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## Quixotic Legacy: *The Female Quixote* and the Professional Woman Writer

Jodi L. Wyett

**Abstract:** This essay argues that Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote or, The Adventures of Arabella* (1752) served as a fulcrum in eighteenth-century literary history by providing a figuration of the female quixote for subsequent women novelists who were keen to court absorbed readers on the one hand while countering stereotypes about women's critical failings on the other. The figure of the female quixote proves to be a significant mark of literary professionalism by reifying the spectre of the professional writer's need for absorbed readers and dramatizing the occasion by which the woman writer demonstrates her own authority, paradoxically allowing both woman novel reader and woman novel writer to lay claim to intellectual authority. Ultimately, the main character Arabella's fictional model potentially echoes more actual eighteenth-century women's experiences than her adventures at first suggest: the female quixote emerges as less a social outcast or a freak than a figure for women's commonality, especially their intellectual and ethical ambitions in a world inimical to their interests.

**Contributor Biography:** Jodi L. Wyett, Associate Professor of English at Xavier University, Cincinnati, has published on Jane Austen, Frances Brooke, and animals in the long eighteenth century. She is currently working on a book about women novelists' use of the female quixote trope to address anti-novel discourse.

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After the publication of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote, or The Adventures of Arabella* in March 1752, the trope of the overly absorbed woman reader who misconstrues her reality via the conventions of prose fiction featured in many novels until the end of the eighteenth century and beyond. *The Female Quixote* proved to be Lennox's most enduring work, contributing significantly to her literary reputation. Consulting circulating library catalogues from the 1750s through the 1780s, Cheryl Turner places Lennox among those authors listed with "sufficient public status to make it advantageous for the proprietors to name them" (134). Frances Burney praised Lennox's novels, writing in 1778 that the "Female Quixote is very justly admired . . . indeed, I think *all* her Novels for the best of any *Living Author*" (3:105). Hester Thrale remarked, "Was I to make a scale of Novel Writers I should put Richardson first, then Rousseau; after them, but at an immeasurable Distance—Charlotte Lenox [sic], Smollet [sic] & Fielding." Thrale based her commendation of Lennox on *The Female Quixote* in particular, placing it "far before Tom Jones or Joseph Andrews with regard to Body of Story, Height of Colouring, or General Powers of Thinking" (1:328-9). While Lennox's work was praised, novels in general were often thought suspect, especially when read by women. Thus *The Female Quixote*, the first fully sustained novelistic characterization of a too-susceptible woman reader, had the potential to define the terms for women writers and their readers in the decades to come. As I will argue, *The Female Quixote* served as a fulcrum in eighteenth-century literary history by providing a figuration of the female quixote for subsequent women novelists who were keen to court absorbed readers on the one hand while countering stereotypes about women's critical failings on the other. By reifying the spectre of the professional writer's need for absorbed readers

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and dramatizing the occasion by which the woman writer demonstrates her own authority, the figure of the female quixote paradoxically became the means by which both woman novel reader and woman novel writer could lay claim to intellectual authority. The deployment of the female quixote thus proves to be a significant mark of literary professionalism. To this end, I briefly explain the models of authorship inherited by Lennox before turning to her own metaphorical treatment of the circuit between author and readers in her periodical *The Trifler* and *The Female Quixote* itself. Finally, I address the reception of *The Female Quixote* by two reader-authors, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Anna Laetitia Barbauld.

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Despite the high regard *The Female Quixote* enjoyed in the eighteenth century and its near canonical status in our own, many scholars have taken issue with Lennox's pains to craft the novel in keeping with the advice of her influential mentors, especially Samuel Johnson and Samuel Richardson, arguing she adheres to gendered generic conventions that give preference to the masculinized novel over the feminized romance.<sup>1</sup> In collating Lennox's correspondence, Norbert Schürer concludes that she "abdicated artistic authority over her own works" and was "quick to accept suggestions" from readers and influential male patrons (xxxvii). Yet I would argue that denouncing Lennox's purported capitulation to patriarchal market forces suggests an anachronistic understanding of authorship. We ought to define Lennox's professional aspirations in terms of profit and recognition rather than apply to her career a definition of authorship that might be more easily attributed to a later period, such as the Romantic concept of the author as original genius. To this point, it is helpful to consider how Betty A. Schellenberg sees Lennox's entire career as a poet, novelist, translator, periodicalist, and playwright as exemplifying a model of authorship as circuitry. Schellenberg concludes that Lennox was a colleague and collaborator rather than merely a supplicant to her powerful male mentors.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Schellenberg suggests that Lennox was the "node" of a complex network of writers both male and female ("Putting Women" 246). Some of Lennox's writing published just before and after *The Female Quixote*, as well as the seventeenth-century prose fiction referenced within the novel, provide a means of contextualizing this concept of collaborative authorship. These texts also highlight the ways in which a circuit between author, collaborators, readers, and text is exposed by and demanded of quixotic fictions. As I will explain later, intimate knowledge of romances figures significantly for readers of *The Female Quixote*, though knowledge in

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<sup>1</sup> The problematic binary of novel (masculine) / romance (feminine) is the basis of much of the scholarship on *The Female Quixote* published in the 1980s and 90s. Pertinent sources are too numerous to list here, but see in particular Langbauer's influential work and Levin, who argues that *The Female Quixote* is not a proto-feminist novel.

<sup>2</sup> Schellenberg does not equate Arabella's willing abdication of her agency to Lennox's, arguing instead that Lennox made a calculated and "legitimate professional choice" informed by a model of authorship that emphasized "reading the currents of public taste and the needs of the press in order to maximize the success of her works" (*Professionalization*, 118-19).

circulation about the authorship of these prodigious tomes might also provide a precedent for Lennox's authorial practices.

Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (Part 1, 1605; Part 2, 1615) offers the archetype for how quixotism allows authors to comment on the interplay between author, text, and reader. In the prologue, Cervantes foregrounds the author's problem of adhering to readers' expectations based on extant publishing and structural conventions. The narrator addresses his "Idle reader" about his concern that his book contains "faults" because it is "plain and bare, unadorned by a prologue or the endless catalogue of sonnets, epigrams, and laudatory poems that are usually placed at the beginning of books" (3-4). A friend offers advice to the author: he can fabricate the necessary paratexts or borrow from a long history of common citations and allusions. The friend ultimately offers to do this work for the writer. Authorship is thus acknowledged outright as dependent on the circuit connecting patrons, author, text, and readers. Though Cervantes is mocking elaborate panoplies to custom, noting their empty, repetitious content, he also explains how authors can avail themselves of tactics ranging from what we might call plagiarism to exploiting personal and professional networks, especially if veracity is not a concern. Furthermore, that Cervantes notes his work was "begotten in a prison," specifically debtor's prison, makes manifest the ties between financial necessity, public approbation, and dependence upon the kindness of friends, if you will (3).<sup>3</sup>

Lennox's more immediate predecessors include the authors of Arabella's reading material.<sup>4</sup> There is one English source text, *Parthenissa* by Roger Boyle, Earl of Orrey, published throughout the 1650s.<sup>5</sup> The rest are all French fictions: *Cassandre* (1642-45), *Cleopatre*, (1648-58), and *Faramond* (1661-3), written by Gauthier de Costes de La Calprenède, and *Artamène, ou le Grand Cyrus* (1649-53) and *Clélie* (1654-60) by Madeleine de Scudéry.<sup>6</sup> Scudéry's career provides the most salient model for Lennox.<sup>7</sup> Though her work was published under the name of her brother Georges, Madeleine's primary authorship was widely known in her own time and beyond. Contending with Arabella's references to Scudéry as "he" throughout *The Female Quixote*, Devoney Looser finds it "extremely unlikely" that Lennox would not know Madeleine's identity as the author of Arabella's romances (106). Even if Lennox had not been a successful and prolific translator of French works and thus possessed of a more than passing familiarity with French literary history, Scudéry's fictions, extraordinarily popular in

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<sup>3</sup> Cervantes himself would have to respond to just the sort of aggressive "borrowing" outlined in the preface to Part One of the novel when forced to resurrect his hero ten years later to counter a spurious sequel.

<sup>4</sup> Jennie Batchelor has argued for early English amatory fiction as source material for Lennox. See "Amatory Fiction."

<sup>5</sup> See Zurcher for the publication dating. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* states that *Parthenissa*, "never completed, occupied its author intermittently from the 1640s onwards."

<sup>6</sup> Different sources provide slightly different publication dates for these multi-volume works. I have followed Bannister's dating of the texts.

<sup>7</sup> There are thematic and structural parallels as well between Lennox's and Scudéry's works including the ways in which humans are often subject to powers beyond their control (Doody 264); the oppressive nature of marriage for women (Wine 176); and narrative structures that highlight the tensions between artifice readers are meant to recognize and artifice that requires readers to suspend their disbelief (DiPiero 131), a tactic that deftly describes not only Lennox's novel but also *Don Quixote*.

the seventeenth century, remained so well into the eighteenth.<sup>8</sup> In addition to collaborating with her brother, who contributed battle scenes and prefaces, Scudéry's works proved to be complex collective undertakings of what Joan DeJean deems "salon writing" (72). Members of the salon actively participated in the writing process, suggesting revisions and perhaps even providing portions of the text apropos to their expertise, such as military history or the Hellenic period (72-3). DeJean argues that salon writing "fostered a lack of concern with individual authorial privileges, an undermining of the importance of the signature, and finally a definition of the author as director or animator of a creative enterprise," while also producing a leveling effect that intermingled bourgeois and aristocratic creative, intellectual, and political endeavors (75-6). DeJean further asserts that women writers in particular did not participate in these collectives as a matter of modesty, but to enjoy insulation from political consequences and to cultivate the knowledge of more educated salon members (77). It should also be noted that financial necessity prompted the bourgeois Scudéry's authorship (Aronson, 21). Thus while there was likely an economic impetus to Lennox's collaborations with famous men of letters, they may also have served to augment her own knowledge and, more significantly, to cushion some of her more radical social critiques.

Certainly periodical publishing has always been understood to fit this more collaborative model of written production than fiction published under a single author's name. Lennox's periodical, *The Lady's Museum* (1760-61), published after and capitalizing on the fame of *The Female Quixote*, offers insight into Lennox's ideas about the interplay between gender, intellectual labor, and publication. Scholars are unclear how much collaboration went into *The Lady's Museum*. Looser, Judith Dorn, and Manushag Powell all suggest that Lennox was responsible for most of its content, which included some of Lennox's previously published poetry, original works and translations of history, fiction, and didactic literature, as well the novel *The History of Harriot and Sophia*, later published separately as *Sophia* (1762). Conversely, Duncan Isles suggests that *The Lady's Museum* is "nominally" by Lennox "but contains many contributions from her friends" (xxxvi). The frontispiece to the periodical itself states "By the Author of the Female Quixote," suggesting that the endeavor was to be underpinned by the success of that work, already widely known as Lennox's.<sup>9</sup>

While it capitalized on *The Female Quixote's* success, the *Lady's Museum's* authorial persona, called the "Trifler," also harks back to the speaker of Lennox's most well-known poem, "The Art of Coquetry," first published in 1747 in *Poems on Several Occasions* and re-printed in a revised form in the November 1750 issue of the *Gentleman's Magazine*.<sup>10</sup> If the author is a coquette, she must use all of her arts to seduce

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<sup>8</sup> See Aronson, 137-55.

