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"High and Noble Adventures": Reading the Novel in The Female Quixote

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Near the end of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, the heroine Arabella falls into a dangerous fever, the consequence of having thrown herself into the Thames to escape—for the sake of her "immortal Glory"—the ravishers she imagines are pursuing her (363). Afraid that she is near death, she "desir[es] with great Earnestness the Assistance of some worthy Divine" to prepare her for this eventuality (366). Though Arabella does recover "the Health of her Body," the Divine is yet more concerned with the "Cure of Arabella's Mind" (368), warned as he has been by her lover Mr. Glanville of the "Disorders Romances had occasion'd in her Imagination" (367). Indeed, Arabella herself, chastened by her recent illness, charges the Divine to "instruct," not compliment her, commanding him to "discover me to myself" (370).

The lecture that follows, however, is not, ostensibly, one of moral instruction, but rather a lesson in genre, for as the Divine repudiates one form of fiction—the romance whose heroic principles have proven so dangerous to Arabella—he elevates another. Declaring that "The only Excellence of Falshood ... is its Resemblance to Truth" (378), he recommends to Arabella those fictions that truly serve as "copies of life" and thus "models of conduct" (377).[1] The Divine's advice thus complicates the insistent binaries—the oppositions between romance and real life, fiction and truth—that have seemed to inform *The Female Quixote*, and on which its satiric portrayal of its heroine depends. For romance is not the only kind of fiction that circulates in this narrative: though Arabella must give up her romances, it is not real life that she must learn to love, but novels.

This lesson in genre, echoing and even quoting discussions of the novel by Samuel Richardson and Samuel Johnson, clearly locates *The Female Quixote* within the controversy surrounding the status of fiction at mid-century associated with Richardson's and Henry Fielding's competing claims to generic novelty. Feminist literary histories of the novel in the eighteenth century often position women writers as outside of a dominant literary tradition, characterizing their fiction as necessarily marginal, resistant, or silenced. Yet these critical strategies obscure the continuing controversy over the definitive form of the new fiction and the participation of women writers in this debate, and risk rendering both genre and gender monolithic and ahistorical. Unhappy with this paradigm for either literary history or feminist criticism, I want to challenge its assumptions by bringing questions of generic change and gender difference to bear upon one another. By placing *The Female Quixote* within the controversy over the new fiction, and seeing Lennox as representative of the peculiar position of women writing "after" Richardson and Fielding, we can

[1] Perhaps surprisingly, these are the terms which Arabella uses to describe her romances; I discuss the slippage between novel and romance that this characterization suggests below.

unsettle both genre and gender, complicating the function of their relation in the novel's history. We can read Lennox's own text as a self-conscious intervention in the debate over the new fiction, one that uses both romance and novel to expose the gendered rhetoric of the dominant discourse.

Questions about the status of romance in *The Female Quixote* and the significance of its association with women's narrative have been central to recent critical discussion of this work, especially in light of the renunciation of romance that marks its resolution. These arguments often depend on a series of identifications: of Lennox with her heroine Arabella; of romance with women's writing and thus with Lennox's own fictional practice; and of romance with fiction itself.[2] These identifications are most compelling in rendering romance's appeal: its association with female power, freedom, and consequence, its singular status here as a form of narrative that enables women to have and to tell stories. Yet the implications of these assumptions are unsettling, especially evident in readings that must see Lennox as writing herself into silence, abdicating her "female" voice, or pulling back from the possibility of romance that she almost embraces. Laurie Langbauer makes this connection in the strongest possible terms: for Lennox "to take her place in [the dominant tradition of the novel], to write at all, she must cease to be a *woman* writer" (66).

While the resolution of *The Female Quixote* is certainly not without cost, as the humiliation of Arabella makes clear, Lennox's figuring of this retreat is not the only way to account for her fictional practice in this text. To say, as Langbauer does, that "Lennox herself, literally or figuratively, must disappear," that Lennox and Arabella both must "lose [their] voices," is to mistake the generic argument of *The Female Quixote* (82). Generic categories in this text are certainly inflected by gender: in Catherine Gallagher's terms, romance "thematizes" women's writing, just as it "thematizes" fiction itself (179). But as a woman writer, Lennox is not so much reclaiming romance, or lamenting its demise, as she is undermining the distinction between the old romance and the new novel. Deftly exploiting the traditional association of romance with female readers and writers, she also exposes the gendered rhetoric central to accounts of the new fiction. Using romance strategically to critique the definitive terms of the new genre, Lennox claims the novel, too, as "women's writing."

I. The Debate Over the New Fiction

The controversy around the "new species" of fiction at mid-century marks a profound change in the novel's institutional status.[3] In a process that William Warner has termed "the elevation of the novel," the rivalry between Richardson and Fielding successfully "reshape[s] what their culture takes the novel to be,"

[2] Discussions which are informed by these parallels include Doody, Langbauer, Spacks, and Ross. Other recent treatments of *The Female Quixote* include Gallagher, Lynch, Malina, Marshall, and Motooka.

