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Amy Hodges
University of Arkansas

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The Female Quixote as Promoter of Social Literacy

Abstract

In Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, the unruly Arabella clashes with the eighteenth century's conception of England as an orderly, unromantic site of commercial trade. Arabella's romances prompt her to expect certain power structures from English society; she invites others to see her body as a spectacle and expects that her actions will solidify her status as a powerful woman. Yet Lennox reveals that English society sees Arabella's body not as powerful, but as an object upon which they may construct their own potential site for the exchange of knowledge, an objectification that neither Arabella nor Lennox are prepared to accept. I argue that Lennox teaches her reader to read English social spaces in terms of discourses of power, thereby giving women the literacy skills to read their own subjectivity according to their position in both romantic and unromantic public spaces.

Keywords

literacy, women, spectacle, reading

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In Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, the protagonist Arabella immerses herself in the world of romantic literature, where gallant men and grand women conform to an archaic hierarchy. Her conflation of the romantic world with the practical and sensible mindset of eighteenth-century English society raises the question of how texts, particularly fictitious ones, train people to "read" the world around them. Like her fellow voracious reader Don Quixote, Arabella's problems stem from her failure to recognize the difference between text and reality. However, this novel aims not only to tame the wayward female Quixote, but also to domesticate, herby assuming the role of a proper English wife. In asserting that works of romance do not provide a suitable model for modern, respectable femininity, Lennox positions herself as a writer who can imagine how to animate good feminine subjects in a novel. In the process of attempting to meet this challenge, *The Female Quixote* engages and questions models of reader subjectivity; additionally, it talks about living in society as a specifically *literate* activity. Indeed, many readers of the novel validate the reality espoused by the sage, well-read Doctor, who enters in the penultimate chapter to "cure" Arabella of her romantic ways, telling her that "nothing is more different from a human Being, than Heroes or Heroines" (380).¹ The Doctor calls her favorite romance volumes "with which Children are sometimes injudiciously suffer'd to amuse their Imaginations; but which I little expected to hear quoted by your Ladyship in a serious Discourse" (374). Proper books, he argues, should provide "an Antidote to Example" in order to teach young ladies the proper morals (380). On the surface, Lennox's text appears to engage with and then settle questions about how the modern novel, as opposed to the antiquated, feminine romance, informs readers' perceptions of reality.

Scholars have long recognized that romances are not the only means of educating Arabella; however, but we have failed to appreciate exactly how perceptions of literacy and text shape Arabella's problematic behavior and subsequent transformation. Laurie Langbauer states that *The Female Quixote* "attests to a tacit recognition that the problems of romance are the problems of fiction, and of the novel as well" (64).² Ellen Gardiner suggests that Lennox's novel criticizes literary culture for using "romance as a tool with which to exclude readers and writers from participation in the new profession of literary reviewship on the basis of class and gender" (1). Seeing further problems in the novel's representation of literacy, Mary Patricia Martin argues that *The Female Quixote* "uses both romance and novel to expose the gendered rhetoric of the dominant discourse," making space for Lennox to "[claim] the novel, too, as 'women's writing'" (46). These interpretations of the novel suggest that Lennox's portrayal of Arabella as a bad subject is influenced by generic problems: how the emerging novel incorporates other genres (like the romance, perceived by many as a particularly feminine mode of expression) into the form of the novel readers recognize today.

While the question of genre certainly informs *The Female Quixote*, Lennox expands the scope of literacy to include not only genre but context—to "read" society in terms of the often unequal relationship between the object of interpretation and the reading subject. That is, the novel shows that just as the reader holds power over the interpretation of the text, so do men who "read" women as a means of protecting their authority as patriarchal powers and ensuring women remain in a state of social and sexual objectification. In response to this framework of a rather unromantic modern England, Lennox negotiates the conflicting positions of women's subjectivity in public space as a means of promoting social literacy, the ability to "read" society in terms of power relationships and social hierarchies.

The problem I focus on in this essay is not simply due to what Arabella reads (romances) nor the material conditions of her reading (isolation from modern England), but how these influences enable her to construct the subjectivity of a reader. Arabella's father, the Marquis, "never admitted any Company whatever" (6), and after her mother's death, Arabella was "permitted [...] to receive no Part of her Education from another, which he was capable of giving her himself" (6). Her physical and educational solitude exacerbates her textual solitude, for Arabella reads only a "great Store of Romances, and, what was still more unfortunate, not in the original *French*, but very bad Translations" (7). Undoubtedly, these romances warp Arabella's worldview later in the novel, and a cursory examination of the novel would suggest that romances themselves prey upon unsuspecting, lonely female readers, twisting their interpretations of proper behavior into romantic delusions. Yet the isolated reading of the romance's content does not necessarily lead to Arabella's misreading in entirety; indeed, as Sharon Smith Palo points out, the romance allows Arabella later in the novel to "exercise a transformative influence over this society" (223). Moreover, Arabella's unique viewpoint and store of knowledge lead her to develop values such as compassion, self-respect, and virtue.³ While important to her mindset, romance and isolation are not the only instigators of her quixotic vision.