<sup>9</sup> Manushag Powell and Judith Dorn both contend that Lennox authored "The Trifler" essays despite frequent attribution to Hugh Kelly as co-editor. Powell, building on evidence that Kelly would have been only about twenty years old and new to London at the time, points out that the older, more experienced Lennox may have mentored Kelly (185).

<sup>10</sup> The coquette as writer is also a trope Lennox deploys in her first novel, *Harriot Stuart* (1751), whose coquettish heroine is a reader of romances and an aspiring poet. Jennie Batchelor cites *Harriot Stuart* as

unwilling readers or keep the willing absorbed. The coquette's emphasis on exploiting the gap between perception and reality seemingly sets up the quixotic reader as the victim of the coquettish author. But both the heterosexual gendering of the coquette metaphor and the intertextual play between Lennox's writings suggest not an adversarial but rather a sympathetic relationship between the coquette and the quixote. The speaker of "The Art of Coquetry" shares the values *The Female Quixote's* heroine gleans from seventeenth-century romances that empower women via their capacity to control hearts, thus complicating a too easy binary between controlling coquette and duped quixote. The poem's speaker also calculatingly depicts coquetry as a means for intelligent women who cannot abide powerlessness to control susceptible *men*. The poem addresses

Ye lovely maids! . . .  
 Who justly set a value on your charms,  
 Pow'r all your wish, but beauty all your arms  
 Who o'er mankind wou'd fain exert your sway  
 And teach the lordly tyrant to obey (ll.1, 3-6).

The tone is cynical, acknowledging that the current system affords women power only as measured by their physical attractions while also insisting that to desire dominance follows from a "just" consideration of value. "Charms" here certainly include intellectual abilities since the speaker, detailing the different sorts of coquettes, expressly states that a "haughty Beauty" plays a game of "force" while "The witty fair a nimbler game pursues" and, in any case, "the wise can win from art" (ll. 20, 22, 23, 32).<sup>11</sup> Thus coquetry, depicted as a sign of intelligence, is an endeavor for the quick-witted woman who should set her sights on hapless male victims.

"The Art of Coquetry" irked the bluestocking intellectual Elizabeth Carter, who lamented that "it is intolerably provoking to see people who really appear to have a genius, apply it to such idle unprofitable purposes" (1:367). Carter disdains Lennox's use of her literary talent to manipulate, citing a definition of profit that implies moral or intellectual edification rather than monetary gain. Carter's complaints are apt. The "Trifler" of *The Lady's Museum* explicitly connects the persona of the coquette to that of the writer, thus shifting the locus of power from the sexual to the cerebral. The Trifler is an eighteen-year-old woman given the advice to "CAST your eyes upon paper, madam; there you may lock [sic] innocently," by "a polite old gentleman of my acquaintance," which she interprets as advice to read in order to properly direct her intellectual energies. But she opts to push beyond reading to grasp at the authority of the writer:

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an example of how a woman reader's understanding of amatory fiction conventions could initiate gendered power reversals ("Amatory Fiction," 151-4).

<sup>11</sup> Just as she borrowed *The Female Quixote's* heroine's name from the dedicatee of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712-17) and lists the different sorts of coquettes similarly to Pope's list of sylphs, Lennox alludes to the Baron here, who (in)famously engages with the coquettish Belinda to obtain her lock, "by Force" or "Fraud" (2:32). Lennox's ongoing fascination with the power of coquetry suggests that Arabella's name might not be an ironic allusion after all.

It is indeed very clear to me, that my friend . . . recommended reading to eyes which he probably thought were too intent upon pleasing; but I, with a small deviation from the sense, applied it, to what is I freely own my predominant passion; and therefore resolved to write, still pursuing the same darling end, though by different means (1:2).

Notably, the narrator claims to wish to please “Universally;” she nevertheless states that she “shall be contented, if it finds only a favourable acceptance with my own sex, to whose amusement it is chiefly designed to contribute” (1:4). Thus the intellectual energies of readership are refigured as authorship, in turn figured as a means of redirecting the arts of coquetry to the art of pleasing readers, in this case women readers. Exploiting the slippery boundary between bodily and mental pleasure, Lennox effectively cuts men out of the circuit.

The desire to control the reading practices of susceptible young women while also laying claim to the intellectual abilities of the female author prove to be a paradox for the Trifler in ensuing volumes, so much so that Manushag Powell deems her a potential “hypocrite” for seemingly advocating conservative notions of women’s propriety that she does not apply to herself (190). But I would argue that the love of paradox and the dizzying reversals offered by the Trifler both parallel the very binds of femininity Lennox seeks to expose and champion the power of the reader to create meaning.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the Trifler, at turns an apronym and a deeply ironic moniker, wants to have her cake and eat it too. She tells readers the subjects she will write of

will be such as reading and observation shall furnish me with; for, with a strong passion for intellectual pleasures, I have likewise a taste for many of the fashionable amusements, and . . . I have contrived to gratify both these inclinations; one I thought too laudable to be restrained, the other I found too pleasing to be wholly subdued (1:4).

Here the Trifler speaks of her own habits of consumption, wrapped up in both entertainment and instruction. Literary satire, of course, offers both to the perceptive reader in its ability to expose social ills and incite laughter. Yet “The Trifler” essays deploy so many kinds of satire it can be difficult to keep up. One letter writer, for example, savages the practice of churchgoing and cites Methodist churches in particular as merely a service to the public for keeping people out of madhouses; she then ends her letter with a lengthy description of an acquaintance who believes “that a woman of sense is a character not inferior to a woman of fashion, and, with an extravagant ambition, has united both in her own person” all of which “leave us slender hopes of reclaiming her” (ii: 564, 567). The letter is signed Anoeta, or “Unthinking” (Dorn 20).

