and the Countess, Lennox's mockery of romance disappears; for a moment she explicitly values it:

[34] *Monthly Review*, 6 (April 1752), 255.

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Arabella and the Countess, alike because they have read romance, are also alike paragons of virtue. Those outside romance's influence, like Miss Glanville and the women of London, are empty-headed, selfish, and ordinary.

Yet Lennox's positive alignment of women and romance is wistful because she recognizes how tenuous that position is. Her treatment of romance reflects her feelings about the novel's possibilities, and by locating a women's form in romance, she is placing it in what her form, the novel, cannot admit and casts out. This placement recognizes that women have no real place, and Lennox's novel figures their ostracism repeatedly: women precursors are largely absent—Arabella's mother is dead, the Countess almost immediately leaves her, called away by her own mother's "Indisposition" (from the Latin, the state of placelessness), and the literary precursors Lennox calls on are all male: Young, Richardson, Johnson. And not only are women exiled to romance, but even that possibility, when not derided, is appropriated by patriarchy: when the book opens, the Marquis has taken his wife's romances out of her closet and put them in his library; the writers of romance, Calprenade and Scudery, are men;[35] even though Lennox herself makes up a romance in this novel, she puts it into the mouth of Sir George.

The Female Quixote needs romance to set itself up as a novel, but, when prodded, romance deconstructs and merges into the novel. Gender categories in the book are just as shifting and soluble. The novel uses romance to try to stabilize gender—in romance, women are beautiful and men are brave—but the world of the novel shows that formula is too simple. When attempting to apply it, Arabella is especially posed by fops like Tinsel:[36]

> *Nor can I persuade myself, added she, that any of those Men whom I saw at the Assembly, with Figures so feminine, Voices so soft, such tripping Steps, and unmeaning Gestures, have ever signalized either their Courage or Constancy (279).*

What is troubling about such men is that they tamper with sexual definitions; their attention to beauty gives them the affect of women. By ignoring sexual rules they also subvert the power structure; they take on the inconsiderable status of women. Arabella goes on to say that "such Trifles are below the Consideration of a Man" (280). But what is more troubling is that, stripped of conventional gender markers, such men ultimately can't be read—their gestures are "unmeaning," they no longer "signalize"—and by being outside Arabella's signifying grammar, they call it into question.[37]

[35] Scudery was, of course, a woman, but felt it necessary to assume a male persona as a writer. She pretended her books were her brother's, and Lennox believed her.

[36] Arabella also meets masculine women—interestingly, they are the overtly sexual women she meets: Miss Groves is "masculine" (71), and the prostitute is dressed in man's clothing (334–339). Lennox's alignment of these two qualities underwrites her recognition that in the staus quo sexuality is structurally masculine.

[37] The signifying agent of Arabella's grammar is, of course, herself. Her non-verbal signs, for example, reflect her fantasy of an absolutely transparent language, given meaning by her desires.

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And although romance seems to provide clear-cut gender distinctions, as we have already seen with the Amazons, those distinctions aren't really fixed—women go to war, men think only of love, Orontes even unabashedly dresses up as a woman (72). Sir George's romance also feminizes him, not just because Glanville and Sir Charles see it as unmanly, but because he takes on conventional female gestures in it—for instance, he swoons in his story at least three times (232, 236, 247). And romance's effect on Arabella's sexual image is contradictory. On the one hand, it goes against what is seen as the very essence of woman: silent, submissive, invisible. Arabella believes instead that a lady's reputation depends "upon the Noise and Bustle she makes in the World" (128). But on the other hand, it makes her especially womanly, not just because it allows her to play up her sexual attractions, but because its influence distinguishes her as the best of women.

Whether Lennox is emphasizing the link between romance and women's sexuality or romance and women's power, the structural parallel between romance and women remains. Each is the name for qualities the status quo finds transgressive and threatening, and attempts to dispel by projecting into a separate genre or gender. By doing so, the novel or patriarchy shores up its stability, emphasizes its boundaries—romance and women are in the no-novel's no-man's land outside; their very exile is what gives the others shape. Yet such distinctions are consoling fictions. What *The Female Quixote* ultimately shows us is not what romance is and how the novel differs from it, or what woman is and how patriarchy is opposed to her. When we try to pinpoint romance or woman we are left empty-handed; what remains basic to them is only that they stand for whatever the defining agent rejects or taboos. They highlight the ways it is divided from itself, and unsettle and fascinate it in consequence.

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