[3] While I here and elsewhere use "the novel" in reference to the mid-eighteenth century, a more accurate gloss would be "the new genre of prose fiction that comes to be called 'the novel.'" As critics have noted, the use of the term "novel" is not consistent until the last decades of the century; though "novel" was at times opposed to "romance" (usually in distinguishing probable from fantastic fiction), these terms are used derisively in tandem so often that the distinction between them blurs. See Williams, and McKeon 52–64.

and "[remaps] the set of cultural practices called 'reading novels'" (579, 581, 580).[4] Accounts of this moment in the novel's history are, of course, familiar, yet the convergence of these famous adversaries' claims and strategies remains striking. Describing his fictional project in writing *Pamela*, Richardson observes, "I thought the story, if written in an easy and natural manner, suitably to the simplicity of it, might possibly introduce a new species of writing, that might possibly turn young people into a course of reading different from the pomp and parade of romance-writing" (*Letters* 41). Fielding follows a similar argument in the "Preface" to *Joseph Andrews*, "having ... distinguished *Joseph Andrews* from the Productions of Romance Writers," he declares it a "Species of writing ... hitherto unattempted in our Language" (10). He is even more ambitious in *Tom Jones*: "I am, in reality, the Founder of a new Province of Writing ... [and] am at liberty to make what Laws I please" (77). Seeking to shape the future of the novel, Richardson and Fielding formulate competing theories of fiction, defining as characteristic the attributes of the new genre most identified with their own works. And, by insisting on the novelty of their writing, each dismisses prose fiction of the past, asserting, as Warner has noted, "the fundamental difference of their own projects" from earlier fiction (580). This strategy—depending as it does on the repeated use of the romance as a negative example—has very particular consequences for eighteenth-century women writers.

Relying on romance as a foil, Richardson and Fielding pointedly dismiss an earlier tradition of prose fiction largely identified with women writers and readers. Placing his work above the "Swarm of foolish Novels, and monstrous Romances," Fielding avows a superior alliance to the "[t]ruth [that] distinguishes our writings, from those idle romances" (*Jones* 487, 150). Richardson assumes a similar advantage: "I intend more than a Novel or Romance"; "[I] resolved therefore to attempt something that never yet had been done" (*Letters* 99; *Clarissa* 280). By declaring their fictions "new," Richardson and Fielding construct a new history of fiction as well, ignoring and obscuring the early eighteenth-century prose narratives which are their most obvious and immediate precursors. In these progressive histories of genre, debased romance is reformed and replaced by the new fiction, as in Richardson's account: "I am endeavoring to write a Story, which shall catch young and airy Minds, and when Passions run high in them, to shew how they may be directed to laudable Meanings and Purposes, in order to decry such Novels and Romances, as have a Tendency to inflame and corrupt" (*Letters* 46–47). This is one strategy Richardson employs in the preface that he apparently wrote for a posthumous edition of Penelope Aubin's collected works. Identifying women as the usual authors of fiction in the early eighteenth century, he laments the "fallen Angels," "those of the Sex, who have ... been far from preserving that Purity of Style and Manners, which is the greatest Glory of a fine Writer" (qtd. in Zach 282).[5] Fielding goes even farther, borrowing classical dress to transform romance into another genre altogether: "a comic Romance is a comic

[4] While I have learned much from Warner's essay (which anticipates his forthcoming book *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel-Reading in Britain, 1684–1750*), I am here particularly interested in the function of gender in the debate over the novel and the consequences of this "hegemonic moment" for women writers, issues that Warner, though repeatedly invoking "Behn, Manley, and Haywood" does not consider.

[5] The preface, whose attribution to Richardson Warner accepts as well, is included as an appendix to Zach's essay.

Epic-Poem in Prose" (*Andrews* 4). By aligning romance with the masculine tradition of epic, Fielding further obscures the work of women writers in the development of the novel.

With strategies such as these, Richardson and Fielding suggest that the work of women writers is different in kind, and thus use gender to marginalize women's writing within the definitive terms of the new fiction. This is the implication of Richardson's preface to Aubin's works, where in the guise of praising her fiction he presents a paradigm far more appropriate to his own, stressing as it does "a Purity of Style and Manners ... the Duties of social Life ... [and] an Air of Probability" (qtd. in Zach 282).[6] While Richardson might seem to be acknowledging Aubin as a female precursor here, he so misrepresents her fiction that he can be seen as eliding her place in the novel's history even as he extols it. Fielding employs a similar strategy by associating his sister Sarah Fielding's *The Adventures of David Simple* with his own theory of fiction: "every Work of this kind is in its Nature a comic Epic Poem" (Preface 6). By failing to grant originality to his sister's work, Fielding promotes his own model for the new fiction, positioning *David Simple* as a minor example of the genre he has introduced and defined. Moreover, in urging that Sarah Fielding's "Sex and Age entitle her to the gentlest Criticism," he argues that "the Writings of a young Woman" should be judged by a different critical standard (Preface 6, 5). This is a policy he exemplifies in the preface itself, where there is much praise, but more condescension, as Fielding repeatedly refers to his sister's "little book," and ultimately credits its excellencies more to the goodness of her heart than her genius. Identifying what is peculiar to women's fiction, even to praise it, serves to estrange women writers from the dominant discourses of both fiction and criticism. Whether by asserting the preeminence of their own fictional paradigms, or defining women's writing as a distinct body of work, Richardson and Fielding effectively marginalize women's writing within the new tradition each seeks to establish.

Writing amidst this change in the status of the novel, mid-century women writers could not escape questions of gender and generic identity. The number of women writing fiction rose dramatically in response to the popularity of Richardson and Fielding, and much of this new work reveals a self-conscious awareness of the controversy around the novel, and of its implications for women writers.[7] While Lennox's deft negotiation of these complex issues in *The Female Quixote* is perhaps the most subtle, the terms of the debate are everywhere evident. In prefaces and in their novels proper, women writers take up the theories and models for fiction identified with Richardson and Fielding, revisiting their characteristic themes, reimagining their plots, and experimenting with their

6 Although Aubin does emphasize the moral purpose of her writing, the traditional episodic romance structure of her fiction, its exotic settings, and often fantastic features are ill-served by this description.