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<sup>12</sup> Dorn concurs, reading the persona as deeply ironic and arguing that “‘Trifling’ serves as a code forming the readers of the *Museum* into a community that mocks the public’s refusal to acknowledge the potential significance of women’s minds.” Dorn further suggests the faux correspondence signals how Lennox longed for a nonexistent female collaborative in which women could support and validate each other (20).

Initially, burlesque technique invites readers to judge the correspondent whose assertions are so crude as to clearly mark her values as absurd, but the letter progresses to more subtle irony when criticizing the exemplary woman of intelligence and fashion—the values espoused by the Trifler herself—with whom readers might identify. Another correspondent, Perdita, relates the story of her marriage being ruined by a coquette called Belinda. The allusion to *The Rape of the Lock* cannot be accidental, and it is this sort of intertextuality that demands attentive readers. The complex relationship between narrative and implied readers swings like a pendulum between sympathy and irony, demanding extraordinary dexterity from readers and at the same time reminding us of how their responses can never be fully anticipated or controlled.

Accordingly, to acknowledge the existence of the reader is to acknowledge the agency of the reader. Powell contends that Lennox's heavy use of self-reflexivity in "The Trifler" essays serves "to reform female readers; not to make them more scholarly, exactly, but to use reading to modify their deportments with the ultimate aim of making them less miserable (and her more commodifiable, valuable) in the mixed-sex world" (190). But I would argue that the ability to unpack self-reflexive writing aims at not a gullible reader who needs to be reformed, but at a knowing reader who has read and perhaps been rebuked—and continues to read anyway. Such a reader mimics the Trifler's own subversive and eager reading habits. Inverting some of the particulars of Arabella's childhood, the Trifler's history includes an excellent, amiable father who died when she was very young and a mother deeply opposed to reading, which the narrator engages in from an early age. The Trifler's older brother luckily undertook her education and she looks to extend the favor to her own readers who seek to justify their passion for reading—both "intellectual" and "fashionable"—and incorporate it into their respectable lives.

Lennox's writing thus both anticipates and constructs the ideal reader of her own deeply meta- and intertextual writing. One of the Trifler's correspondents illustrates this point when she writes that she "[c]annot help suspecting that you artfully mean to cajole your fair readers into sense and seriousness, and that you only bait your periodical labours with a Trifler merely to captivate our attention, while you mean nothing less than our acquaintance with all useful and polite literature" (2:641). Like previous letters, this one deploys thick irony to chide the Trifler for recommending learning when women are not valued for their minds. The correspondent, Parthenissa, concludes that, "for my part, I think a spelling dictionary, and Grey's Love Letters very ample furniture for a lady's library" (2:643-4).<sup>13</sup> Parthenissa has, of course, already exposed herself as a reader of much more than a dictionary and Aphra Behn's racy *roman a clef*, *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684-7; based on Lord Grey of Werke's scandalous seduction of his sister-in-law, Lady Henrietta Berkeley). She

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<sup>13</sup> Parthenissa is also the eponymous character of one of Arabella's romances, who Arabella aligns with Cleopatra because both were "for some Months, in the Hands of their Ravishers" (105). Arabella's interlocutor subsequently deems Cleopatra "a Whore" (105). It's also the name of Sophia Western's aunt in *Tom Jones*, who says she has been much maligned for it.



is also a reader of *The Lady's Museum*, which is to say a reader of fiction, history, didactic writing, Shakespearean criticism, or, indeed, "all useful and polite literature."

The Trifler is therefore much more than a woman who trifles with men's affections. She is deeply concerned with the interplay between the woman writer and the woman reader and how metatextuality emphasizes the agency of both. As such, the Trifler falls in line with the authorial persona of *The Female Quixote*. Theresa Braunschneider sees the figure of the coquette as an enabling one for women writers in the first half of the eighteenth century, primarily as a means of positioning homoerotic desire as one choice among many, calling the coquette "expansively characterized as a woman who resists any constraints upon her choices" (2). Consequently the coquette figure can emphasize bonds between women as well as female agency. Braunschneider cites *The Female Quixote* as a reformed coquette narrative, albeit an unconventional one, in that Arabella engages in coquettish behavior without recognizing it as such (127).<sup>14</sup> Taken in tandem with Lennox's other metaphorical constructions of the author as coquette as well as with her frequent allusions to Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, dedicated to one Arabella Fermor, Lennox's Arabella becomes not only a quixotic reader, but also the author of her own fantasies of sexual power.

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This model of the author as trading in the art of pleasing, as necessarily engaging with patrons, collaborators, publishers, printers, and readers, erodes a model of mid-century authorship that both depends upon and erects further gendered hierarchies. It also illustrates why the quixote figure proved so useful to Lennox and many of her successors. Lennox's correspondence clearly reveals her interest to appeal to her male mentors and the reading public, and as Kate Levin suggests, to reverse her professional fortunes in light of lukewarm reviews for her earlier, more experimental works. This privileging of market concerns and tastes may seem to pave the way for the definition of authorship that excluded women from newly emerging notions of the writer as purveyor of elite cultural knowledge.<sup>15</sup> However, *The Female Quixote* enacts many of the myriad strategies women novelists used to respond to and subvert this process. Jennie Batchelor explores how women writers retained the trope of coquetry inherited from early eighteenth-century amatory fiction ("Amatory Fiction" 148-49); she also cites techniques such as theoretical prefaces, self-conscious plays on conventional plot structures, narrative digressions, direct addresses to readers, and proscriptive chapter summaries to argue for the woman novelist's particular attention to how 'truths' could be bound up in cultural constructions ("Gender, Genre" 89-94). This is precisely the function of the complex narrative in *The Female Quixote*. Lennox's angry coquette, who paradoxically both resents her reduction to a sexualized being and willingly deploys whatever power she might wield, pre- (and post-)figures her female quixote, a woman

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<sup>14</sup> Braunschneider finds the ending of the novel unconvincing on the grounds that it does not adequately redirect Arabella's desires away from powerful, interesting women to a heterosexual union (134-7).

