

"Mind at once so enlighten'd, and so ridiculous": A Romance-Reading Heroine in *The Female Quixote*

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1. Introduction

Arabella, the heroine of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752), devotes herself to reading romances and identifies with the heroines of her favorite ones. At the time Lennox worked on *The Female Quixote*, there was a literary controversy surrounding fiction, which Lennox herself took part in. Both Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding regarded themselves as authors of the "new species" of fiction (Martin 45-47), disassociating themselves from the romances they denounced as characterized by excessive exaggeration and redundancy. However, a reading of *The Female Quixote* suggests that the most distinguished feature of a romance is its emphasis of love's supremacy. Arabella follows the example of her romance heroines, putting "love" at the center of her life, a choice which often creates turmoil. The novel, in contrast to romances, claimed to aim for realism and focus on modern daily lives. In describing Arabella as a romance-reading heroine, Lennox seems to intentionally make her an object of ridicule. However, as Amanda Gilroy points out, "novels and romances often seem interchangeable" (xxii).¹ The ambiguous distinction between novels and romances may have an effect on Arabella's personality. Lennox seems to represent Arabella not only as a protagonist to

be ridiculed but also as one to be respected and admired by the reader. Therefore, it is difficult to make a sweeping judgment about who Arabella is. In this paper, I would like to examine the intentions behind Lennox's representation of her heroine, and to particularly focus on Arabella's relationships with other characters in *The Female Quixote*. I will also briefly consider the ways in which *The Female Quixote* influenced Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818).

2. Self-Dramatization of Arabella

By making use of the romance framework, which presents love as life's most important and noblest event, Arabella dramatizes her own uneventful days as "adventures." For her, an "adventure" does not always mean wandering through dark, winding secret passages in old castles like heroines in the gothic novels that represented the zenith of prosperity in the second half of the eighteenth-century.² Her daily life is so isolated and monotonous that any slight deviation from routine can mark the dawn of a great "adventure." Her first "adventure" starts when she meets the eager gaze of a respectable gentleman in her church. She cannot help but feel intense excitement about the gaze and assumes the gentleman must passionately love her. In her imagination, she

conjures up all sorts of romantic stories. In the process of this self-dramatization, she conveniently distorts situations so that they correspond with her imagined stories. For example, when Arabella receives a report on Mr. Hervey, the gentleman in the church, from Lucy, her favorite waiting woman, she insists on maintaining her original interpretation of his kissing of a letter he received from her. Although Lucy, who remained nearby during the incident, thinks that Mr. Hervey kissed the letter because he must have mistaken it for a reply from her mistress, Arabella never accepts this idea:

Foolish Wench! replied *Arabella*, How can you imagine he had the Temerity to think I should answer his Letter? A Favour, which, though he had spent Years in my Service, would have been infinitely greater than he could have expected. No, *Lucy*, he kissed the Letter, either because he thought it had been touched at least by my Hands, or to shew the perfect Submission with which he received my Commands; (27)

If anything in life contradicts her understanding of the codes of romance, Arabella manages to adapt it to her own imagination. In doing this, she elevates daily trifles to the status of illustrious "adventures." Thus, she rewrites her dull, uneventful routine by looking at things from a romantic perspective.

Even when Arabella grieves for her father's death, her behavior is theatrical; in fact, her mourning soliloquy is so dramatic that her grief seems to be artificial, though the narrator of the novel maintains that Arabella's feelings are pure and sincere. Still, it cannot be denied that Arabella is intoxicated by her own speech, and Sir Charles, who finds his niece's lamentation extremely unnatural, cannot help suspecting that she is

"in a Delirium" (77). Hereafter, he often doubts Arabella's sanity.