More troubling is the model of a reader's subjectivity that stems from Arabella's isolated consumption of romances. Lennox's narrator tells the reader that Arabella's "Retirement" left her unable to understand how "any Solitude could be obscure enough to conceal a Beauty like hers from Notice; and thought the Reputation of her Charms sufficient to bring a Croud of Adorers to demand her of her Father" (7-8). In this satirical reading of her own body through the eyes of an imagined public, Arabella reflects upon her status as a representation. Arabella reads herself through the eyes of an imagined public and concludes that she should be powerful because her body is an object of attention for that public, specifically men in search of a sexual partner. For example, when potential suitor Mr. Hervey desires to "have a nearer View" (19) and the gardener Edward "gaze[s] on her very attentively" (22), Arabella interprets this attention as an acknowledgement of her power and expresses that power by ordering them around and banishing them from her presence. She conflates romantic desire for her person with the men's recognition of her own importance, and in the case of Edward, completely fabricates both feelings. Even though Arabella expresses some discomfort with being the object of men's gazes, the novel suggests that she projects this uneasiness in order to restore herself to the position of higher power:

This Veil had never appeared to her so necessary before. Mr. *Hervey's* eager Glances threw her into so much Confusion, that, pulling it over her Face as much as she was able, she remained invisible to him all the time they afterwards stayed in the Church. This Action, by which she would have had him understand that she was displeas'd at his gazing on her with so little Respect, only increased his Curiosity to know who she was. (9) Arabella intends her retreat into her veil to remind Mr. Hervey of her right to his respect and of her position as the administrator of power in this relationship. In this way, Arabella's behavior implies her belief in her ability to control how others perceive her.

However, Arabella's reading of her own power is misguided. Her actions with the veil draw Mr. Hervey's curious gaze even farther in, and her position as object of the gaze leads Mr. Hervey to evaluate her worth and investigate ways to hold power over her. After seeing her rich carriage

and fine dress, he “conceived a much higher Idea of her Quality than he had at first,” and after finding out from other churchgoers that she has been raised “in Obscurity,” he concludes that “it would not be difficult to persuade her to free herself by Marriage” (9). As Mr. Hervey’s gaze “reads” the text of Arabella’s body, his inner monologue reveals two important assumptions he makes about the balance of power between men and women: his observations about her appearance correctly establish her current social status, and his understanding of that status will make it possible for him to exploit her for his own economic well-being – that is, he could marry her. Through Mr. Hervey’s production of meaning from the text of Arabella’s body, Lennox shows how the act of reading in modern England signifies more about a subject than just the ability to understand the written word. In the hands of Mr. Hervey and other members of English society, literacy serves as a language of power that could potentially deny objectified women the full possession of their public identity and subjectivity.

Mr. Hervey’s strategies for “reading” Arabella align with some contemporary notions about the objectification of women’s bodies in eighteenth-century consumer culture. As modernity developed, ideas about the objectification of bodies and the placement of those bodies in a public spectacle changed, as Erin Labbie explains:

During the mid-eighteenth century, gender roles and constructs, previously maintained as social categories, became invested with a categorically ontological rigidity. The shift brought with it a new focus on female sartorial ornamentation and a commodification of fashion markers. In other words, as women’s ontological status began to inhabit their social status, making evident a collapse between interiority and exteriority, as well as surface and depth, which continues to be at work today, a perception of women as sites and objects of exchange began to be expressed through increasing commodification and distribution of fashion and its hygienic paraphernalia. (80)

Whereas in Arabella’s romances women may have been powerful because of their bodies’ objectification, the same is not necessarily true of Arabella’s modern society. When women make spectacles of themselves in a consumer society, they grant others (like Mr. Hervey) power over themselves, permitting themselves to serve as “sites and objects of exchange” for the interpretations of other people in society rather than as sites for their own subjectivity, as Arabella thinks. While no character in the novel directly expresses these views, the bad subjects – particularly Arabella – delineate the changes in social behavior. While Labbie ties this shift in the culture’s perception of women to fashion and the expression of one’s good taste, Lennox’s novel explores how literacy serves as a vehicle for the culture’s interpretation of the public reception and reputation of a woman.