<sup>15</sup> See Siskin and Warner.

who desperately wants power and influence but wields it only within the narrow confines of an idealized realm ruled by love.

As a result, *The Female Quixote* should inspire us to rethink the circuit between author, text, and readers, particularly as it complicates our understanding of attitudes toward women writers and readers. For example, feminist scholars troubled by the novel's apparent endorsement of patriarchy via Arabella's "cure" and marriage privilege plot trajectory in a way that *The Female Quixote* resists. Too much emphasis on the denouement also elides the ways in which any novel gains meaning through readership. Eighteenth-century readers cannot be assumed to have always already identified with heroines, especially those at midcentury who were primed on an established satiric tradition. Satire calls for a reader who is able to mock the protagonist, often by colluding with the text's narrator. Scott Paul Gordon argues that *The Female Quixote* encourages the disciplining of an active female imagination on the grounds that the text establishes a complete breach between its reader and its heroine (59).<sup>16</sup> At times the text does take pains to maintain distance between the heroine and the reader, but the function of that distance is not, I believe, to establish readers' absolute superiority over Arabella. While Gordon contends that the distance between heroine and reader is too often ignored as a symptom of "critical quixotism"—critics' inability to read the evidence as they impose their own feminist agenda on Lennox's text and heroine—I believe the gap between the reader and the heroine can be recuperated for feminist ends. Lennox's novel hails a critical reader outside of the text who counters stereotypes about women's susceptibility and, in keeping with the period's satirical traditions, understands the ways in which the text exposes the ills of eighteenth-century society. The novel offers female quixotism as a symbol or synecdoche for certain double-edged aspects of women's intellectual labor, both reading and writing; to understand a text about female quixotism you must have a sharp mind.

Furthermore, Lennox, herself an avid reader of romance, directs her novel to readers who have a similar level of understanding. The very knowledge required of Lennox's readers suggests a paradoxical relationship between readers and heroine, characterized both by repudiation of the too mimetic reader of romances *and* by sympathy for her literary tastes and the kinds of power afforded to women within such works. Lennox's narrator at turns distances her readers from Arabella's reading practices and requires that they deploy their own knowledge of seventeenth-century romance conventions, often in decisively gendered terms. Deluded by her reading, Arabella entertains the thought that she has material power in her culture through heterosexual relationships. She engages in such quixotic behavior as commanding her lovers to live and die at her will and believes that by adhering to the conventions of romance she can delay marriage and thus absorption into the patriarchal order. Lennox tells readers how to interpret this behavior, titling chapter IX in Book I: "In which a Lover is severely punished for Faults the Reader never would have discovered, if he had

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<sup>16</sup> Gordon's argument is compelling, but his use of later eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century quixote narratives to argue retroactively for the orthodoxy of Lennox's does not account for the ways in which Lennox's work informs those texts.

not been told what they were" (30). Here Lennox satirizes Arabella's quixotism by aligning her readers with the characters in the novel that do not understand Arabella's actions. She suggests Arabella's behavior is indecipherable. Though readers are told they should not be able to understand, let alone sympathize with Arabella, they also have been told from the outset that Arabella's behavior is predicated on conventions from romances. The result is a layering of expectations. While the best readers of *The Female Quixote* indeed already understood the basis for Arabella's behavior—the codes of romance—those readers who have abided by advice to avoid corruptive romances must have the code explained to them.

Perhaps the universal "he" in the title of Book I's chapter IX should be read as a gendered "he"—the readers who need to be directed are those who have not read romances, which in popular discourse of the time means men. I am not suggesting that Lennox intended to gender readers with the use of the masculine pronoun,<sup>17</sup> yet her novel does imply even men who think that they are versed in the conventions of romances simply cannot understand them.<sup>18</sup> Sir George has read romances and believes he can use that knowledge to seduce Arabella both by constructing an elaborate romantic tale of his own "history" and by staging an incident meant to trick Arabella into renouncing Glanville. But Sir George makes the mistake of relating a professed love for one woman after abandoning another. Arabella accuses him of committing "such an Outrage to all Truth and Constancy, that you deserve to be ranked among the falsest of Mankind" (250). Here Arabella's interpretation of Sir George's romance serves as a valid interpretation of his real-life escapades—Sir George has been hedging his bets, playing the lover to both Arabella and Miss Glanville all along. Sir George misunderstands how Arabella's understanding of romance conventions always already empowers the woman; they cannot be corrupted to serve his ends. On the other hand, while Glanville lies to Arabella about reading her beloved books, incapable of sustained attention to them, his attention to her has nonetheless made him susceptible to her worldview. It is Glanville, not Arabella, who in the end falls for Sir George's elaborately staged ruse, and Sir George who pays the price with a wound from Glanville's sword.

Because of the ways in which romance conventions rely upon a definition of female agency that conflates social, political, and sexual power, Lennox's previous engagement with the figure of the coquette suggests a palimpsestic overwriting of the innocent quixote atop the artful coquette. Though very few of the people in Arabella's social circle truly comprehend the foundation of her interpretation of the world around her, the men in *The Female Quixote* are obsessed with the idea that they cannot exercise authority over her until they have gained control over her interpretive agency. The

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<sup>17</sup> Nor am I suggesting that only women read romances, rather that Lennox is aware of the discourse that associates women with romance. Indeed, Margaret Anne Doody's introduction to *The Female Quixote* cites Horace Walpole's characterization of himself as a delusional romance reader in his youth (xv-xvi), and James Boswell suggests that Johnson, who "as a boy was immoderately fond of reading romances," attributed "to these extravagant fictions that unsettled turn of mind which prevented his ever fixing in any profession" (36).

