

**Agrégation**

**ANGLAIS**

Charlotte Lennox

# *The Female Quixote*



Sous la direction de  
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# Women, Power, and the Imagination in Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*

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*Her ideas from the Manner of her Life, and the Objects around her, had taken a romantic Turn; and, supposing Romances were real Pictures of Life, from them she drew all her Notions and Expectations.*

Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote*, 19.

Featured alongside leading women artists and thinkers in Richard Samuel's painting *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain* (1779), Charlotte Lennox was one of the most well-respected and celebrated female authors of the eighteenth century<sup>1</sup>. She certainly captured the attention of her contemporaries, including fellow writers Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, though she is less well known today<sup>2</sup>. In *The Female Quixote* (1752), considered to be her most famous work, Lennox presents the reader with an intimate and detailed portrayal of the power of the female imagination, if somewhat hyperbolic. Simultaneously a warning against and a celebration of creativity, the text demonstrates its own fantastical power through a reworking of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605), considered to be the earliest example of the novel in the form that we know it today.

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1. Other women featured include Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Carter, Angelica Kaufmann, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Elizabeth Griffith, Hannah Moore, Catharine Macaulay and Elizabeth Linley. For more information on this painting see Elizabeth Edgar, 'Introduction: The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain' *Bluestockings: Women of Reason from Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cham: Springer, 2010) <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/9780230250505>.
  2. See Brian Hanley, "Henry Fielding, Samuel Johnson, Samuel Richardson, and the Reception of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* in the Popular Press." *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 13.3 (2000): 27-32.

Beneath her satirical characterisation of the naïve but strong-willed protagonist Arabella, Lennox explores many of the contemporary anxieties surrounding women and reading. The heroine's melodramatic and parodic relationships with other characters through the presentation of her over-active imagination serve to legitimise Lennox's position as a woman writer by casting *The Female Quixote* in Cervantes's established tradition. His protagonist, Alonso Quijano, also found himself on a number of fantastical, if somewhat delusional, misadventures in the name of chivalry. Despite their similarities, Lennox's narrative differs from *Don Quixote* as she centres the female experience as the fundamental core of the novel; but like her predecessor, Lennox's text can be viewed as pioneering in its own right. Her characterisation of Arabella paved the way for other Quixotic heroines such as Jane Austen's Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* (1817) and Cherry Wilkinson in E. S. Barrett's *The Heroine* (1813), and can be said to create a formula for the ideal Romance protagonist in English Literature<sup>3</sup>. Critics such as Laurie Langbauer argue that "the silly extravagances of romance that Arabella illustrates are meant as a foil for the novel's strengths."<sup>4</sup> I would suggest that it is possible to go further than this to propose that Lennox is using the Romance genre to reflect not only the strengths of the novel, but the power of the imagination itself. In the light of this, the present chapter will discuss how Lennox constructs the female imagination, hyperbolic or not, as a source of power for her heroine, Arabella, in order to create a sense of agency.

### **“Ranging like a Nymph through Gardens”: The early origins of Arabella's imagination**

Lennox opens *The Female Quixote* by introducing the reader to the early life of the beautiful and accomplished protagonist Arabella, modelling her on the seventeenth-century French heroines that she reads about<sup>5</sup>. Secluded from society in the “Epitome of Arcadia”, the

3. For more information about E. S. Barrett, *The Heroine: Or, Adventures of a Fair Romance Reader* Vol. 3 (Henry Colburn: London, 1813), see Gary Kelly, “Unbecoming a Heroine: Novel Reading, Romanticism, and Barrett's *The Heroine*.” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 45.2 (1990): 220-241.

4. Laurie Langbauer, “Romance Revised: Charlotte Lennox's “The Female Quixote”.” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*. 18.1 (1984): 29-49, 29.

5. Lennox draws inspiration from texts such as Madame de Scudéry's *Clélie, histoire romaine* 10 vols. (Paris: Augustin Courbé, 1654-60).

author establishes her heroine's status as a figure of romance, cut off from society, which encourages the reader to feel sympathy for her<sup>6</sup>. The reader is given a thorough grounding in Arabella's background so they can fully comprehend the origins of her expansive imagination. Lennox explicitly informs the reader that, inspired by the narratives she reads, "she was taught to believe, Love was the ruling Principle of the World; that every other Passion was subordinate to this" (Lennox 19). The author evokes this philosophy at the start of the novel and it underpins the entire narrative. Arabella eventually marries her suitor Glanville, despite multiple mishaps stemming from excessive imagination. From this perspective, Arabella is empowered to fulfil her ambition of finding a husband who meets her chivalric criteria.