When Arabella goes out into society in Bath, she does not necessarily see much of the world. The new acquaintances she gains are limited and do not cause her romance-centered notion of the world to waver at all. In fact, it is with these acquaintances, Mr. Selvin and Mr. Tinsel, that Arabella acts out new ludicrous fantasies. Believing both Mr. Selvin and Mr. Tinsel have fallen in love with her, Arabella becomes agitated by the assumption that Mr. Tinsel will sweep her away when he unexpectedly enters her room:

Arabella hearing this Exclamation of her Woman's, echo'd her Screams, tho' with a Voice infinitely more delicate; and seeing *Tinsel*, who, confounded to the last Degree at the Cries of both the Lady and her Woman, had got into her Chamber he knew not how, she gave herself over for lost, and fell back in her Chair in a Swoon, or something she took for a Swoon, for she was persuaded it could happen no otherwise; since all Ladies in the same Circumstances are terrified into a fainting Fit, and seldom recover till they are conveniently carried away; and when they awake, find themselves many Miles off in the Power of their Ravisher. (338)

This passage suggests that she falls down in a faint not because she fears being carried away emotionally, but because she thinks she should behave in accordance with the codes of romance. Her theatrical behavior bewilders the Glanvilles in the extreme, and they do not understand what has befallen her. Later, confused with her eccentricity, Sir Charles gives serious consideration to bringing her to a "Commission of Lunacy" (380), though this never takes place.

It must be noted that almost all male characters in *The Female Quixote* have doubted Arabella's sanity at least once. Interestingly, her madness is contagious (Langbauer 36). For example, when Mr. Glanville has to endure her unreasonable speech, he cries to her, "you will make me quite mad, if you go on in this manner" (128). As we see later, eloquence is one of Arabella's most conspicuous traits. By repeatedly emphasizing her whimsical speech and follies, Lennox repeatedly induces the reader to laugh at Arabella. In this way, Lennox ostensibly criticizes romances bitterly. However, we cannot say that Lennox rejects them completely, for, although she encourages the reader to ridicule Arabella, she also protects her heroine from being ridiculed *too much*, and even compels the reader to admire her. To this end, Lennox sets up Arabella as an extraordinarily beautiful lady who is gifted with an excellent intellect and feminine virtues. As Laurie Langbauer puts it, Arabella is "very much a romance heroine herself" (32).³

According to Langbauer, the romance has "traditionally been considered a woman's form" (30-31). It is noteworthy that the romances Arabella reads with great pleasure are a legacy from her dead mother. When Mr. Glanville curses the books and attributes all follies to the false education they provide, he is, in a way, reproaching female tradition itself. Mr. Glanville and the Marquis completely agree about Arabella's need for a "cure," and their desire for her reform is mostly beneficial to themselves. It is true that Mr. Glanville prevents the Marquis from burning Arabella's books, but he does it only because he thinks he can make use of them as "Intercessors" (73). Debra Malina observes that romances act as both "evidence and emblem of the repression" of Arabella's dead mother because the patriarchal system

did not allow her to engage in any public activities she might have preferred, and Arabella's reading of romances thus represents a "political act of recovering and allying herself with the absent mother in defiance of the father" (279). However, we must not overlook the fact that the romances have not directly passed from her mother's hand to Arabella's; rather, they have come to Arabella through the Marquis's library, although he probably never read them himself. By allowing the books to be transmitted through the father, Lennox suggests that the problems with Arabella's education do not entirely stem from female inheritance but are also considerably tied to the patriarch.

To show how perfect Arabella's charm is, Lennox describes Arabella's appearance in Bath society. In spite of her strange dress and the rumors of her whimsical conduct that have already been circulating, her appearance in the Bath ball room still captures the attention of the others in attendance and drastically changes the circumstances:

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

Her noble Air, the native Dignity in her Looks, the inexpressible Grace which accompany'd all her Motions, and the consummate Loveliness of her Form, drew the Admiration of the whole Assembly. (307-08)

Lennox, by exposing Arabella to the public eye and showing that others have the greatest admiration for her, assures readers that she can be praised without reserve. That the narrator often calls her "our fair Heroine" or

"our charming Heroine" is another strategy meant to secure readers' sympathy. Furthermore, the narrator sometimes calls Arabella "the fair Visionary" or "the lovely Visionary." These designations show the heroine's two-sidedness, as the word "Visionary" insinuates her absurdity while epithets like "fair" and "lovely" clearly show her to be in high regard.