7 Invaluable information about women novelists of the period is found in Turner, whose research indicates that after increasing in the 1720s, the number of novels published by women decreased after 1730 (with no titles at all appearing between 1736 and 1744) and then increased again, and steadily, for the remainder of the century (212–16). By "mid-century women writers" I am thinking of writers whose literary careers began by the early 1760s (roughly ten years after the publication of Richardson's and Fielding's last novels). While I have chosen to provide a context for my reading of Lennox by briefly discussing Susan Smythies and Maria Susannah Cooper, other women writers of this generation include Frances Brooke, Sarah Fielding, Anna Meades, Sarah Scott, and Mrs. Woodfin. Eighteenth-century women writers are also discussed in Spencer and Todd.

form and technique. In doing so, they call attention to their position as women writers within the terms established by the governing discourse.

For example, Susan Smythies's novels are preoccupied with questions of generic definition, though she takes no sides in the rivalry over the new fiction. In *The Brothers* (1758), she praises Richardson's works as an "honour to the present age, [which] answer the only ends of good writing, the supplying the head with proper notions, and mending the manners, at the same time that they delight the fancy" (89). But the influence of Fielding is also prominent, as in the preface to the same novel, which notes "a little Advertisement may be the bill of fare on the table, to acquaint the guest with what he is to expect" (i).[8] Smythies's novels, like Fielding's, feature a studied selection of typical characters, a variety of humorous incidents, and plots that turn on surprise and coincidence. More significant is Smythies's interest in the controversy around the novel, and the evidence of her searching examination of contemporary rationales and paradigms for the new fiction. For instance, Smythies stages a debate between Mr. Manley, a wise and kindly country gentleman, and the boorish, low-born Captain Cannon:

> *The conversation turned on the prevailing taste for novels. Mr. Manley said, he had never read anything of that kind, but the works of Cervantes, till lately he had been persuaded to peruse Clarissa, and some of the Covent-Garden justice's performances; and though he formerly had thought such fictions below his notice, he was now not ashamed to aver, there were some, which, if attended to, and not run over meerly to kill time, capable of yielding profit, particularly those he had mentioned. Cannon could by no means allow of the preference given to these, but declared, "They were mere nonsense, and none of them came up to Haywood's."* (*Stagecoach* 50)

We can recognize some of Richardson's and Fielding's own legitimating strategies here, as Smythies defends the improving qualities of fiction, and offers a more respectable literary antecedent for the novel than the scandalous fiction identified with Eliza Haywood. Yet in reminding readers of an alternative genealogy for the new fiction in earlier eighteenth-century women's fiction, Smythies renders the identification of her own work with Richardson's and Fielding's somewhat equivocal. Whether she is claiming an alliance with these writers, or slyly pointing out their neglect of their female precursors, Smythies challenges the marginal status of women's fiction in the authoritative accounts of the novel.

Writing a few years later, Maria Susannah Cooper also addresses the consequences of the novel's new institutional status. In her own interrogation of the maxim that Richardson wrote *Clarissa* to challenge—"A reformed rake makes the best husband"—Cooper tries to imagine what would have happened had Clarissa married Lovelace. In both *The School for Wives* (1763) and *The Exemplary Mother* (1769), the virtue of a young wife is tested, a variation of plot and theme which can be read either as a defense or a critique of Richardson's unhappy ending. One heroine, whose "principles will not permit her to accuse an husband," is

[8] Fielding uses the same metaphor in the famous opening chapter of *Tom Jones*.

rewarded for her patience and fidelity with her husband's reform; the other, whose extreme sensibility discloses her husband's unkindness, dies without the grace of his repentance (*School* 6). Both of Cooper's novels praise Richardson, whose *History of Sir Charles Grandison* functions, as in Smythies, as a practical moral guide: "[Richardson's] works are better calculated for public utility, than any of his contemporaries—What justness, and delicacy of sentiment! What fine rules of morality! What a perfect knowledge of nature!" (*School* 35). Yet Cooper's interest in the contest over the novel goes beyond imitation or simple flattery, as her discussion of the place of fiction in young people's lives indicates. Mrs. Villars, the "exemplary mother," has included novels in a curriculum of "biography, history, and poetry," requiring that her children record their thoughts upon their reading (*Exemplary* 14). When her son prefers Fielding, and her daughter "the pathetic Richardson," she offers these observations:

> *In respect to novel writing I taught them, that the design of that species of composition ought to be, to unite utility with entertainment. That the characters should not be drawn beyond the limits of probability, yet should be calculated to render the reader better by the exhibition of virtuous examples. That vice should always disgust by its deformity, and that whilst we condemn faults in the portraits presented to our view, we should turn the mirror on ourselves.* (*Exemplary* 15–16)

These sentiments are familiar enough, staples of discussions on the novel since Richardson, Fielding, and Johnson. But their status in this text remains intriguing, an indication that the debate about the novel is not yet over, and that Cooper is serious and self-conscious about the kind of fiction she is writing. By writing novels that participate in this debate, both Cooper and Smythies question the gendered exclusion of women's writing from the new fiction, even as they acknowledge the power of Richardson's and Fielding's claims. While their own novels provide striking evidence of the more famous writers' influence, they also function as a strategic intervention in the discussion of the new genre.