In this light, Arabella’s fright over Mr. Hervey is not nearly so far off base. When Mr. Hervey rides up to her, her “Imagination immediately suggested to her, that this insolent Lover had a Design to seize her Person” (19), and in a sense, he does. As he “reads” Arabella, he sets events in motion that threaten to seize her person in the form of her subjectivity. Certainly, Arabella’s concerns about the physical seizure of her person are unfounded, but the seizure of her identity through marriage is imminent. As a woman entering the marriage market, Arabella inhabits a space in which her status as a commodity becomes intertwined with her identity as a woman,

making her the type of accomplished figure Ann Bermingham argues “raised the specter of false consciousness” in late eighteenth-century novels (496). In Bermingham’s view, Arabella is the type of woman whose achievements and appearance reflect back the desires of men; the mid-eighteenth century tended to represent eligible women as particularly problematic when women developed their subject formation as a result of what men wanted out of them.⁴ Bermingham’s figure helps clarify how Arabella’s resistance to Mr. Hervey is a resistance to not only modern ways of reading and being read by society, but also the lack of selfhood implied by these actions. Undoubtedly, Arabella has an overblown view of her own power, but the satirical portrait of her contains an undercurrent of fear about women’s status as subjects.

In this way, Arabella unwittingly opposes contemporary views of courtship. As modern society writes fictitious, romantic ideologies over the exchanges of power that occur over the course of a courtship, Lennox has her protagonist humorously defy that fiction. As Catherine Gallagher notes, this reading of the novel turns around the conventional interpretation of the novel in that Arabella “*does* resist fiction, a fact that has not generally been noticed; indeed, most commentators take her to be resisting reality” (175-176). Yet the question here is, how is it helpful to show a protagonist comically and inadvertently resisting such traditional notions of romance and womanhood? Ultimately, Arabella’s adventures help readers decode how society interprets the value, both economic and moral, of its members. By living out her own reality and provoking extreme reactions from other characters in the novel, Arabella’s resistance to convention allows her reader to trace the discursive threads of English society and to delineate the ways that English culture processes power, reading, and femininity.

As Arabella’s reading moves from the text of her romances to the context of her society, her misreading of the power structures in England becomes more apparent. When Arabella’s “Attention [is] immediately engaged” by another woman at church, she responds by reading subjectivity into Miss Groves’s appearance (67).

In Arabella’s elevated description, Miss Groves’s tall stature and curious plumpness are conflated with her “majestic” bearing, her “Air of Grandeur,” and the “Charms” of her face (67). Arabella associates society’s attention to Miss Groves with society’s acknowledgement of her commanding presence. In her delusion, she reads Miss Groves and inscribes the language of power over her body, the object Arabella thinks controls the gaze of men and requires them to respect women.

However, Miss Groves’s companion Mrs. Morris informs Arabella that the female body is the root of Miss Groves’s subjection, not her subjectivity:

I need not tell you, Madam, that my Lady was a celebrated Beauty: You have yourself been pleased to say, that she is very handsome. When she first appeared at Court, her Beauty, and the uncommon Dignity of her Person, at such early Years, made her the Object of general Admiration. (74)

But, as Miss Groves finds out, women who draw the gaze to their bodies confirm men’s power over them. The same “Object of general Admiration” has sex with Mr. L., and as Mrs. Morris reports, when “[h]er Story became generally known, [...] [s]he was shunned and neglected by

every body” (75). When Miss Groves displays her body to a group of unromantic English readers, she opens herself up to misinterpretation and a loss of social status and power. Good readers in this culture, Lennox implies, understand that women’s actions are interpreted not only by their own legitimate reasoning, but also by the authority of men, who tend to control the consequences of bad representation.

Arabella seems to understand how the public penalizes wayward women, but she does not account for the impact social class can make on women at the center of the spectacle. For example, she reads Miss Groves’s story in the context of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra, people far more powerful than Miss Groves, a fallen woman who is pregnant for the second time out of wedlock:

Your Lady’s Case, said she, is much to be lamented; and greatly resembles the unfortunate *Cleopatra*’s, whom *Julius Caesar* privately marrying, with a Promise to own her for his Wife, when he should be peaceable Master of the *Roman* Empire, left that great Queen big with Child, and, never intending to perform his Promise, suffered her to be exposed to the Censures the World has so freely cast upon her; and which she so little deserved. (77)

Although Arabella considers how other people read Cleopatra’s story, her conflation of Cleopatra and Miss Groves suggests that she views their positions in the social hierarchy as one and the same. This interpretation marks her as sufficiently Quixotic by being unable to read the world around her, but it also enables her to be sympathetic towards both women. The scorn which Cleopatra “so little deserved,” in Arabella’s view at least, was heaped upon Miss Groves, whose reputation “was pretty severely handled by her Enemies,” Mrs. Morris adds (75). Lennox implies that a shift in Arabella’s literacy skills towards an understanding of class and society will perhaps bring about a shift in her ability to feel sympathy for others.