<sup>18</sup>As Catherine Craft has noted, even the good doctor cannot be included among the most informed readers of Arabella's quixotism because he admits to not having read romances himself (837).

struggle for control of Arabella's interpretive agency is framed as an imperative to control her imagination, the very human faculty novels were considered to appeal to most powerfully. Imagination, in turn, is associated with sexuality. We are told that it is Arabella's imagination that allows her the illusion of great power, the "Facility in accommodating every Incident to her own Wishes and Conceptions" (25). And it is this too fertile "Imagination" that "made her stumble" (21). These connections between imagination and sexuality offer another means to see how Arabella's imagination can be construed as a threat to heterosexual orthodoxy. Gordon argues that Arabella's quixotism saves her from being deemed an artful coquette, therefore proving her genuine worth within the established sex-gender system as a "marriageable object," a pawn rather than an empowered agent (62). But Lennox's ongoing fascination with coquetry suggests her version of quixotism may not be entirely uncorrupted. Certainly Braunschneider's consideration of coquetry offers one way in which women could indulge erotic energies besides the heterosexual. Furthermore, coquetry is not the only sexualized danger that stems from a too-active female imagination. Novels were feared to inspire a sexual perversity in women particularly subversive because furtive. Within the proliferating discourse inveighing against masturbation, the virtue of women who read clandestinely was of utmost concern.<sup>19</sup> Novels threatened to remove a woman reader from the heterosexual exchange altogether.

The means of separating Arabella from empowering figures of femininity and reconciling her to the role of wife is to reform her reading practices and thus stifle her interpretive agency. Asking Arabella to grasp the paradoxical relationship between fictional fabrication and moral truth, the doctor proclaims that "Truth is not always injured by Fiction" and "The only Excellence of Falsehood . . . is its Resemblance to Truth" (377-8). The doctor concedes to the ways in which fiction and reality are both constructs; just as fiction communicates only through careful crafting, the human condition demands that we acquiesce to the accepted conventions of our reality. After arguing that experience tells us most people lead lives devoid of heroism (thus echoing the Countess's speech about the reality of women's lives, discussed below), the doctor admits that "the Order of the World is so established, that all human Affairs proceed in a regular Method, and very little Opportunity is left for Sallies or Hazards, for Assault or Rescue; but the Brave and the Coward, the Sprightly and the Dull, suffer themselves to be carried away alike down the Stream of Custom" (379). The doctor explains, with an almost melancholy air, how the world has been "[o]rder"ed and "established" not unlike how a novel is crafted, and that through the workings of time, custom becomes accepted, or naturalized, and rules us all.

Subsequently, the doctor suggests that Arabella may learn to accept her social reality by reading *Clarissa*, in which Richardson "has found a Way to convey the most solid Instructions, the noblest Sentiments, and the most exalted Piety, in the pleasing Dress of a Novel" (377). The irony, of course, is that the central action of *Clarissa* revolves around a rape. Lennox's willingness to capitulate to market needs might

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<sup>19</sup> For the discourse against masturbation, see Barker-Benfield, Laqueur, and Sedgwick.

explain the paradox of this moment. In a letter to Lennox responding to her request for his advice on how she should end the novel, Richardson suggests that Lennox wrap up the novel in its “Present [two] Vols.” rather than extend it in a third. “The method you propose, tho’ it might flatter my Vanity, yet will be thought a Contrivance between the Author of Arabella, and the Writer of Clarissa,” Richardson writes, suggesting Lennox thought to flesh out the idea of Arabella reading *Clarissa* as a means of her reform (Lennox, *Correspondence* 21). Allowing Arabella, who is convinced that most men pose a threat to her virtue, to read her way to reform via the story of *Clarissa* proves untenable in Lennox’s final version of the novel. The doctor believes that “Books ought to supply an Antidote to Example,” but he also believes that they can incite sexual perversity, as becomes clear when he adds, “if we retire to a contemplation of Crimes, and continue in our Closets to inflame our Passions, at what time must we rectify our Words, or purify our Hearts?” (380). Here the doctor raises the specter of masturbation again, that traceless and therefore threatening act that can be seen to offer the very kind of independence and self-directed rapture that Arabella seeks in romances. Simply giving her “better” books cannot control Arabella’s interpretive agency. Her mind, if not her hand, is too agile to be entrusted to texts again.

Thus Arabella is abruptly separated from her books; but is she truly reformed? As scholarship on the novel has often noted, *The Female Quixote*’s critiques of eighteenth-century society expose gendered behavior as socially inscribed and prescribed. Upon first meeting Arabella, many of the characters in the book attribute her strange behavior not to insanity, but to “Simplicity” and a “Country Education” (21, 28). Indeed, romances offered virtually the only entertainment and instruction for both Arabella and her mother in their seclusion. The Marchioness had “purchased these Books to Soften a solitude which she found very disagreeable,” and Arabella turns to them in kind because she was “wholly secluded from the World” (7). Both women were isolated, confined, and controlled by the Marquis—a reality not unlike that experienced by many heroines of romance and sentimental fictions alike—and both women turned to romances as a means of psychic fulfillment. Arabella’s books consequently supply the place of maternal mentor. And though the books were a maternal inheritance, they too have been subjected to paternal control; Arabella reclaims them to suit her own ends. Even during her “reformation,” Arabella reveals an ability to recognize the mechanisms employed to control her. She chides the doctor for sliding from a condemnation of romances to the people who read them, offended that his “Language . . . glances from the Books upon the Readers” (374). Arabella rightly reads the weakness of the doctor’s argument as one that condemned all women readers of fiction.