Whereas Arabella likes to "command" men and enjoys forcing them to obey her, Lennox manages to represent Arabella as feminine and innocent. In order to support her agreeableness, Lennox represents Arabella as displaying feminine behavior, such as blushing and casting down her eyes. We may notice that these gestures are rarely seen in Miss Glanville.

Lennox's intentional emphasis of Arabella's simplicity and innocence can also be seen her following quote:

All these, *Lucy*, as I said before, are very deplorable Effects of my Beauty; but you must observe, that my Will has no Part in the Miseries, that unfortunate Beauty occasions; and that, tho' I could even wish myself less fair, in order to avoid giving so much Unhappiness to others, yet these Wishes would not avail; (201)

In this passage, Arabella implies that she has brought Mr. Hervey and Edward to ruin through her fatal charms, and that even her own uncle, Sir Charles, has fallen in love with her. On the surface, she laments the situation and claims her innocence, since it is not her intention to be the cause of such fatal instances of "love." Scott Paul Gordon, discussing Arabella's innocence, argues that she exercises "immense power without any consciousness of doing so" (506). In spite of her frank and innocent distress, as shown in the preceding quote, she is clearly conscious of

her own beauty. Thus the quotation can also be read as an example of Arabella's self-dramatization: modeling herself after the glorious heroines of romances, she tries to enhance her beauty through dramatic effects. Gordon also observes that it is "her delusion, not her beauty" that generates the events of the story (507), but, in fact, her delusion is based on clear awareness of her own beauty. It is this same awareness that she uses to identify with her favorite model heroines. Indeed, near the start of *The Female Quixote*, the narrator describes Arabella looking into a mirror: "Her Glass, which she often consulted, always shewed her a Form so extremely lovely, that, not finding herself engaged in such Adventures as were common to the Heroines in the Romances she read, she often complained of the Insensibility of Mankind" (19-20). In addition to this, it must be noted that Arabella's beauty is not so natural as it seems to be; rather, some parts of her beauty is artificially created: "Her fine black Hair hung upon her Neck in Curls, which had so much the Appearance of being artless, that all but her Maid, whose Employment it was to give them that Form, imagined they were so" (21).

Still, she is nothing compared with Miss Glanville when it comes to the amount of time she spends gazing into a mirror. Miss Glanville devotes all her energy to beautifying herself, and the only other concerns she has pertain to how to obtain a suitor. Arabella's self-dramatization serves to foreground problems haunting women's daily lives and general social life in the eighteenth-century. The person who embodies these problems most overtly is Miss Glanville, and Arabella's unintentional speeches often expose her vanity and artificial coquetry. Unlike her cousin, Miss Glanville's reading has been "very confined" (101), and her shallow learning is revealed during conversations

with Arabella. Moreover, Miss Glanville has no friendly feelings toward other women. She sees Arabella only as a rival, and so cannot believe that any warm friendship can spring up between them. Thus, when Arabella praises her beauty, Miss Glanville cannot take her cousin's words seriously and tries to read hidden messages in her compliments, though none actually exist. Serving as a foil for Arabella, Miss Glanville makes Arabella's virtue more explicit. As Sharon Smith Palo argues, if Arabella's education is not perfect, a fine lady's education such as the one Miss Glanville received is even more useless (205).

While Miss Glanville loves to go out and enjoys society, Arabella does not. It is worth noting that Arabella does not try to dance in the assembly rooms in Bath. In Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney compares dancing with marriage, and, indeed, dancing can be the first step toward a married life in which both husband and wife have duties to fulfill. That Arabella prefers sitting down and listening to "history" to dancing shows that she cannot comply with the social customs of the eighteenth-century and resists participating in the patriarchal framework. Because she likes to direct the course of her own life, Arabella's self-dramatization is inextricably associated with her desire for power, whether consciously or not. As long as she sticks to and indulges in her imaginary romantic world, she can have overpowering control, and maintaining a dominant position over male characters.

