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A Mad Knight in her Attic: the Reformulation of Quixotism and its Use in Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*

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Abstract

Women writers in eighteenth century England had to deal with accusations of immorality and perversion of young female minds, due to the alleged subversion of their role as "domestic" and "invisible" women. Charlotte Lennox chose to approach quixotism in her most celebrated novel, *The Female Quixote, or, the Adventures of Arabella* (1752), to create an appealing heroine whose literary delusions allowed her to experience freedom and power for the first time in her life. Lennox, as other writers would do following her example, employed that momentary escape from constraint, the subsequent punishment of her heroine and her final return to reason, to make a statement on her status as a woman writer, as well as to consolidate herself as a respectable one. Moreover, by so doing, she transformed completely the concept of "Quixote" and proved an important transition in the quixotic tradition towards a more romantic heroine.

Peter Steele writing on quixotism, expressed himself in these terms: "Quixotry may be deprecated, admired, or merely noted, but is usually taken to involve the plucking of liberty out of the jaws of constraint" (1981: 298). Authors may have apprehended Don Quixote in varying ways; however, all have acknowledged the freedom and escape it offers from conventionality. Nevertheless, what they have not all agreed on is if this escape should be condoned or condemned. The aim of this paper will be to offer a brief reflection on why Charlotte Lennox chose to approach quixotism in her most celebrated novel, *The Female Quixote* (1752), and how she employed that momentary escape from constraint and the subsequent return to reason, both to make a statement on her status as a woman writer, and to consolidate herself as a respectable one. Moreover, it will be avowed that, by so doing, she

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transformed completely the concept of "Quixote" and proved an important transition in the quixotic tradition towards a more romantic heroine.

The origins of Charlotte Lennox, née Ramsay, remain unclear. It is thought that she was born in Gibraltar, then moved to New York, and returned to England quite early in life. The accounts of her age when arriving in England are contradictory, as are those of her family's position. The author's own chronicle seems to have been re-written in a more favourable light, transforming her father into a Lieutenant and stating that she was fifteen when she arrived in London to live with a wealthy aunt. Apparently, neither was she as old as fifteen, nor her aunt as rich. Adding a little decor to one's story to seek acceptance was not uncommon; it was even advisable with such little recommendation on which to base her career as Charlotte had. Nevertheless, despite these drawbacks, she exceptionally found her way to become an actress, a translator and, finally, a well-known novelist.

It was still difficult for women living in the mid-eighteenth century to become successful writers. Moreover, it was even impossible to become *recognised* professionals by the bulk of male writers and critics or not to have one's reputation compromised if fame was finally achieved. This was due to the fact that women authors were immediately identified with their characters. As Dale Spender states, they were thought only to be capable of writing about their own feminine experience, that of the very limited "domestic scene" to which they belonged. As they could only write of what they knew, there was "great pressure on them to be acceptable women in order that they might be acceptable writers" (Spender, 1986: 194) and the criticism that was placed on them as writers was "not concerned with their writing, nor with the conditions under which they wrote, but with their character, and their "honesty", and whether they were what they claimed to be" (Spender, 1986: 196). This was even more so as the century advanced, as, according to Janet Todd, the Restoration and early eighteenth-century frankness in writing gave way to a much more sentimental period in the mid-century. This new vogue of sensibility in writing demanded not only an absolutely respectable image in the woman, but also "a more restricted subject matter" (Todd, 1989: 3). Therefore, novels such as the early Eliza Haywood's, openly accused of immorality due to the above-mentioned identification with her heroines

and with their rather overt sexuality, had to be tamed and redefined into a new didactic tradition of reformed heroines in which women writers could prove themselves honest and worthy. To be a respected woman novelist you had to be a 'teacher' of moral.