Lennox also emphasizes the need for this shift near the end of the novel, when Arabella’s position bears a striking resemblance to the position of two women who are associated with the spectacle, prostitution, and scandal. First, at the pump-house, Arabella claims that people “either took me for some Princess of the Name of *Julia*, who is expected here to-Night, or else flatter me with some Resemblance to the beautiful Daughter of *Augustus*” (272). Her suitor Mr. Selvin points out that Julia “was, pardon the Expression, the most abandon’d Prostitute in *Rome*,” observing that Arabella effectively identifies herself as a woman of ill repute (273). Then, when Arabella goes to London, she again finds herself an object of attention for the public:

The Singularity of her Dress, for she was cover’d with her Veil, drew a Number of Gazers after her, who prest round her with so little Respect, that she was greatly embarrass’d, and had Thoughts of quitting the Place, delightful as she own’d it, immediately, when her Attention was holly engross’d by an Adventure in which she soon interested herself very deeply. (334)

The narrator explains the “Adventure” that Arabella witnesses: a navy officer’s mistress (Lucy) has been dressed as a man, but has been discovered. Despite the woman’s intended interpretation of her identity as a man, she betrays her true identity after becoming slightly intoxicated.

Arabella's interpretation of the woman as an "unfortunate Fair One" leads her to unveil herself while rushing to Lucy's aid, an act that "attract[s] every Person's Attention and Respect" (335).⁵ While Arabella intends to be seen as a heroine defending Lucy's honor, her behavior commands the public's attention in the same way that other scandalous women attract the gaze of others. The similarity between Arabella, Julia, and Lucy the prostitute in their position as the center of the spectacle also signifies their shared struggle: : a woman's ability to control the interpretation of identity while maintaining sympathy for others, and on the other hand, her acceptance by her community and her reputation as a virtuous woman.

This problem of self-representation is framed by important ways in which eighteenth-century English society interprets gender, the body, and social control, historical shifts articulated by Michel Foucault in his theory of discipline. Broadly speaking, according to Foucault in the historical period represented by Arabella's romances, punishment occurred through the spectacle, a situation where power was displayed through bodies punished in public. Authorities used public exhibitions of torture - such as lynching, beheading, quartering, and burning at the stake - as a means of reaffirming their power over the people and educating the public about the consequences of certain crimes (7, 12-13, 32-69). The body in the spectacle served as a political statement about the relationship between offenders of the social order, the spectators, and the state: "The body, several times tortured, provides the synthesis of the reality of the deeds and the truth of the investigation, of the documents of the case and the statements of the criminal, of the crime and the punishment" (47). While not an exact equivalent to Arabella's perception of the spectacle, Foucault's theory frames her view of the world in terms of antiquated forms of power. As Arabella's experiences with Mr. Hervey and Miss Groves show, she feels that bodies (particularly hers) can change how other people interpret their individual situation.

However, Foucault adds, over the course of the eighteenth century, European modes of discipline begin to occur in private spaces with individual offenders:

[Punishment] leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness; its effectiveness is seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity; it is the certainty of being punished and not the horrifying spectacle of public punishment that must discourage crime; the exemplary mechanics of punishment changes its mechanisms. (9)

In tracing how punishment and discipline came to be considered essential elements of being a good subject, Foucault outlines a key shift in how subjects have to "read" other members of their society. Rather than focusing on a central "text" to determine what or what not to do, individuals internalize the norms of their society; good discipline is maintained by interpreting the behaviors of others, determining what actions are more likely to bring punishment, and adjusting their public performance accordingly. As many scholars have pointed out, these modes of discipline seem to be located in or around the female subject. Arabella's companion Charlotte Glanville seems to understand the public/private split of her subjectivity, as she bristles when Arabella compliments her on her "Opportunities of making [her]self beloved [... to] a greater Number of Admirers" (87). Charlotte resents this characterization of herself as an object of the gaze, responding "I never granted a Kiss without a great deal of Confusion" (89). Charlotte's subjectivity is intertwined with her body, and her knowledge about society shows that neither

should be open to the public. While Arabella interprets power as residing in bodies, the modern society starts to see the body as an intermediary, and the real authorities see bodies as a site for the exchange of knowledge through which they can perpetuate their social systems (Foucault 9, 11, 14-16).