3. Arabella's Eloquence

As Sir Charles points out admiringly by saying "you speak like an Orator" (304), Arabella is a very eloquent speaker. Nobody in *The Female Quixote* can compete with her in eloquence. Even when Arabella's claims are

most ridiculous, she can silence anyone by using her knowledge of romances freely. Although Mr. Glanville is most anxious to "cure" his cousin, he cannot rebuke her effectively; in order to avoid arguing uselessly and provoking her harsh resentment, he pretends to submit to what she "commands." As a result, he becomes the reluctant "hero" Arabella has imagined: he rescues her "Treasure" (74) from burning, threatens Mr. Tinsel when he slanders her, and stabs Sir George who is a rival for her love. Male characters who do not know the "Laws of Romance" are overwhelmed by her eloquence even if they do not understand what she means. To top it off, as previously discussed, they tend to jump to the conclusion that Arabella's brain is "disordered." However, Arabella is not always caught up in romantic notions. When the topic is irrelevant to romance and love, she can talk brilliantly with her sweet voice and captivate all who listen to her.

For Arabella, eloquence is the essential skill that allows her to indulge in her delusions. Even if someone complains about how whimsical her ideas are, she is never thoroughly unsettled. She is so confident of her historical knowledge that she can overwhelm anyone with floods of citations, often from romances. It is interesting to note that her attitude differs depending on the sex of her conversation partner. When Arabella runs away from her home, suspecting that an ex-gardener Edward has designs to carry her away, she assumes not only that Mr. Glanville is in league with this "ravisher" but also that Lucy has betrayed her. While Lucy is quickly acquitted when she explains what has happened, it takes much more time for Mr. Glanville to clear himself of Arabella's suspicions. Indeed, it is not until Mr. Glanville contracts a terrible disease that Arabella's feelings toward him soften. When

she talks with a man, she tends to be a reluctant listener. She tries to close her ears to the imaginary confessions of passionate love she expects whenever a man speaks to her with any degree of interest. She seldom concedes to men's arguments, often interrupts them, and occasionally even forbids them from opening their mouths. Consequently, Arabella monopolizes conversation. Thus, she dominates male protagonists.

Not only does Arabella herself talk; she also urges other women to speak of their own experiences or, as she calls them, "adventures." Langbauer argues that the conventions of romance allow women "to tell their stories" (44), and Arabella supports this position by trying to uncover the stories of women which, without her encouragement, would never be told. That the Countess's account of her life story is very short supports the assumption that respectable women have no stories to tell:

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. (367)

The Countess speaks of only four events in her life: her birth, christening, education, and marriage. As Palo points out, the Countess fails to refer to any events that occurred between the end of her education and courtship, which implies that she married shortly after completing her education (218).

What Arabella attempts to do is expand the space of time between an education's completion and marriage, adding color to her own life by pursuing her unique "adventures." However, this time in a woman's life is more likely to be consumed by petty dangers and preoccupations related to chastity. While Arabella wants to draw out stories of noble and glorious lives from women, most of the actual stories she finds consist of trivial gossip. For instance, Miss Groves's life, revealed by her waiting woman, is a series of sexual scandals: she has been seduced and delivered illegitimate children. In spite of the rampant conduct that defined Miss Groves's past, Arabella chooses to view her life in a "favourable Light" (96), redefining Miss Groves's story as a series of tragic misfortunes.⁴ Thus, as Gilroy observes, Arabella's romantic misreadings offer "alternative histories" (xxx) to those usually categorized as fallen women.

Generally, Arabella reacts favorably and sympathetically to women's stories. At Vauxhall Gardens, Arabella encounters a cross-dressing young woman who is actually the mistress of a naval officer. Noticing that the woman is extremely attractive but that she is in utmost distress, Arabella completely misapprehends the situation, trying to console her in defiance of Mr. Glanville's remonstrance. Here again, by applying the codes of romance to reality, Arabella breaks down the boundaries between women of virtuous and disreputable social standing.