Though it is certainly not only through the lens of Richardson and Fielding that we can productively consider women's fiction of this period, the work of women writing "after" these self-canonized founders of the genre illuminates the often vexed relationship between gender and genre. This focus raises questions about the domesticity thesis argued so powerfully by Nancy Armstrong and others, particularly in the parallels it establishes (in Armstrong's terms) among the "rise" of the novel, "the rise of female authority in the novel," and "the rise of the domestic woman," a constellation which has definitively shaped recent critical discussion of women writers of this period.[9] This identification between the writing woman and the domestic privileges a certain kind of fiction, and renders women's writing legible only in these terms.[10] Moreover, this emphasis on the domestic creates a history of the novel in which women writers recognize only

[9] I take these terms from Armstrong's table of contents. For a striking challenge to the assumption of "gendered spheres" which informs discussions of domesticity, particularly the opposition between "public" and "private" in the eighteenth century, see Klein.

[10] The domestic is the only model for "ladies fiction" and "lady novelists" that figures in Armstrong's study; see esp. 134–36.

one "father," for to privilege the domestic is, necessarily, to privilege Richardson, and the influence of Fielding is thus overlooked. And yet, in a text like *The Female Quixote*, despite its explicit championing of his great rival, Fielding is everywhere: in the shared nod to *Don Quixote* (the title page to *Joseph Andrews* reads "in imitation of the manner of Cervantes"), in its self-conscious play with its own fictional status (an acknowledgment that is anathema to Richardson), evident, as in Fielding, in chapter titles that call attention to the volume's material status and the progress of its story, and in the ironic narrator who presides over the novel and its readers alike.

Richardson's and Fielding's place in eighteenth-century women's fiction is evidence that women writers at mid-century did register the controversy around the novel, and felt themselves to be participating in it. Moreover, women writers recognized the arguments about the novelty of the new fiction as gendered arguments, and responded strategically to this distinction. Despite the gendered literary histories which seek to marginalize women within the authorized "new species," women writers are participating in its definition, shaping the practices of reading it produces, and contesting the terms of their own exclusion.

II. A Fine Romance

With the mid-century debates over the status of the new fiction in mind, I want to return to the notorious resolution of *The Female Quixote*, and its ostensible praise of the novel. Speaking through the Divine, Lennox seems to authorize the account and defense of the genre most associated with Richardson, and with Johnson's famous praise of Richardson in "*Rambler* #4."[11] In their definitions of the "new species," Richardson and Johnson (both, we should remember, admirers of Lennox herself) repeatedly stress two distinct, though related characteristics: the ability of the new fiction to represent the truth of lived experience, and its consequent power to affect its readers, a power to which these critics ascribe great didactic potential. As Johnson observes in *The Rambler*, these fictions "exhibit life in its true state," and "arise from general converse, and accurate observation of the living world"; thus, "the power of [their] examples is so great, as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will" (19, 20, 22).[12] This discussion of the new fiction distinguishes both its crucial generic characteristic and the reading practice it initiates, thus claiming for the novel a peculiar relation to and effect upon the real lives of its readers.

The defense of the novel which the Divine offers Arabella reiterates these same terms, literally quoting Johnson's own praise of Richardson in the process:

[11] The identification between Lennox's Divine and Samuel Johnson is a point of some controversy, and has even led to speculation that Johnson himself wrote this notorious chapter. Most recent critics have rejected this argument, or at least its relevance, observing, as does Spacks, "Enter, literally or metaphorically, Dr. Johnson" (16). This intervention has been read, variously, as a sign of Lennox's assimilation to male authority or her appropriation of the same; as Marshall observes, "It is difficult to know how to read the complicated intertextual dialogues and overdetermined acts of literary imitation, impersonation and appropriation that Lennox seems engaged in with Johnson" (131). A useful account of Lennox's relations with Johnson and Richardson is found in Isles.

[12] Similar formulations can be found in Richardson's correspondence and in the prefatorial and concluding materials to his three novels; see, in particular, letters to Aaron Hill and George Cheyne in *Letters* 41, 46–47.

"Truth is not always injured by Fiction. An admirable Writer of our own Time, has found the Way to convey the most solid Instructions, the noblest Sentiments, and the most exalted Piety, in the pleasing Dress of a Novel, and, to use the Words of the greatest Genius in the present Age, 'Has taught the Passions to move at the Command of Virtue'" (377). This praise for the novel comes, of course, at the expense of Arabella's romances, condemned here as "senseless ... absurd ... [and] Criminal" (374). The terms of this judgment are significant, turning as they do on the relation between fiction and truth: unlike novels, romances "disfigur[e] the whole Appearance of the World, and represen[t] every Thing in a Form different from that which Experience has shewn" (379). The Divine's distinction between novel and romance also depends, as Gallagher has argued, on "the invention of fiction as an explicit category of narrative": it is not reality that Arabella resists in insisting that her romances are true, but fiction, which she cannot credit or respect (179, 174–80). And yet it is fiction which the Divine commends when he counsels Arabella to give up her romances for novels, arguing that "The only Excellence of Falshood ... is its Resemblance to Truth" (378). Though truth is here at stake, Arabella is not being asked to give up fiction itself, but rather to exchange one kind of fiction for another. Real life and fiction come together in the category of the novel, and the oppositions between romance and real life, between fiction and truth (the oppositions on which *The Female Quixote*'s satire has seemed to depend) are dismantled.