The problem Arabella needs to solve – and the problem Lennox examines in the latter half of the novel – is how women should “write their own character,” or interact with their society so as to be interpreted in the way that they would like to be interpreted. The issues Arabella has previously had with reading broaden, for this part of the novel shows Lennox linking a female writer’s control over her own body and text with the potential that writer has for influencing her own reception in the public sphere. Of course, Arabella’s conception of a reader’s subjectivity reveals how willingly she would forfeit control over her identity, and thereby forfeit her public authority. When she instructs her maid Lucy to relate Arabella’s history to her suitor Sir George, Arabella reveals how she thinks an intimate story of a woman should enter the public sphere:

Recount all my Words and Actions, even the smallest and most inconsiderable, but also all my Thoughts, however instantaneous; relate exactly every Change of my Countenance; remember all my Smiles, Half-Smiles, Blushes, Turnings pale, Glances, Pauses, Full-stops, Interruptions; the Rise and Falling of my Voice; every Motion of my Eyes; and every Gesture which I have used for these Ten Years past; nor omit the smallest Circumstance that relates to me. (122)

Arabella sees her own story in both precise and intimate terms: Lucy would have to be very close to Arabella’s body indeed to record the “Motion of [her] Eyes” and “exactly every Change of [her] Countenance” (122). If she were to bring this story into the public sphere, the public’s perspective on her body would amplify many of her flaws. In animating this ludicrous tale of Arabella’s, Lennox’s novel appears to reinforce the status quo: entering the public sphere places women in a position that risks injury to her intimate self.

On the other hand, some critics have rejected this theory of the novel’s conservatism, preferring to see Arabella as a character who unmasks the domestic ideologies of eighteenth-century England – not unlike Lennox herself. As Labbie argues, “By making visible the means by which the female subject is exploited, made the pure object of the scopic gaze, and commodified through the gaze, those means of exploitation are disarmed” (86). In this view, Lennox’s only means of rebellion or radical reaction is representation of and consequential avoidance of the gaze. Earlier in this essay, I argued that Arabella’s interactions with Mr. Hervey perform a similar function of uncovering the ways in which English culture uses the gaze to discipline women, but the novel as a whole is less clear about overcoming the exploitation made possible through the gaze. That is, *The Female Quixote* does not animate the sort of subjectivity which could operate in public while maintaining an identity cohesive with one’s domestic life *and* without being misinterpreted by others. In a sense, Lennox’s novel requires one of the most critical reading skills of all: to imagine a subject that does not yet exist. The Quixote thus becomes a literacy educator: her job is to test the boundaries of respectable subjectivity, and her facetious readings of her world train her reader to judge how a subject *could* operate in her situation, if that subject possessed the ability to accurately read her society.

Arabella's world widens when she and the Glanvilles go to Bath, and her appearance enables her reader to understand how societies work. Arabella first visits the pump-room dressed in "something like a Veil, of black Gauze, which covered almost all her Face, and Part of her Waist, and gave her a very singular Appearance" (262). Her ridiculous costume makes her the object of others' discourse, as "every new Object affords a delicious Feast of Raillery and Scandal" (262).

Lennox specifically places Arabella as the spectacle, the object of a communal reading, wherein members of society attempt to "read" Arabella and make judgments about her character. Her unusual costume draws a number of outrageous interpretations, such as a Scottish lady and a Spanish nun. Luckily for Arabella, the men in the room hear about her wealth and "found greater Beauties to admire in her Person" (263), but the women of the room "dropt their Ridicule on her Dress" (264). Arabella's position as the center of attention produces two not entirely unlike readings by the different genders. The men sexualize Arabella the object, actively searching for "greater Beauties" in her body to make her more palatable as a future mate. The women satirize her by "drop[ping] their Ridicule" on her body.⁶ Both groups' verbs, "finding" and "dropping," suggest an active conceptualization of Arabella.

