

GENDER MEMBER-GENDER MENDER: CHARLOTTE RAMSAY LENNOX AND HER FICTIONS

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Abstract

Charlotte Ramsay Lennox is one of the many women novelists long forgotten by scholars that only very recently has received the critical attention she deserves.

This paper aims at the reconsideration, and the inclusion in the tradition, of one of the greatest talents of the British literary scene of the eighteenth century.

Charlotte Ramsay Lennox must, by now, be recognized as one of the most versatile writers of her generation: she wrote poetry, fiction, criticism – she was the first woman to write on Shakespeare and his sources in the eighteenth century, with her *Shakespeare Illustrated* (1753), and was the editor of one of the first magazines which serialised novels.

Keywords: gender; feminist; women; English literature; canon.

Résumé

Gender Member – Gender Mender: Charlotte Ramsay Lennox et ses Fictions

Charlotte Ramsay Lennox est l'une des nombreuses femmes romanciers oublié depuis longtemps par les chercheurs qui a très récemment reçu l'attention critique qu'elle mérite.

Cet article vise à reconsidérer, et l'inclusion dans la tradition, de l'un des plus grands talents de la scène littéraire britannique du XVIII^e siècle.

Charlotte Lennox Ramsay doit, maintenant, être reconnu comme l'un des écrivains les plus polyvalents de sa génération: elle écrit de la poésie, fiction, critique – elle était la première femme à écrire sur Shakespeare et ses sources dans le dix-huitième siècle, avec son *Shakespeare Illustrated* (1753), et a été le rédacteur en chef de l'un des premiers magazines qui sérialisés romans.

Mots-clés: sexe; féministe; les femmes; la littérature anglaise; canon.

Resumo

Gender Member – Gender Mender: Charlotte Ramsay Lennox e suas Ficções

Charlotte Ramsay Lennox é uma das muitas mulheres romancistas esquecidas por estudiosos e estudiosas, que só muito recentemente tem recebido a atenção merecida por parte da crítica.

Este trabalho tem por objetivo a reconsideração e a inclusão na tradição de um dos maiores talentos da cena literária britânica do século XVIII.

Charlotte Ramsay Lennox deve, agora, ser reconhecida como uma das escritoras mais versáteis da sua geração: escreveu poesia, ficção, crítica – foi a primeira mulher a escrever sobre Shakespeare e suas fontes no século XVIII, com o seu *Shakespeare Illustrated* (1753), e foi a editora de uma das primeiras revistas de romances serializados.

Palavras-chave: gênero; feminismo; mulheres; literatura inglesa; cânone.

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Of the approximately two thousand novels that were written during the eighteenth century, only a very few have been preserved and passed on in the literary canon. [...]

[W]hen to this is added the information that about half these novels were written by women and *all* of them have since failed the test of greatness, then explanations are required. Either the laws of probability are in need of revision or there are good grounds for hypothesising that some other law is operating in the selection process.

(Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel*, 1986)

1. Anthologies and the Canon

According to many feminist scholars, anthologies, etymologically «a flower gathering», constitute a major culprit in the cultural forgetting of women's writing» (Eger, 1999: 204).

Anthologies defined, in turn, both as «a substantial agent of cultural definition» and «an educational tool», have been identified as a popular literature form that «flourished during the eighteenth century, both fostering and responding to a growing sense of national literary heritage» and have been used as «creators and barometers of public reading taste (Eger, 1999: 202).

Feminist critics have demonstrated how anthologies and histories of literature have largely contributed to the «erasure» of women writers from the canon and have proposed, accordingly, a reassessment and redefinition of it that would reconsider the relevant position of such texts as «channels of tradition»².

Ian Watt, one of the most influential scholars of the eighteenth-century literature in Britain, maintained in his *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) that the new literary genre originated with Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding. He, accordingly, devoted his whole book to male novelists and only referred to female authors with a single, though very significant, statement: «The majority of eighteenth century novels were actually written by women»³. It took forty years

² Some ground-breaking studies were produced in the 1960s and 1970s by scholars who protested against the systematic neglect of women's writing: Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* (1968), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969), Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). A new approach was then possible in the 1980s, in works such as Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985), Dale Spender's *Mothers of the Novel* (1986) and Janet Todd's *The Sign of Angellica* (1989), to mention just a few. This «formal» protest ended up, for example, in the inclusion of more than thirty women writers in the 1990s' editions of the Norton Anthology of English literature.