If we, with Arabella, have been paying attention to this lesson in genre, we have learned to prefer a new category of fiction that, in its resemblance to truth, redefines fiction itself. Because novels, unlike "disfiguring" romances, are truly "copies of life," they can move their readers to imitate the exemplary characters they represent. Given the identification between romance and women's writing, and the renunciation of romance required of Arabella, Lennox's reiteration of this praise for the novel seems to leave readers with two choices: either Lennox is writing herself into silence, aligning her own writing with a noble and much maligned tradition, and acknowledging that she and romance have been excluded from the novel; or Lennox is willing to abandon romance for the novel, adopting Johnson's own voice to defend her choice, and qualifying the achievement of her fiction by compromise and capitulation. But if we read *The Female Quixote* back through the Divine's terms, locating both novel and romance in its pages, we discover that the opposition between genres which underlies each of these readings is far from stable. The novel is not quite so credible, nor the romance so pernicious as the Divine has argued, and the value of the lessons to be learned from each cannot always be predicted. In *The Female Quixote* Lennox uses romance to unsettle the distinction between the two genres, thus raising questions about the very characteristics of the novel which her own conclusion seems to confirm. Turning the arguments for the novel's novelty back upon themselves, Lennox challenges the definitive account of the new genre, and the gendered rhetoric on which it depends.

Throughout *The Female Quixote*, Arabella's fanciful romances are distinguished from "the world" whose reality she is urged to recognize, and in which it is hoped she will take her place. Relying upon the Divine's fictional paradigm, in

which romance is opposed not to truth, but to the novel, we can now identify this "real" world of *The Female Quixote* with the novel itself. The opening description of Arabella's father's estate has signaled as much: "the most laborious Endeavours of Art had been used to make it appear like the beautiful Product of wild, uncultivated Nature" (6). This garden in the English style, an implicit contrast to the studied artfulness of French landscape (and romances?), recalls the novel's most distinctive attribute, its ability to disguise its artifice by seeming to be real. And yet, the world that stands in for the novel in *The Female Quixote* soon proves no more believable than the romance, featuring stock conventions and devices that call attention to its fictiveness. That "realistic" novels do not exactly "exhibit life in its true state" comes as no surprise to any reader of eighteenth-century fiction; what is important here is that the specific terms of comparison which define the differences between novel and romance are not sustained.

That Arabella is the heroine of both the novel and of her own romance in *The Female Quixote* is the central source and evidence of this generic slippage. No matter how ridiculous her faith in romance makes her, Arabella is always treated like a heroine, her beauty, character, and understanding repeatedly described in the most extravagant terms. The initial account of Arabella is typical in its superlatives: "Nature had indeed given her a most charming Face, a Shape easy and delicate, a sweet and insinuating Voice, and an Air so full of Dignity and Grace, as drew the Admiration of all that saw her" (6–7). Arabella's exalted sense of her own power and importance (she commands her lovers to live or die, charges them with deeds of valor or revenge, and banishes them from the country) is often presented as evidence of both the excesses of romance and of her folly in believing in them.[13] And yet Arabella's own notion of the inevitable consequence of her "fatal Beauty" is hardly greater than that the novel grants her, as every single man she meets is surprised by her loveliness and captivated by her charms (164; 315). The successive descriptions of Arabella's first encounters with these breathless admirers underscore their conventional nature: Mr. Hervey's eyes "were in an Instant fixed upon her Face," Sir George is "struck with Admiration at the Sight of so lovely a Creature," an unknown gentleman finds himself "astonished at [her] Beauty ... her Stature; her Shape; her inimitable Complexion; the Lustre of her fine Eyes, and the thousand Charms that adorned her whole Person," and even her uncle Sir Charles is "struck with an extreme Surprize at her Beauty" (8, 85, 99, 60).[14] While seeming to deflate the excesses of romance, Lennox creates a heroine as fully conventional as those she claims to satirize, thus challenging the novel's pretensions to "resemble the truth."

Even when Arabella's "malady" exposes her to mockery and scandal, her illustrious status as a heroine is not diminished. For instance, the company awaiting Arabella's appearance at her first Bath assembly has been primed with gossip over the newcomer's "singularity" of dress:

13 For examples of such episodes. see 15, 130–38, 314–21.

14 Arabella's mistaken assumption that her uncle is among her lovers is the exception that proves the rule: Arabella is not so far wrong in thinking that all the men she meets are in love with her, if not for (quite) the reasons that she thinks.

much Mirth was treasur'd up for her Appearance; and the occasional Humourist has already prepared his accustom'd Jest, when the Sight of the devoted fair One repell'd his Vivacity, and the design'd Ridicule of the whole Assembly.

Scarce had the first tumultous 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.

Her noble Air, the native Dignity in her Looks, the inexpressible Grace which accompany'd all her Motions, and the consummate Loveliness of her Form, drew the Admiration of the whole Assembly. (272)

As the assembly's "mirth" and "ridicule" dissolve into "respect" and "admiration," Lennox can be seen as figuring the reader's own relation to the heroine, revealing the qualified nature of the satire against her. When *The Female Quixote*'s satire works in its simplest form (as in, for instance, the episode in which Arabella is convinced that the gardener Edward is a disguised nobleman, and that his crime of stealing carp is actually a failed suicide attempt born of his despair over his secret passion for his mistress), it turns on the reader's awareness, shared with the narrator and sometimes with other characters, of the very great distance between Arabella's understanding and the reality of her situation.[15] In moments such as these, the difference between Arabella's romances and the truth seems stable enough. But while we are certainly asked to laugh at her mistakes and eccentricities, we are often, like the company at Bath, brought up short by Arabella's evident superiority, as her knowledge, judgment, and taste are contrasted with the ignorance, vanity, and superficiality of the world around her.[16] Arabella's undeniable excellence qualifies the satire against her, and against the romances with which she is identified, raising new questions about the status of this genre in *The Female Quixote*.