Rather than condemn all women readers, *The Female Quixote* briefly offers one figure who models the critical yet sympathetic female reader necessary to seeing how the novel implicates the very social order it appears to uphold. The Countess is described as a woman “who among her own Sex had no Superior in Wit, Elegance, and Ease, was inferior to very few other in Sense, Learning, and Judgment” (322). Yet the Countess also feels “Compassion” for Arabella, since she “herself had been deep read in romances” (323). Through her own education and her worldly experience, the Countess

has concluded that a woman's life is really quite unlike a heroine's. Her relation of the significant events in her life is both practical and depressing: "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" (327). Attributing her own escape from romantic delusions to "an early Acquaintance with the world, and being directed to other Studies," the Countess is positioned for a moment as the means by which Arabella will be reformed (323). After meeting Arabella, the Countess "resolv'd to rescue her" (323). Though the Countess models a potential ideal reader of *The Female Quixote*, she is forced, as many critics have noted, to abandon her hope of reforming Arabella when domestic duties call. Many of these same scholars see the Countess's departure from the text as a capitulation in favor of the male reformer and thus a concession to patriarchal power and control of the woman reader.<sup>20</sup> Yet the Countess's domestic calling also potentially aligns her even more powerfully with the novel's middle- and upper-class female readers whose daily lives included attention to domestic duties and the pursuit of reading, be it for entertainment, intellectual edification, or both. The Countess is a critical woman reader who fits the eighteenth-century domestic ideal as well, suggesting that the two might not be incompatible.

The complex interplay of readerly sympathetic identification and skeptical critical distance that the narrative of *The Female Quixote* invites throughout does not satisfactorily resolve in the final chapter's conventional ending in which two couples are married. The narrator, drawing attention to the text's construction, chooses, "Reader, to express this Circumstance, though the same, in different Words, as well to avoid Repetition, as to intimate" how Arabella and Glanville enjoy a companionate marriage whereas the union of Charlotte and Sir George reflects concern for social and economic status only (383). Therefore the ending seems to champion Arabella's conversion and companionate marriage while also pointing out its status as just that—a forced bit of closure made possible through the workings of the author's pen. In this way the novel foregrounds its own construction, reminding readers that such tidy happy endings are truly the stuff of fantasy. Patricia L. Hamilton argues that the illness Arabella suffers after leaping into the Thames could lead to her death and the novel thus inverts Cervantes' tragic ending only at the last minute.<sup>21</sup> But Regina Barreca suggests Lennox's book does not end happily at all: "Being the girl the boy 'got' so that he can then found a nice little society around himself is not her happy ending" (19).<sup>22</sup> A closer examination

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<sup>20</sup> See Gardiner and Spacks in specific. On the other hand, Barreca, Ross, Roulston, and Spencer do not lament the Countess's departure, characterizing her insistence that proper women have no stories to tell as representative of conservative patriarchal ideals. Hamilton argues that the Countess and the Doctor have been misinterpreted as opposites when, in fact, they work together to guide Arabella's transformation.

<sup>21</sup> Arabella could also be seen to avoid Clarissa's tragic ending by accepting the suitor chosen for her by her father.

<sup>22</sup> Barreca also cites the distinction between the two marriages at the end of the novel and notes the irony of how Arabella suffers the very fate, "oblivion," she feared (43-4). Consequently, *The Female Quixote* mirrors its source text more closely than previously considered. Don Quixote is humiliated, cured, and

of two eighteenth-century readers' reactions to the novel's ending further illustrates how quixotic narrative can complicate gendered assumptions about reading and writing and elicit critical reflection even in those committed to reading novels for pleasure.

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While *The Female Quixote's* ending seemed to pose little problem for Frances Burney and Hester Thrale, cited at the beginning of this essay, the chosen cure of Arabella via a conversation with a Johnsonian cleric was a matter that did vex at least two professional women writers who read the novel in the ensuing decades of the Georgian period. Both Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) and, decades later, Anna Laetitia Barbauld (née Aikin, 1743-1825) questioned the conventional plot resolution, the evidence so many modern scholars use to illustrate *The Female Quixote's* capitulation to the patriarchal power structure. Both Montagu and Barbauld considered themselves literary professionals, both were precocious autodidacts who taught themselves Classical language and literature, and both women experienced psychologically unsettling epistolary courtships that led to unsatisfactory marriages and were said to have been influenced by quixotic reading practices. Montagu, who did not sign her name to her various poetic and periodical publications but was nevertheless well known as an author even before the posthumous publications of her correspondence, eloped with a man her family disapproved of and later attributed the action to her youthful romantic turn of mind. Similarly, John Aikin seems to have blamed his sister's marriage to a psychologically unstable Frenchman on her reading of Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (Langford 478-9). Yet Barbauld, editor of Richardson's correspondence and renowned literary critic, was just the sort of woman reader who, by her own standards, would not be unduly swayed by a novel, though she did boldly assert that the pleasure novels provided was enough to recommend them. In her essay "On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing," which prefaced the *British Novelists* series in which she included *The Female Quixote*, Barbauld affirmed that "the unpardonable sin in a novel is dullness: however grave or wise it may be, if its author possesses no powers of amusing, he has no business to write novels" (1:48). While pleasure surely invites absorption, Barbauld also suggests that "the sagacious reader" actively participates in interpreting textual meaning and plot outcome (1:57). Barbauld's ideas echo those of Lennox's Trifler, who posited that reading and writing could edify her taste for both "intellectual pleasures" and "fashionable amusements" (1:4).