In direct opposition to Arabella's conception of love, in the first chapter of the novel, Lennox draws attention to her parents' relationship in order to contrast the protagonist's lofty expectations for marriage; we are introduced to the structures within which women were supposed to conform, and that Arabella wholeheartedly rejects throughout the novel. Lennox writes, "the Marquis, though now advanced in Years, cast his Eyes on a young Lady, greatly inferior to himself in Quality, but whose Beauty and good Sense promised him an agreeable Companion" (Lennox 18). We are given a clear indication of the Marquis's pragmatic marital priorities, and by extension, the value of women in society. This is directly in opposition to the chivalric romance that Arabella fantasises about and ultimately expects in her own relationships, and this serves as an indication of how far the heroine's hyperbolic imagination has exceeded the bounds of reality. Critics such as Christine Roulston suggest that "published at a time when the distinction between romance and the novel was still ill-defined, Lennox's novel stages the confrontation between these two literary genres as one which is indelibly bound up with the question of gender representation."<sup>7</sup> Given that the imagination plays such an important role in the novel form more generally, it is significant that in *The Female Quixote* it transgresses the boundaries of genre, and ultimately reflects the gendered tropes of both Romance and the novel. Furthermore, this mingling of textual identities is significant as the relationship between reality and the imagination is also liminal. It is possible therefore to

6. Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote* (Penguin: London, 2006) 18.

7. Christine Roulston, "Histories of Nothing: Romance and Femininity in Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*" *Women's Writing* 2.1 (1995): 25.

argue that this designates a sense of power to Arabella, and in turn also reflects Lennox's power as an author; neither Arabella's imagination nor Lennox's narrative can be contained by predetermined constructs and this in turn implies a sense of agency.

Lennox conveys a clear message about how women were perceived through her portrayal of male characters in the novel and how they relate to others; the brief depiction of Arabella's mother perhaps gives us the clearest indication of this. Not even a page after we are introduced to her parents, the author states that "in the second Year of his Retirement, the Marchioness brought him a daughter, and died in Three Days after her delivery" (Lennox 18). From Lennox's tone, it would be easy to say that this is only a comment upon the value placed upon women; at their most basic level they are suitable for childbearing and marriage, certainly not for becoming adventurous heroines or authors. But the Marchioness holds more importance within the novel than we might initially think. Susan Greenfield suggests that in the romance novel, "whether she is dead, missing, emotionally detached, or present without the daughter's realizing it, the mother is conspicuous in her absence."<sup>8</sup> Certainly for Lennox, the figure of the absent mother provides a gateway to the exploration of Arabella's imagination as it allows her to construct the sense of isolation that underpins her desire to read as a form of escapism. On a more practical level, this notion also foreshadows the author's presentation of attitudes about literary production and women's reading as we are told that Arabella's late mother had "purchased these Books to soften a Solitude which she found very disagreeable; and, after her Death, the Marquis removed them from her Closet into his Library where *Arabella* found them" (Lennox 18). It is unusual, therefore, that the absent mother is initially given the responsibility for Arabella's problematic love for tales of chivalry. In the eighteenth century, male authors, notable examples include Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift among others, essentially cast the debasement of English literature as originating from a process of the feminisation of culture<sup>9</sup>. Though not an author herself, it could be argued that Arabella's mother's legacy of Romance novels can be related back to this idea, as Arabella's perspective on life stems from this. Her inner narrative can be viewed as a form

8. Susan Greenfield, *Mothering Daughters: Novels and the Politics of Family Romance*, Frances Burney to Jane Austen, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003) 18.