While Arabella has an authentically detailed knowledge of romance, Mr. Selvin, who is proud of his reading and eager to show off his knowledge of history, is presented as a very superficial reader. For all his extensive reading, he has failed to acquire any useful knowledge beyond that which gratifies his own vanity. For this reason, he is no match for Arabella when they talk

about history, though her knowledge of history is based on romances that are not even consistent with historical facts. On one level, we can say that Lennox encourages readers to laugh at Arabella's inaccurate eloquence. However, on another level, Lennox also encourages readers to consider how to read books. Unlike Mr. Selvin, Arabella's reading ability is so prodigious that she not only memorizes various anecdotes, but also discovers useful messages behind the hyperbole and redundancy that characterize romances: values such as valor, nobility, and glory. In other words, she can cite romances freely because she deeply understands them. Arabella may read the wrong books, but Lennox explicitly shows that her way of reading is effective. In addition to Mr. Selvin, Sir George is represented as a superficial reader. The best values romance has to offer completely elude him when he tells his "history" to Arabella. Thus, though she listens to his long, romance-like story attentively, she reacts icily.

Arabella's powerful eloquence is supported by her vast knowledge of the romance. To be engrossed in her imaginary world and maintain her position as its romantic heroine, Arabella must continuously merge reality and the world of romance. As Palo puts it, she must use "her powers of interpretation and imagination," which contribute to the "development of her intellect" (207). We can say, therefore, that both Arabella's eloquence and intellect have been cultivated by her reading of romances.

It is especially noteworthy that Mr. Granville is attracted to Arabella's intelligence from the beginning: Arabella "charmed him to the last Degree of Admiration by the agreeable Sallies of her Wit, and her fine Reasoning upon every Subject he proposed" (62). Unlike his rivals, including both the real and imagined ones, he coherently

penetrates her intellect and wit even when her absurdity seems most excessive. For this very reason, Mr. Glanville is the right person to be Arabella's suitor.

4. Catherine Morland as a Successor to Arabella

The fact that Jane Austen enjoyed reading *The Female Quixote* is well-documented.⁵ It would even be possible to read *Northanger Abbey* as a tribute to and commentary on *The Female Quixote*. Instead of romances, Catherine Morland is engrossed in gothic novels. Hoping to experience something "horrid" (33), Catherine suspects the chest and cabinet in her room at Northanger must contain secrets to be uncovered. Just like Arabella, the books she has read inspire her to build castles in the air and to seek imaginary thrills. Without these "adventures," her life in Northanger would be much more uneventful than it is, for, as General Tilney admits, Northanger can offer neither "amusement nor splendour" (142) for Catherine. That the monotony of daily life is enhanced through the fancies of a young woman connects *Northanger Abbey* to *The Female Quixote*, and, in this regard, Catherine is Arabella's successor. Furthermore, it is Catherine's imagination that produces a story worth narrating. It is a point of interest that the life of Eleanor, General Tilney's daughter, is never explained in detail. Eleanor, who likes to read both novels and history so that she can distinguish reality from fiction, rarely has anything to say, just like the Countess in *The Female Quixote*. From this, we can infer that her life in Northanger has been rather dreary, and this inference is supported by Henry's observations that Eleanor "was uncomfortably circumstanced" and "sometimes without any companion at all" (160).

When comparing her to Arabella, we should consider the fact that Catherine becomes interested in Mrs. Tilney's life. She intends to uncover the situation surrounding Mrs. Tilney's death and attempts to snoop around her room. In the following quotation, Henry talks about his mother:

The world, I believe, never saw a better woman. But it is not often that virtue can boast an interest such as this. The domestic, unpretending merits of a person never known, do not often create that kind of fervent, venerating tenderness which would prompt a visit like yours. (201-02)

What the passage makes clear is that the lives of women, like Eleanor and Mrs. Tilney, often go unnoticed. What Catherine does by speaking out about the situation and considering the feelings of Eleanor during and after her mother's death sheds new light on the lives of such women, though her suspicion that the General might be a murderer proves incorrect. Earlier in the novel, Catherine complains that the histories she has read show her nothing but "the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all" (110). Without even recognizing her own shrewdness, Catherine strikes at the heart of the problem: women's lives have received too little attention.