The differences between Arabella and her cousin Charlotte are often the vehicle for comparisons between the world of the romance and that of the novel, and three early encounters between them illustrate the characteristic logic of Lennox's satire.[17] Though each points to Arabella's ignorance of the world and its customs, and to the absurdity of her absolute reliance upon romance in interpreting experience, they also demonstrate the range of her knowledge, the depth of her sympathy, and the greatness of her mind and heart.

In a chapter archly entitled "In which our Heroine discovers her Knowledge in Astronomy," the coquettish Miss Glanville, always ready to spar with her more sober—and more beautiful—cousin, finds herself upbraided:

15 This episode occupies Book I, Chapter 7 (22–26), and also provides examples of the confusion over language which is so often the source of the novel's humor and the heroine's mistakes. When the Head Gardener claims to have "discovered" Edward, Arabella assumes he refers to his quality, and not his crime; responding to the fear that Edward would "make away with himself" this same practical gentleman replies "No ... only ... with some of the Carp" (24, 25).

16 Paulson identified this critique as an example of the "corrective" aspect of the "Quixote syndrome" in an early comment on *The Female Quixote* (275); I here focus not on the function of satire *per se*, but on its implications for the generic argument I am tracing in Lennox's fiction.

17 Ross and Motooka have also discussed the differences between Arabella and Charlotte Glanville.

Indeed, Lady Bella, said Miss Glanville, smileing, you may as well persuade me, the Moon is made of a Cream Cheese....

Is it possible, Miss, said Arabella, that you can offer such an Affront to my Understanding, as to suppose, I would argue upon such a ridiculous System; and compare the Second glorious Luminary of the Heavens to so unworthy a Resemblance? I have taken some pains to contemplate the Heavenly Bodies; and, by Reading and Observation, am able to comprehend some part of their Excellence: Therefore, it is not probable, I should descend to such trivial Comparisons; and liken a Planet, which, haply, is not much less than our Earth, to a thing so inconsiderable, as that you name. (142)

At first glance, Arabella's absurdly literal reading of a common cliché seems of a piece with her faith in romances: just as she is unable to recognize their fantastic excess as fiction, she cannot even comprehend figurative language, unaware that words might ever mean something else than they say. This blunder, joined with her grand and rather humorless pedantry, surely positions Arabella here as the object of satire. But if we join Miss Glanville in laughing heartily at Arabella's mistake, it is not for long:

Pardon me, dear Cousin, interrupted Miss Glanville, laughing louder than before, if I divert myself a little with the Extravagance of your Notions. Really I think, you have no Reason to be angry, if I supposed you might make a Comparison between the Moon and a Cream Cheese; since you say, that same Moon, which don't appear broader than your Gardener's Face, is not much less than the whole World: Why, certainly, I have more Reason to trust my own Eyes, than such whimsical Notions as these. (143)

As Miss Glanville gaily displays her ignorance, becoming the unwitting object of her own raillery, Arabella's status in the satire is shifted, and new value granted to her learning and intelligence. While Arabella is admittedly sometimes foolish, she is never a fool. Nor does she revel in making others look ridiculous, for after Charlotte's embarrassing mistake, Arabella, "unwilling to expose her Cousin's Ignorance," changes the subject (143).[18]

Disagreements far more serious arise between the cousins over the acceptable conduct of young women of honor, as Miss Glanville's modish town manners seldom measure up to the standards imposed by Arabella's romances. (Charlotte is uncharacteristically insightful in remarking to her cousin, "I have always the worst of those Comparisons you are pleased to make between me and other People" [183].) But in modeling her behavior on her cherished heroines, Arabella risks appearing eccentric, naive, and even indiscreet. When Sir George, styling himself "the unhappy Bellmour," promises to end his life for "the Crime of loving" the "Divine Arabella," she is distraught by this latest example of the "deplorable Effects" her "unfortunate Beauty occasions" (174–75). Determined to follow the example of "the fair Amalazontha," who condescended to visit her dying lover "and even to give him a little Hope, in order to preserve his Life,"

[18] For a very different reading of this encounter, see Motooka 261–62.

she prepares to attend Sir George in his own chamber (180). Announcing her plan for this "charitable Visit" to Miss Glanville, the latter is first amused and then alarmed by jealousy to challenge the propriety of Arabella's decision: "no Woman, who has any Reputation at all, will be guilty of taking such Liberties" (183). Arabella staunchly defends her own conduct, outraged by the censures that such an insinuation casts "upon the Virtue of the divine Mandana, the haughty Amalazontha, the fair Statira, the cold and rigid Parisatis, and many other illustrious Ladies" (183).