However, Arabella's next appearance in society involves a different dress and a different reaction. This costume is in the style of her conception of antiquated romances:

She wore no Hoop, and the Blue and Silver Stuff of her Robe, was only kept by its own Richness, from hanging close about her. It was quite open round her Breast, which was shaded with a rich Border of Lace; and clasping close to her Waist, by small Knots of Diamonds, descending in a sweeping Train on the Ground. The Sleeves were short, wide, and slashed, fastned in different Places with Diamonds, and her Arms were partly hid by half a Dozen Falls of Ruffles. Her Hair, which fell in very easy Ringlets on her Neck, was plac'd with great Care and Exactness round her lovely Face; and the Jewels and Ribbons, which were all her Head-dress, dispos'd to the greatest Advantage. (271)

Arabella's exterior is marked by signifiers of her wealth: the "Richness" of her robe, a "rich Border of Lace," "small Knots of Diamonds" on the border and on her sleeves, and "Jewels and Ribbons" in her hair. Even though she is the object of attention in Bath society, she has an additional source of legitimacy and power: class and riches. In her full sexual and economic display, Arabella exposes her body to the public, but she now shows her power in such a way that society recognizes her worth. Perhaps, some readers might think, Arabella finally seems to understand herself as a text because she represents herself as a wholly commercial object, uniting her economic worth with her presentation of herself as a subject. Indeed, in this situation, she gets a markedly different reaction from the public, who interpret her in a more favorable light than before. Instead of drawing attention to herself as an object of "delicious Feast of Raillery and Scandal" (262), Arabella's "irresistible Charm [...] commanded Reverence and Love from all who beheld her:(272).

The members of the community react favorably to Arabella's performance because she exhibits her body in a context conducive to modern societal norms. Arabella fulfills the position of an

objectified woman, but her markers of class and wealth make her a very valuable object. Lennox frames this scene as a moment in which society can see Arabella's true self, and she commands the respect that has been missing throughout the novel.⁷ The difference between this display and the earlier costume reveals one way to combat the gaze: if Arabella can accurately wield her wealth and class, she can make society interpret those signifiers in terms of her manners and inner self, and ultimately can help society shape their customs. By comparing the appearance of the two dresses and including opposite reactions by other members of Arabella's society, Lennox introduces the idea that the truthful representation of wealth and power matter greatly to an individual's reception in public.

Presumably, the wealthy Countess would be a suitable role model for a respectable spectacle, but she is unable to help Arabella with her problem. One of the most ambiguous characters in the novel, the Countess appears to support Arabella's madness by answering her greeting with a language "so conformable" to her romances (325). In contrast with the other characters who reject Arabella, the Countess initially aligns herself with the bad subject. However, once Arabella brings up singular women who made spectacles of themselves in her romances, the Countess tells her that "one cannot help rejoicing that we live in an Age in which the Customs, Manners, Habits, and Inclinations differ so widely from theirs, that 'tis impossible such Adventures should even happen" (326). Using her common ground with Arabella, the Countess persuades her that times have changed, and the society that once read those romances no longer exists. Here, the Countess shows that, unlike Arabella, she is able to distinguish the types of things that happen in old books and the types of things that happen in the modern world. On one hand, she appears to be the type of reader that the novel is attempting to construct.

On the other hand, Lennox shows how the Countess has internalized the gaze of society by demonstrating how much she has assumed the roles others have defined for her. She continues to stress feminine community when Arabella asks her for her history, or a "Recital of her Adventures" (327). The Countess responds by telling the younger woman the story of her life:

The Word Adventures carries in it so free and licentious a Sound in the Apprehensions of People at this Period of Time, that it can hardly with Propriety be apply'd to those few and natural Incidents which compose the History of a Woman of Honour. And when I tell you [...] that I was born and christen'd, had a useful and proper Education, receiv'd the Addresses of my Lord --- through the Recommendation of my Parents, and marry'd him with their Consents and my own Inclination, and that since we have liv'd in great Harmony together, I have told you all the material Passages of my Life, which upon Enquiry you will find differ very little from those of other Women of the same Rank, who have a moderate Share of Sense, Prudence, and Virtue. (327)

The Countess narrates the primary events in a woman's life that attach her to social institutions: christening to religion, education to contemporary social mores, and marriage to the authority of her husband. No woman stands out for public reading, yet the extreme domesticity that this narrative implies conflicts with the expansive societal landscape that Arabella has previously had access to. Lidia De Michelis argues that the Countess's representation of the self "issues an unequivocal statement concerning women's allotted place in mid-eighteenth-century society"

(193); indeed, that place is decidedly void of anything resembling the plot of Lennox's novel. Without Arabella's mistaken notion of reading subjectivity, *The Female Quixote* itself does not exist. When social literacy and public acceptance become substitutes for personal and social identity, women like the Countess write themselves straight out of the novel and the public sphere, as her sudden disappearance from the novel suggests.