Inscribed in this didactic tradition is Charlotte Lennox's novel *The Life of Harriet Stuart* (1750),[1] which dealt with a young, inexperienced girl, "a self-confessed coquette who enjoys her power over men" (Levin, 1995: 273), the Harriet of the title, who had to be taught to become a less lively and more devoted daughter and, eventually, wife. Although, in the end, she settled into marriage, she never completely lost her spirit. Even if this novel granted Lennox the praise and increased patronage of some of the more influential writers of her time, such as Fielding, Richardson and, especially, Johnson, it did not, however, change the idea that there was rather a lack of a serious didactic purpose in her literature, as well as certain impropriety in her early publications.

Therefore, responding to this unfavourable criticism, two years later, Charlotte Lennox published her masterpiece, *The Female Quixote, or, the Adventures of Arabella,* in which she moved beyond the creation of a mere reformed coquette and employed the excuse of quixotic madness to offer an attempt at escaping constraint, while detaching herself from her deluded heroine. According to Levin, Lennox used this work to respond to her critics and to refashion her image as a writer, because it "exemplifies her theory that properly written novels should discipline their female readers by teaching them how to become proper domestic women" (1995: 271). We can see this in the novel's plot. Arabella is a woman whose secluded education is comprised of the French romances she has inherited from her deceased mother. With no other guide and no experience in the world, she mistakes these romances for the truth and acts according to the principles found in them, seeing a lover or abductor in every man in her acquaintance, as well as demanding servility from her beaux as courtly love allowed her to do. In the end, a close to death experience in the shape of a fever, and a wise Doctor of Divinity's conversation, restored her to reason, as she assumed her place in life and married Prince Charming himself.

[1] The *reformed* Haywood wrote an almost twin novel, *The History of Miss Betty Thoughtless* (1751).

With this pattern, Charlotte Lennox offered what would be a new model of Quixote with many of the heroic attributes found in romances: a young, beautiful, noble and wealthy woman. Arabella was the embodiment of a romantic heroine, as she grew up motherless, isolated in what the author describes as an "epitome of Arcadia", with the only company of her novels, and even lived a true love story with the hero of the novel, her cousin Glanville. While, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, England had known many different approaches to quixotism, most of them "emphasized only the surface farce" or transformed the Quixotes in the butt of their satire (Knowles, 1947: 267). However, according to Javier Pardo García (1997: 164), with Fielding came a change in the quixotic tradition, as in *Joseph Andrews,* Joseph and the real quixotic character, Parson Adams, became the instrument of satire against the world that surrounded them due to their moral superiority. Lennox, hence, followed Fielding, and moved towards the nineteenth-century romantic approach. She heroized her character and made her extremely attractive. She abandoned Cervantes' old knight and Fielding's elderly Adams, as she transformed her Quixote into a young girl, always described in great advantage in the novel, being "her Mind as beautiful as her Person was lovely" (Lennox, [1752] 1973: 6). Lennox also transformed the knight's madness into the misinterpretation of an unguided imagination, by presenting a girl "secluded from the world" who "supposing Romances were Real Pictures of Life, from them she drew all her Notions and Expectations" (Lennox, [1752] 1973: 7) and whose "Imagination, always prepossessed with the same fantastic Ideas" (Lennox, [1752] 1973: 21) made her stumble into ridiculous mistakes. Thereby, Lennox transformed mad romancing into a "coming-of-age" matter, while making Arabella became a transitional figure towards the Romantic heroine, a morally superior creature, a "fallible, but unfallen heroine" (Spencer, 1986: 142). A heroine who deeply loved her family and friends, showing true devotion for her father and sorrow at his death, and always concerned with virtue. She was a definitely charming, virtuous and pious heroine, who Lennox made attractive for the reader.