9. See E. J. Clery, *The Feminization Debate in Eighteenth-century England: Literature, Commerce and Luxury* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 74-94.

of literary production, and by extension, Arabella inherits this legacy of feminisation as a literal demonstration of the power of the female imagination. Whether or not the novel is a celebration or a denigration of the female Romance heroine is ambiguous. This idea is discussed by critics such as Deborah Ross, who suggest that “Lennox could not wholeheartedly assert that women’s real lives were complete, that romantic dreams were unnecessary; and so she did not unequivocally condemn the romance.”<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, when we consider the way that Arabella’s mother—and, to an extent, the early iteration of the protagonist herself—it is easy to see how Lennox lingers on the boundary between romance and realism, without necessarily condemning either. This can therefore be perceived as a form of agency in itself, as neither identity is completely assigned to any character in the text.

Lennox does not just place the blame at the door of Arabella’s mother, however, as she seems to suggest that the Marquis is also responsible for his daughter’s unruly imagination as a result of her education and lack of female influence. This is perhaps not what we might expect, as the Marchioness’ status as a reader of Romance novels seems to be at the heart of Arabella’s interest in these extravagant narratives. As well as falling out of favour at court, Lennox’s narrator informs us that “at Four Years of Age [the Marquis] took [Arabella] from under the Direction of Nurses and Women appointed to attend her, and permitted her to receive no Part of her Education from another, which he was capable of giving her himself” (Lennox 18). This certainly would not have been normal and contemporary readers would not wholly have expected the father to take such a pivotal role in a daughter’s education. Indeed, we learn that the Marquis “permitted her therefore the Use of his Library, in which, unfortunately for her, were a great Store of Romances, and, what was still more unfortunate, not in the original *French*, but very bad Translations” (Lennox 19). Significantly, the emphasis here is on the translation, not the actual text, so it is possible that Lennox is not as critical about Romance novels as we might initially think. There is not the space here to discuss the implications of cross-channel literary networks and translation. However, it is worth reflecting on these when considering the way Lennox portrays the corrupting nature of Romance narratives upon Arabella’s mind. Moreover, other characters in the novel

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10. D. L. Ross, *The Excellence of Falsehood: Romance, Realism, and Women’s Contribution to the Novel* (University Press of Kentucky, 1991) 95.

point out the obscurity of her upbringing. When her suitor Glanville is insulted by Arabella, he puts it down to her “Country education” (Lennox 42). From this perspective, the Marquis is unsuccessful in toning down her hyperactive imagination.

### **“The Laws of Gallantry and Respect”: Arabella and Mr Glanville**

Arabella and Mr Glanville’s relationship is at the heart of the novel, and it is one of the primary ways that Lennox explores her heroine’s independence, but also the unyielding expanse of her imagination. Her reticence to marry as a result of her grandiose expectations of courtship is the subject of much anguish for most, if not all, of the characters in the novel. Notwithstanding this, we are shown that Arabella maintains a certain degree of agency as a result of her unwillingness to settle for anything other than what she has imagined for herself. Furthermore, the reader is able to see the potential of her imagination to influence others as Lennox expands upon the degree of independence that the protagonist has on the selection of her husband. Rather unusually the reader is informed that, “the Marquis tho’ he had resolved to give *Arabella* to his Nephew, was desirous he should first receive some Impression of Tenderness for her, before he absolutely declared his Resolution” (Lennox 54). This degree of concern for Arabella’s emotions from her father was certainly unusual. But the Marquis’s reasonable nature is tested by Arabella’s delusions of grandeur and his patience is challenged. Responding in equally hyperbolic terms, her father demands “but I desire to know, interrupted the Marquis, For what Crime it was you took the Liberty to banish him from my House?” (Lennox 54). To which Arabella retorts that it is because of Glanville telling her he loves her. In this moment we are reminded of her extravagant and preposterous expectations surrounding courtship. Here, Lennox directly shows the obstinacy that reading can result in as Arabella’s father swiftly corrects her flawed perspective: “the Presumption, as you call it, tho’ I know not for what Reason, said the Marquis, was authorised by me” (Lennox 54). Arabella’s agency is limited in real life; it is only in her imagination that she is truly free to exercise her romantic desires. The Marquis demands that she apologise to Glanville in the form of a letter. Arabella writes:

It is not by the Power I have over you, that I command you to return, for I disclaim any Empire over so unworthy a Subject; but, since it is my Father's Pleasure I should invite you back, I must let you know that I repeal your Banishment, and expect you will immediately return with the Messenger who brings this; however, to spare your Acknowledgements, know, that it is in Obedience to my Father's absolute Commands, that you receive this Mandate from. (Lennox 55)

Though this is certainly a confrontation with reality for Arabella, the language she uses in order to fulfil her father's request is elevated and chivalric. She writes of "Empire", "Banishment" and "Commands", all of which could be said to stem from her literary interests. From this perspective, Arabella retains a sense of power specifically through her imaginative language. She is never quite forcibly brought back down to reality and this is one of the clearest examples of how Lennox maintains her protagonist's agency, while also conforming to contemporary societal expectations.