On the other hand, the Countess defends her position by reflecting on the developing notions about women's bodies, the value of those bodies, and virtue. She notes the change in women's subjectivity since the romances, namely that women's positions as objects then meant greater power than the position means now:

A Lady in the heroick Age you speak of, would not be thought to possess any great Share of Merit, if she had not been many times carried away by one or other of her insolent Lovers: Whereas a Beauty in this could not pass thro' the Hands of several different Ravishers, without bringing an Imputation on her Chastity. (328)

A woman surrounded by men who have access to her body used to be a sign that she held power over them, but women who give many men access to her body in Arabella's era grant those men power over her, the Countess argues. Ultimately, women who exist only as objects do not have the power to control the reception of their character, regardless of their potential for a good story. Again, the Countess makes the earlier lessons in the novel clear, but her sudden exit from it leaves Arabella uncured, although uneasy (330).

The Countess's argument raises some significant questions for *The Female Quixote* itself. As the genre of the novel was developing, critics wondered if the form could accurately represent modern subjectivity. If *The Female Quixote* cannot model subjectivity for its readers, what novel could? In the Countess's view, all good women have uneventful lives which are not suitable for representation in the novel, thereby suggesting that the solution to Arabella's problem with social literacy does not automatically help her problem with subjectivity. She does not offer any answers for women's authorship, suggesting that the gap between women as a writing subject and women as a textual object is almost too difficult, if not impossible, to overcome.⁸ She fails to answer fully any of the key questions of the novel: How can one teach a reader to understand key distinctions between things that happen in novels and things that happen in the real world? Or how can a novel represent reality without having people read it *as* reality? Although Arabella (and perhaps many readers) sees the Countess's "secret Charm [... and] the Force of her reasoning" (329) as a potential panacea, her characterization points to the profound uncertainty and complexity surrounding Lennox's examination of literacy, discipline, and subjectivity.

After Arabella jumps in a river because she would rather die than be ravished by her perceived attackers, she receives a visit from the authoritative Doctor, a character possibly modeled after Samuel Johnson.⁹ Arabella attempts to argue that her actions were justified, but the Doctor suggests otherwise:

Has it ever been known, that a Lady of your Rank was attack'd with such Intentions, in a Place so publick, without any Preparations made by the Violator for Defence or Escape? Can it be imagin'd that any Man would so rashly expose himself to Infamy by Failure, and to the Gibbet

by Success? Does there in the Records of the World appear a single instance of such hopeless Villainy? (372)

The Doctor asks Arabella if any historical precedent exists for her perceptions, and she responds with a question of her own: how does he know that any of the places *he* reads about actually exist? Some readers may overlook Arabella's small victory in what is otherwise a very one-sided conversation: she and the Doctor agree that books help readers gain knowledge about lives they have not lived and places they have not visited. Essentially, both the Doctor and Arabella agree that literacy, particularly in its relationship to reality and fiction, is an ideologically fraught activity. However, the novel has been insistent on pointing out how reality is imbued with fiction; for example, Hervey invents an excuse to court Arabella, but that fiction is underscored by his real desire for her fortune. Additionally, Sir George invents a romantic fiction to win Arabella, but his playacting results in Glanville running a very real sword through him. A careful reader of Lennox's novel has learned not to trust fully the content of her texts nor the world around her, so the Doctor's insistence on the existence of one particular reality should prove suspect.

Moreover, the socially literate reader has observed that members of society are motivated by economic wealth and power, so the Doctor's arguments should be read in this context as well.¹⁰ As he converses with Arabella, he denounces her beloved reading material:

Then let me again observe [...] that these Books soften the Heart to Love, and harden it to Murder. That they teach Woman to exact Vengeance, and Men to execute it; teach Women to expect not only Worship, but the dreadful Worship of human Sacrifices. Every Page of these Volumes is filled with such extravagance of Praise, and expressions of Obedience as one human Being ought not to hear from another; or with Accounts of Battles, in which thousands are slaughtered for no other Purpose than to gain a Smile from the haughty Beauty, who sits a calm Spectatress of the Ruin and Desolation, Bloodshed and Misery, incited by herself. (380-381)

The Doctor damns the romance genre, claiming that it teaches readers improper power relationships, particularly women's power over men. Through his reasoning, Arabella comes to understand how mistaken she was in her belief of her absolute power, but the socially literate reader does not have the same awakening. Rather, the reader's position allows him/her to see that the Doctor's argument is a production of his powerful space in society and his own particular interests in keeping that power. The Doctor's scorn exists not for the romances, or indeed for texts in general, but for how they prompt subjects to actions which invite the disciplinary gaze. By representing the Doctor from this perspective, the novel suggests that texts are not necessarily important for their truthful representation of a world, but for the power relationships they incite in a society.