After such a litany, it would seem that Miss Glanville has again bested Arabella, engaging her in a debate which reveals the extent to which she lives in the world of her romances, unaware of the fantastic nature of the stories she recites, or the fictional origins of the heroines she claims as her models. Stung by Arabella's overly-scrupulous charge that she has granted her lovers "criminal Liberties," Miss Glanville does catch her cousin on the brink of what is indeed, in the eyes of the world, a very grave indiscretion (183). Yet the grounds for Charlotte's disdain are hardly admirable: envious of the impression that Arabella has made upon Sir George, she is small-minded enough to wish her cousin embarrassment. And when Miss Glanville discovers "the fair Cleonice" to have lived "in Sardis ... in the Kingdom of Lydia, " she exclaims: "Oh! then it is not in our Kingdom.... What signifies what Foreigners do? I shall never form my Conduct, upon the Example of Outlandish People; what is common enough in their Countries, would be very particular here" (184). Arabella's stubborn adherence to her romance vision of the world may seem narrow, but it is Charlotte who betrays the truly parochial sensibility (not to mention a rather shaky knowledge of history and geography).

Although Arabella's fears for Sir George's life are undoubtedly foolish (he soon arrives in good health to end the argument), her desire to save him speaks of more than romantic heroism. Arabella's compassion is genuine, however misplaced, and her judgment demonstrates a sympathy of imagination and a nobility of spirit preferable to the self-interested pettiness in which others indulge. These contrasting qualities are seen most explicitly in the extended episode concerning Miss Groves, a young woman of neither reputation nor morals, whom Arabella nonetheless defends, to the great surprise and amusement of Sir George and Miss Glanville. Arabella's distance from a world that neither recognizes nor values her worth is clear in this account of Miss Groves's visit:

> *The young Lady, tho' perfectly versed in the Modes of Town-Breeding, and* nothing-meaning *Ceremony, was at a Loss how to make proper Returns to the Civilities of Arabella: The native Elegance and Simplicity of her Manners were accompanied with so much real Benevolence of Heart, such insinuating Tenderness, and Graces so irresistable, that she was quite oppressed with them; and, having spent most of her Time between her Toilet and Quadrille, was so little qualified for partaking a Conversation so refined as Arabella's, that her Discourse appeared quite tedious to her, since it was neither upon Fashions, Assemblies, Cards or Scandal.* (68)

Scandal might seem a dangerous pastime for Miss Groves, whose several "visits to the country" have caught the attention of those whom, like Miss Glanville, are "extremely fond of Scandal" (140). But she finds a ready protector in Arabella.

Arabella, "so little sensible of the Pleasure of Scandal, as to be wholly ignorant of its Nature; and not to know when it was told her," is simply unable to comprehend the story that Miss Groves's woman is only too ready to share (77). Reading through her romances, Arabella transforms Miss Groves's rather sordid history into "Adventures" of another kind. Unable to believe that this mysterious "Fair one" could have been loved by other than "an Illustrious" unknown, or actually seduced by her fashionable beau, Arabella observes, "it is hardly possible to suppose, a young Lady of Miss Groves's Quality would stain the Lustre of her Descent by so shameful an Intrigue" (140). Arabella's romances have here deceived her, to be sure, but not only her romances: her "benevolence" and "tenderness" have as well. Arabella is often willing to assume the best of others, and is never interested in petty gossip or frivolous pleasure; however misguided, the superiority of her moral imagination is unmistakable.

Arabella once says of her cousin Charlotte, "she thinks all her Moments are lost, in which she finds nothing to laugh at" (85). Yet Arabella herself finds much more to do than laugh, and given the limits of the satire against her—and by implication against romance itself—so must the reader. As we have seen, *The Female Quixote* satirizes Arabella, but only to a point, repeatedly demonstrating the value of her judgment and sympathy. The Divine condemns romances as "contemptuous ... senseless Fictions; which at once vitiate the Mind, and pervert the Understanding," but the unquestioned superiority of Arabella's character raises serious questions about this denunciation (374). For Arabella is inseparable from her romances, her "whole Time been taken up" by reading these fictions, "from [which] she drew all her Notions and Expectations" (7). Her admirers like to think of this "Oddity of her Humour" (45) as a lamentable exception in an otherwise unblemished character: "had she been untainted with the ridiculous Whims [romances] created in her Imagination, [she] was ... one of the most accomplished Ladies in the World" (50). But the very things for which Arabella is most distinguished can be seen as a consequence of her romance reading, as she seeks to emulate "the Perfection of Beauty, Wit, and Virtue, [that] make a Heroine worthy" (151). Arabella's conversation is singled out for praise "when it did not turn upon any Incident in her Romances, [as] perfectly fine, easy, and entertaining" (65) and the company is often enthralled by her wise pronouncements on a variety of subjects. And yet the same notions which leave her audience filled with "Tenderness ... Admiration ... Wonder and Delight" (204) are those she has learned from romance (a point that Lennox makes rather slyly by inserting a speech upon raillery from *The Grand Cyrus* into her heroine's conversation [267–69]).[19] When Glanville finds himself so "charm'd into an Extacy at [a] sensible Speech of Arabella's" that he "forg[ets] in an Instant all her Absurdities" (304), he also forgets that the disquisition he so admires is inspired by the glorious example of "the noble Artamenes," a hero to whom she compares Glanville himself. Rather than the pernicious fictions which have "ruined so noble a Mind" (115),

[19] This borrowing from Madeleine de Scudery is discussed by Margaret Dalziel in the editorial note to this chapter.

romances have actually served Arabella well, providing models for her character and much of the wisdom for which she is so often praised.