Needless to say, Austen did not model Catherine after Arabella in every way. Catherine never identifies herself with the heroines of her favorite books as Arabella does. Lennox packs extreme beauty, elegance, and intelligence, as well as folly, into Arabella's character. As a result, it is difficult to overlook her unnatural theatricality. At times, Arabella even appears to be haughty and obstinate, despite Lennox's intention to arouse the reader's humor and

sympathy toward her. In shaping Catherine, Austen omits Arabella's artificiality. Rather, Austen practically sets her up as "the norm of young Englishwomen" (Malina 284).

Henry's famous admonishment to Catherine "Remember the country and the age in which we live" (203) is reminiscent of the Doctor's words to Arabella: "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; (422-23). Although the Doctor ends Arabella's infatuation with romances—and virtually ends *The Female Quixote* as a whole—Henry's authority is far less extensive as his.⁶ Indeed, Catherine is deeply ashamed of her stupid suspicion about the murder of Mrs. Tilney after Henry's reprimand, but Austen shows that the sense of uneasiness Catherine feels in regard to General Tilney remains present: "Catherine, at any rate, heard enough to feel, that in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (256). That is, even though she reveals no murder, Catherine does discover gothic elements lurking below the modern English lifestyle in "the central part of England" (205).

5. Conclusion

Sometimes, it seems as though Arabella intends to overpower male protagonists, and, at other times, she displays utmost femininity. She has brilliant wit and speaks eloquently, but, at the same time, her words and deeds can be extremely absurd. The Doctor is quite embarrassed by the fact that Arabella has a "Mind at once so enlighten'd, and so ridiculous" (409). It could be argued that Arabella's two-sidedness reflects Lennox's own ambiguous position toward patriarchal

society. Kate Levin, in studying the ending of *The Female Quixote* in terms of Lennox's career as an author, suggests that Lennox needed Arabella's "cure" because she wanted her novel to be accepted by the literary market after negative reception of her earlier publications (277-78). Lennox could present Arabella neither as fully rebellious toward the patriarchy, nor as uncritically accepting of it. Through her portrayal of Arabella, Lennox exposes her critical position toward the patriarchy and questions the quality of women's lives. It is also worth noting that Lennox acknowledges the traditional feminine roles represented in romances, both mocking and respecting them at once. Austen continued the questioning of the patriarchy that Lennox began, exploring related themes in a more realistic way in *Northanger Abbey*, and presenting Catherine as a heroine influenced by her reading of gothic novels.

Notes

- 1 See also Ross, 456-58. Deborah Ross discusses how Lennox's contemporaries approached the differences between the romance and the novel, citing William Congreve's definition and Samuel Johnson's commentary. She also observes that traditional theories of the novel tended to exaggerate the differences between them (456).
- 2 Natalie Neil illustrates the features of eighteenth-century gothic novels, specifically those called "the Northanger novels" that Isabella Thorpe introduces to Catherine Morland.
- 3 See also Martin, 53.
- 4 Mary Patricia Martin says that "Arabella is often willing to assume the best of others, and is never interested in petty gossip or frivolous pleasure" (57). It is true that this tendency of hers indicates her superior sense of her morality, but it may be more accurate to say that this moral sense is limited when the "others" are women.
- 5 Austen wrote to her sister Cassandra on January 8, 1807, saying that reading *The Female Quixote* "makes our evening amusement; to me a very high one, as I find the work quite equal to what I remembered it" (Le Faye 116).
- 6 My views are different from those of critics, such as Walter E. Anderson and Oliver MacDonagh, who regard Henry as a superior to Catherine and attach excessive importance to Henry's role as a tutor.

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