Nevertheless, no matter how appealing, in the mid-eighteenth century, the subversive heroine had to be reformed and her quixotic delusion had to disappear, due to the fact that, more than a mere threat to virtue, "the underlying 'danger' of romance in Lennox's novel was

not so much the threat of sexual corruptibility, as the assumption of female power" (Roulston, 1995: 32), and that Arabella's quixotic *madness* was "her desire to hold authority [...] to wield power rather than surrendering it in marriage" (Motooka, 1996: 252). Arabella "strengthening her own Resolutions by those Examples of heroic Disobedience", decided not to accept Glanville, as she asked herself "What Lady in Romance ever married the Man that was chose for her?" (Lennox, [1752] 1973: 27). Arabella rebelled against her father's choice and commanded Glanville to "arrive at the Possession of her Heart by many Years of Services and Fidelity" (Lennox, [1752] 1973: 27), but this was a momentary illusion of power. She was bound by the conventions of her time to progress "from a mistaken adherence to illusions to a realistic and happy acceptance of life" (Kauvar, 1970: 214). Consequently, Lennox moved beyond the plot of the reformed coquette and the preservation of virtue, and added to quixotism all the complexities of women's position in her age. She addressed the issues of female authorship, independence and control over their own lives, always under the banner of her character's quixotic delusions.

Moreover, the use of the Quixotic formula in *The Female Quixote* also emphasised the burlesque of romance and its readers, an element which was not present in the coquette tradition. The burlesque approach to romance was not unusual at this time, when romance was being rejected due to its implausible nature, as opposed to the realistic tone of the novel emerging at this moment, as Langbauer (1984) has asserted. Lennox tried to consolidate her status as a serious writer of novels, on the one hand by making fun of the highly criticised French romances for their poor quality and implausible plots, and, on the other hand, by warning of the danger posed by that unguided reading for inexperienced female minds. Amy Pawl phrases it thus: "If, as contemporary commentators feared, novel reading might lead women astray, the female quixote could always be used as a scarecrow to frighten women away from the fertile fields of romance and back onto the straight and narrow paths of duty and virtue" (2000: 158).

Lennox's derogatory approach to novel reading, especially those romances written by other women, seemingly inconsistent with her own status as a writer, would be later condemned by authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft or even Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey,* her very own reformulation of the quixotic figure, which also offered a

burlesque of Gothic romance. In her novel, Austen proved her awareness of the difficult situation of women writers and used her own work as a platform from which "to dramatize her doubts about the possibility of being both a woman and a writer" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 155), while still defending the adherence to a female tradition, rather than the denial of it, as a better way of consolidating one's status as a writer. However, despite Charlotte Lennox's reputed genius and her claim to authorship, she depended on the general opinion, that is, the male opinion, to be able to publish and economically support her family. Therefore, she accepted criticising a prior tradition of mainly female writers, as well as embracing the message of subordination implied in the coquette tradition, in order to gain more acceptance by supporting masculine authority (Spencer, 1986: 143); even if, through the quixotic formula, she allowed a momentary "plucking of liberty out of the jaws of constraint" to give her heroine an instant of freedom, a sense of power and control over her own destiny, although that was what she would finally need to condemn. Under her quixotic delusion, which led to her deferment of marriage and subordination, "Arabella becomes inscribed as author within her own fiction" (Roulston, 1995: 31), reflecting Lennox's relative freedom as a woman given by her status as writer. Romance could thereby empower both female reader and writer, giving them the social visibility they were denied. This was stressed by the fact that, the moment Arabella returned to submission and her quixotic self disappeared, the narrative was over. Her marriage to Glanville, the beau chosen by her father, was, literally and figuratively, the end of *The Adventures of Arabella*.

The ultimate redemption of Lennox's Arabella from her status as a rather subversive woman seemingly derided the message of female freedom and power, as she became a conventional woman and disappeared. As has been stated, in the eighteenth century not punishing the female claim to independence and control would be inconceivable, as well as an editorial suicide. Therefore, female authors, such as Lennox, found in quixotism the perfect way to mildly condemn all deviation from the established codes, a way to create appealing female characters who were "plucked out of the jaws of constraint"; while, ironically, still allowing this aim for freedom and authorship to be expressed, and the novel in which it was inscribed to be praised for its didactism and moral worth. Lennox and her successors created a

new quixotism which allowed them new creative freedom; at the same time, as in the case of Lennox, it brought the fame, recognized authorship and independence writers of her time condemned in their characters- and sought for themselves.

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