Several critics have taken both the Doctor's sentiments and the narrative voice as suggesting that women are the problem with fiction, and in particular, the novel. Christine Roulston argues that "[w]hat the novel gradually reveals is the fact that the fictional mode is tied less to romance than to the feminine subject position itself" (40), and Laurie Langbauer suggests the *Female Quixote*

sends the message that “Arabella’s only escape from romance is to stop being a woman” (81). Certainly, the novel’s stance towards a woman’s standing out in public and directing the reception of her character is not positive, but I argue that Arabella’s fate is not the only indicator of the novel’s position towards women and fiction. For Lennox, the Doctor’s interpretation of romances, while authoritative, need not be the final word on their validity and legitimacy as forerunners to the novel. Sharon Smith Palo argues that “Lennox’s position on the question of whether romance reading inhibits or perpetuates a woman’s intellectual development remains unclear” (214), and while that may be true, it is because Lennox argues for a new way of shaping women’s intellectual development: social literacy. Romances may help a reader understand a society, or a mixture of romance and realistic fiction, like *The Female Quixote*, may help women read relationships of power. Texts, then, become what Eric Rothstein calls “a starting point for autonomy” (269), private spaces in which women can practice the reading skills they will need in the public sphere to avoid being a spectacle and perpetuating gendered ideologies.

Lennox is not precisely the feminist writer that modern readers would like her to be, but neither is she wholly complicit in disciplinary structures that objectify women. The social literacy that *The Female Quixote* teaches cannot change society on its own, but the connections to the cultural and societal ideologies of its modern society keep women out of the gaze of men, in hopes of making their “text” less in need of correction. Lennox does not solve the problems of women’s writing and reading in her novel, but perhaps leaves room for her socially literate reader to continue the task of carving out public space and blank pages for female authors.

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¹ All quotations from the text are from the second (1752) edition of *The Female Quixote*.

² Langbauer's larger argument is that the novel scapegoats the romance, "deploying the term in an attempt to draw off contradictions and problems of coherence that undermine the novel's incorporation" (3). My concern with *The Female Quixote* is not about the form the novel takes as it develops into the genre we recognize today, but rather the questions surrounding its usage and purpose for readers. Both Langbauer and I agree that Lennox's inclusion of the romance genre in this novel is a way of asking how women themselves can represent others and be represented themselves in the novel.

³ Lennox did not only represent women's education in her novels, she founded a magazine, *Lady's Museum*, which aimed to teach women "in the very notion of being a woman itself" (Shevelov *Women* 184). For more on Lennox's educational purpose for the magazine, see Shevelov, "'C—L--' to 'Mrs. Stanhope': A Preview of Charlotte Lennox's *The Lady's Museum*."

⁴ Bermingham's article draws heavily upon her reading of the Miss Beauforts in Austen's *Sanditon* as an example of the accomplished woman who unsettles notions of subjectivity. She adds that Austen's heroines tend to view their accomplishments as activities for their own private fulfillment rather than as public displays on the marriage market. Similarly, literacy's position as both public discourse and private source of entertainment makes it a particularly useful lens into the culture's debates over women's subjectivity and domesticity.

⁵ Deborah Ross holds that "in Lennox's view, the social hierarchy found in the real world needs no correction" (460), yet Arabella's compassionate treatment of the prostitute who is so cruelly scorned by her society surely serves as Lennox's small critique on society's treatment of objectified women.

⁶ The women in the room also compare Arabella to other women of their circle who also have "inexcusable" whims, such as riding astride a horse and inventing titles (264).

⁷ Langbauer sees this situation as the novel trying on the mask of a romance, an uneasy moment where the novel confronts what it has been denying that it is (67). Certainly, Arabella's display here is unsettling at the same time that it is potentially empowering.

⁸ The Countess is a bad model for women's writing for another reason – she shuts down any possible debate. The narrator says that through the "Deference always pay'd to her Opinion, [she] silenc'd every pretty Impertinent around her" (322).

⁹ See Isles, 425-26.

¹⁰ Furthermore, the Doctor's understanding of history may be specious, as Jane Spencer argues: "For all their historically-minded insistence on the changing nature of human custom, these men cannot grasp the possibility that customs might ever have been so radically unlike the ones they know as to allow women an important place in history" (337).