Both Montagu and Barbauld represent women readers who valued plot and the absorptive power of fiction as well as the critical distance won by the sort of intellectual labor quixotic fictions require of their readers. And notably both of these women's

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then dies. Arabella is humiliated, cured, and her power is stripped away, abruptly ending her story. Braunschneider argues that *The Female Quixote* is about the "accommodation" inherent in a woman's purported choice in marriage, and that it marks the moment in the eighteenth century when the coquette moves from a figure of levity to one of tragedy (138).

reactions to *The Female Quixote* reveal how its narrative contortions demand just such a reader. In a letter to her daughter Lady Mary wrote, “The Plan of [*The Female Quixote*] is pretty, but ill executed” (3:88). While Barbauld certainly considered the novel worthy of canonical status, it nevertheless did not fully live up to her expectations. She complained that although the *Female Quixote* was one of Lennox’s best novels, “The work is rather spun out too much, and not very well wound up. *The grave moralizing of a clergyman* is not the means by which the heroine should have been cured of her reveries” (24:iii, emphasis added). Barbauld does not question that Arabella needed reform, yet she does disapprove of the didactic clergyman, perhaps a fatigue informed by intervening years of conduct manuals such as James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) that contributed vigorously to anti-novel discourse. Perhaps Barbauld might have preferred that the Countess, a figure who has fascinated modern feminist scholars, undertake Arabella’s reform? Lady Mary’s only clear, specific inquiry about *The Female Quixote* concerns the Countess. “Who is that accomplished Countess she celebrates,” Lady Mary asked her daughter, looking for a historical referent for the character she admired (3:67). Devoney Looser suggests that some of Lennox’s historical references in *The Female Quixote* retain the conventions of “secret histories” from the early eighteenth century, effectively denouncing “improper” reading and at the same time acknowledging that readers will know and enjoy such tales (110-11). Lady Mary was just such a reader, not one “reformed” by *The Female Quixote* to appreciate moral domestic fiction over *roman a clef*, with its genealogical connections to now scandalous romance.<sup>23</sup>

Thus both Montagu’s and Barbauld’s reservations about *The Female Quixote* offer evidence, however incomplete, that the novel unsettles as much as it purportedly settles about the figure of the female quixote. These two women readers’ reactions speak to the ways in which plot trajectory cannot be the sole, or even primary, measure of a novel’s effect. The reform of the female quixote does not set well with either woman reader, both of whom may have been seduced by books into ill-conceived marriages—the very fate Arabella tries to resist—but who also evidenced sharp critical minds and the ability to analyze what they read. The tensions between absorbed reading and critical reading and sympathetic identification and intellectual distance modeled by Lennox’s Countess character are manifest in both Montagu’s and Barbauld’s responses to *The Female Quixote*. These were also the paradoxes faced by women who sought to write novels for profit in the latter half of the eighteenth century when the novel market expanded dramatically, particularly for women writers. More than three times as many women began to write fiction in the 1770s and 1780s as had done in the 1750s and 1760s.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Lady Mary did not know Lennox was the author of *The Female Quixote*, which she attributed to Sarah Fielding. Notably, Lady Mary despised Lennox’s first novel, *Harriot Stuart*, because of its attack on another countess, her friend and Lennox’s former patroness, Isabella Finch.

<sup>24</sup> Based on statistics from Stanton et al. (251).



The concern that novel reading would have a particularly pernicious effect upon susceptible women readers persisted well into the nineteenth century, aided by the changes in copyright laws after 1774 that made many titles more accessible via reprinting in cheap editions. *The Female Quixote* was reprinted in 1783, 1799, and again in Anna Barbauld's *British Novelists* series in 1810. The reprinting of *The Female Quixote* during the later eighteenth century confirms William St. Clair's valuation of availability as the most significant measure of a novel's potential influence on readers.<sup>25</sup> Certainly *The Female Quixote* was a success, even if it could not assure its author long-term material comfort, as few novels of the time did.<sup>26</sup> Lennox's female quixote, the woman who so desperately sought to control her world by proclaiming her sovereignty in a fictional, and female, realm of romance, proved to be a powerful force even at the turn of the eighteenth century, haunting the fiction of writers as diverse as Mary Wollstonecraft (*The Wrongs of Woman*), Maria Edgeworth (*Angelina*), and Jane Austen (*Northanger Abbey*). The notion of the female reader's peculiar susceptibility to print both dogged these subsequent professional women writers' intellectual endeavors and proved necessary to their efforts to write novels that would be bought and read. In turn, readerly susceptibility had to be reckoned with in conjunction with an equally powerful and assiduously cultivated propensity toward critical reading. What emerges from an analysis of Lennox's authorial deployment of quixotism is not only the increasing emphasis on the power of fiction to absorb and instruct, but also a concomitant awareness among women readers of their own ability to gauge, criticize, and otherwise engage with such fiction. *The Female Quixote* offers readers an intelligent and capable heroine, one who suffers from an inadequate education and inequitable opportunities and yet still tries to wield some control over her own life. Thus Arabella's fictional model comes closer to many actual eighteenth-century women's experiences than her adventures at first blush suggest.<sup>27</sup> The female quixote emerges as less a social outcast or a freak than a figure for women's commonality, especially their intellectual and ethical ambitions in a world inimical to their interests. Perhaps it was not so unusual or even so debilitating to be a female quixote after all.

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<sup>25</sup> Miriam Rossiter Small demonstrates that Lennox's work was read well into the late nineteenth century (85-88). Sadly for Lennox, the change in copyright law may have contributed to quashing the lavish version of *The Female Quixote* she was working to see to fruition. See Lennox's 1773 letter to Sir Joshua Reynolds soliciting illustrations (*Correspondence*, 134-5).

<sup>26</sup> Schellenberg goes so far as to interpret Lennox's poverty as a sign of her status as an author, arguing that Lennox had to have been considered worthy of recognition because she received repeated assistance from the Royal Literary Fund (*Professionalization* 119).

<sup>27</sup> Ronald Paulson suggests that "Arabella's reading of romances . . . gives her (as Fielding was quick to remark) the aura of a bluestocking" (170). See also Barney and Motooka on the paradoxical relationship between reason and madness, enlightenment and quixotism.

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