Early in their debate, Arabella challenges the Divine's excoriation of romance with the certain proof of her own exemplary character: "These Books, Sir, thus corrupt, thus absurd, thus dangerous alike to the Intellect and Morals, I have read; and that I hope without Injury to my Judgment or my Virtue" (374). That Arabella's "judgment and virtue" have not been injured by reading romances—but much to the contrary—is evidence of just *how* she has been able to read them. The Divine has praised the novel's "resemblance to Truth," and, quoting Johnson, its consequent ability to move "the Passions ... at the Command of Virtue" (378, 377).[20] But for Arabella, it is romances that she supposes "real Pictures of Life," romances that have taught her to revere "a Love of Truth in the human Mind" (7, 376). Her long praise of her favorite fictions could hardly sound more Johnsonian:

> *Books from which all useful Knowledge may be drawn; which give us the most shining Examples of Generosity, Courage, Virtue and Love; which regulate our Actions, form our Manners, and inspire us with a noble Desire of emulating those great, heroic, and virtuous Actions, which made those Persons so glorious in their Age, and so worthy Imitation in ours.* (48)

Arabella can read her romances in just the way that the novel's champions had reserved for the new genre, and a central claim for the novel's novelty is thus undermined. Lennox uses Arabella's credulity, then, not as a vehicle to satirize the romance, but as a critique of the novel and its defining generic characteristics.[21]

Arabella's romances, unsuited as they are to the life she must lead in the world of this novel, have nonetheless formed her judgment and character, providing "the most shining Examples of Generosity, Courage, Virtue, and Love." And why not? Arabella's romances are certainly better than the real world that stands in for the novel in *The Female Quixote*, a world that offers, despite the Divine's promises, little in the way of "solid Instructions, the noblest Sentiments, and the most exalted Piety" (377). Arabella's own aspirations are far above the shallow vanity that others esteem; her observation that "the World is not more virtuous now than it was in [Greek and Roman] Days, and there is good Reason to believe it is not much wiser" certainly must remain unchallenged (45). Faced with the limited possibilities, both active and imaginative, that this world represents, it is no wonder that Arabella prefers romance:

> *If the World ... affords only these Kinds of Pleasures, I shall very soon regret the Solitude and Books I have quitted.... What room, I pray you, does a Lady give for high and Noble Adventures, who consumes her Days in Dressing, Dancing, listen-*

[20] As I have noted above, Johnson (and ostensibly Lennox) is here praising Richardson.

[21] A comparison of Arabella's romance reading with Sir George's is illuminating: while Arabella takes romances seriously, and thus learns from them real principles of honorable conduct, Sir George is only interested in using his knowledge of romance to exploit Arabella; that the long romance story he tells serves him so poorly is evidence of the frivolous nature of his reading practice. See 209–52, especially 250–52.

> *ing 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 "pens" who do "condescend" are, of course, those of novelists, and in Arabella's disappointment we can read Lennox's indictment of the new genre, which falls so short of its lofty claims. Demonstrating that romances, read well, need not corrupt, questioning the novel's alliance with truth, and thus its moral superiority, Lennox reveals that the distinction between romances and novels is not so clear as it might seem. Locating both romance and novel in *The Female Quixote*, we thus discover a buried critique of the "new species" of fiction its own resolution seems to praise.

Like other women writers of her generation, Charlotte Lennox writes within the terms of the mid-century debates around the novel in which gendered generic distinctions figure so prominently. No novelist, male or female, could escape Richardson's and Fielding's success in shaping the discussion about the new fiction. Whether one reads *The Female Quixote* as celebrating the new genre in the Divine's success with Arabella, or lamenting its triumph in the heroine's subsequent humiliation, the power of "the novel" is unmistakable. But to see *The Female Quixote*—even its infamous resolution—as necessarily evidence of either assimilation or capitulation is to mistake the status of the new genre at mid-century, misreading Richardson's and Fielding's claims as evidence of more stability than the novel possessed, and accepting their marginalization of women's writing within the new fiction. This is what women writers of the period teach us, as their own works participate in the debates about fiction, challenging in their practice of writing the gendered distinction that would proscribe them from the novel. By locating her own work within these terms, Lennox successfully challenges their hegemony.

That she does so using romance is important; critics since Clara Reeve and Henry Fielding himself have puzzled over this choice, given that the "Humour of Romance ... be not at present greatly in fashion in this Kingdom" (Fielding, *Covent* 194). But remembering Lennox's status as a woman novelist at the moment in which the new genre is being defined makes this choice legible, given the identification between romance and women writers and readers in *The Female Quixote*. Using romance strategically, Lennox is exploiting—and thus exploding—the very terms that gender both novel and romance, excluding women's writing from the tradition of the novel. In eliding the distinction between novels and romances, and dismantling the oppositions on which it depends, Lennox undermines the lesson in genre that would write women's narratives out of the novel. In doing so, she reveals the precarious status of the gendered generic distinction, exposing it as a strategy in the contest over the definition of the new genre. Lennox successfully imagines a place for women's writing in the history of the novel not—and this distinction is important—by "restoring" the female literary tradition of romance to that history, but by challenging the very gendering of literary genres and their histories.

Arabella is denied the "high and Noble Adventures" that her romances had promised, and is forced to settle, as the heroine of a novel, for a less heroic, if more dependable, happiness. But Charlotte Lennox doesn't have to settle. Writing a novel after "the novel" is a different kind of "adventure," but by writing herself and women writers like her into its history, Lennox proves that the stakes are no less high.

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