The role of emotions, more generally, and their relationship to the imagination are central to our understanding of the way Lennox portrays female power in the novel. Lennox takes the opportunity to deliberate upon the nature of love and the influence it holds, through her representation of Arabella's anguish. She clearly has preconceived ideas about the timescale of proper courtship, which she takes from her literary knowledge. She declares "truly, I am of the illustrious *Mandana's* Mind; for she said, That she should think it an unpardonable Presumption, for the greatest King on Earth to tell her he loved her, tho' after Ten Years of the most faithful Services, and concealed Tormente" (Lennox 133). This scenario has clearly influenced the vision that Arabella has for her romantic relationships. But this is certainly not the first time we are informed of her grandiose expectations with such urgency. When pressed on her over-the-top response to Glanville's romantic gestures, the protagonist tells him, "Since Love is not voluntary, replied *Arabella*, I am not obliged to any Person for loving me; for, questionless, if he could help it, he would" (Lennox 60). There are two forms of power here, the first being control over the emotions, the second being control over actions. But, ever pragmatic, Lennox has our romantic hero interject: "If it is not a voluntary Favour, interrupted Glanville, it is not a voluntary offence" (Lennox 60). Lennox portrays her heroine as ridiculous as she claims that the reason she is angry is not because Glanville loves her but rather the very fact that he told her about his feelings. Lennox's portrayal



of her anger is matched by her suitor's frustration, or as her father often terms it, "her extreme Obstinacy" (Lennox 71). Equally, the Marquis can only stay patient for so long, as Lennox shows that Arabella's fantasy has the power to drive even the coolest head to outrage. She declares that she would rather die than marry Glanville and her father can listen no longer, interrupting, "Foolish Girl! [...] how strangely do you talk? Are the thoughts of Death so familiar to you, that you speak of dying with so little Concern?" (Lennox 71). Her father is met with a declamatory speech which demonstrates her intent:

I do not yield, either in Virtue or Courage, to many others of my Sex who, when persecuted like me, have fled to Death for Relief, I know not why I should be thought less capable of it then they; and if *Artimisa*, *Candace*, and the beautiful Daughter of *Cleopatra*, could brave the Terrors of Death for the sake of the Men they loved, there is no Question but I could also imitate their Courage, to avoid the Man I have so much Reason to hate (Lennox 71).

Here, Lennox is demonstrating the extremes of Arabella's imagination. This hyperbolic and melodramatic speech serves only to incite rage from the Marquis as he claims that "These foolish Books my Nephew talks of have turned her Brain!" (Lennox 71). In this moment the author explicitly articulates society's fear of the effects that reading, specifically the reading of novels, can have upon women. Though it would seem that her father's rage would bring her back to reality, Lennox still describes the events of the novel in the elevated language of romance. Writing that the characters in her books would endure "a more cruel Tyranny than any they have ever experienced before" (Lennox 72) should her father destroy them, the author draws our attention to the grip of Arabella's imagination once more.

It is not just Lennox's portrayal of the anger initiated by Arabella's imagination that is worthy of our attention. She creates numerous parodic and ludicrous moments in the novel which illustrate the extraordinary breadth of her literary inspiration. In describing Arabella's education of Glanville in the ways of French Romances, Lennox constructs a satirical, humorous image that the reader cannot help but picture. She writes that, "*Arabella* having ordered one of her Women to bring *Cleopatra*, *Cassandra*, *Clelia*, and the Grand *Cyrus*, from her Library, *Glanville* no sooner saw the Girl return sinking under the Weight of these voluminous Romances" (Lennox 65). This highly visual image of a girl being swamped by these