³ See also John J. Richetti (1992). No women writers were included in the «great tradition» of the genre and only recently a critical approach from a feminist perspective has been produced. See Jane Spenser, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist* (1986); Harrison R. Steeves, *Before Jane Austen: The Shaping of the Novel in the Eighteenth Century*, (1966); Lennard J., Davis, *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* (1987); Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel: One Hundred Good Women Writers Before*

before a feminist scholar, Susan Fendler, could observe that the very literary canon considered in Watt's book «was formed by excluding women *although* they contributed to literary techniques or realization of topics. The reasons are that, intentionally or unintentionally, the respective innovation was attributed to the first man following in the wake of each respective woman» (Fendler, 1997a: 1).

When Dale Spender started her research on women's writing in the late 1970s, an effort that would have led to the production of one of the most influential and groundbreaking works on women's literature ever published, she assumed that almost nothing had happened until Jane Austen appeared on the literary scene. She confessed, in fact, that she simply «had no idea» that for more than a century and a half before the «great» writer so many women writers had been writing novels (Spender, 1986: xi). By consequence, when she realized that Jane Austen had to be seen not as the originator, but as an inheritor of a long tradition of female writers, Spender observed: «this has ramifications not just for the history of women novelists but for the history of novelists in general»⁴ (Spender, 1986: 116). It was only in the 1990s, though, that feminist criticism started pushing back the limits of that tradition, taking into consideration other forms and styles, religious writings and vindications for the rights of women, for instance, works published anonymously by those women who, in their own time, didn't even perceive themselves as writers⁵ (Robinson, 1991: 222).

2. A woman of mystery: the case of Charlotte Lennox

One of the many women novelists long forgotten by scholars, both male and female, and who only very recently has received the critical attention she deserves, is Charlotte Ramsay Lennox⁶. She herself, and her life, have long been object of investigation on the part of academics and critics.

In 1967 Philippe Séjourné maintained that Lennox was responsible for creating a legend around her own name (Séjourné, 1967: 11). Dale Spender, some twenty years later, replied to this statement observing that Lennox was just

Jane Austen (1986), Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History: A Defence*, (1988), and *The Sign of Angelica: Women, Writing, and Fiction, 1660-1800* (1989); D. Spender and J. Todd, (eds.), *British Women Writers: An Anthology from the Fourteenth Century to the Present* (1989); Nancy. Armstrong, «The Rise of the Feminine Authority in the Novel», (1990); Cheryl Turner, (ed.), *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (1992), just to mention some titles.

⁴ Janet Todd's *Dictionary* offered the chance of retracing the «disappeared» women writers (Todd, 1985). See also *Aspects Generaux du Roman Féminin en Angleterre de 1740 à 1800* (Séjourné, 1966); «Early Eighteenth-Century English Women Writers» (Sedgwick Larson, 1981); *Mothers of the Novel* (Spender, 1986); *A Dictionary* (Todd, 1987); *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Blain, Clements and Grundy, 1990).

⁵ See also R.D. Mayo (1962); and R.A. Barney (1999).

⁶ See for example, Eve Tavor Bannet (1999), Ruth Mack (2005) and Patricia Hamilton (2012).

another woman writer, like her predecessors Aphra Behn and Delarivière Manley, blamed for the absence of definitive detail and accused of deliberate deception (Spender, 1986: 194). Spender judged Séjourné's statement «she [Lennox] was disliked by her own sex» as double-standard criticism applied to women writers, a gratuitous and irrelevant insult which all too frequently substitutes for criticism of the woman writer. «I do not know if it is true», she added. «I do wonder if it is relevant. And I do ask myself why this 'issue' for a woman writer would go unnoted with a man» (Spender, 1986: 204-5).

Charlotte Lennox's biography was published for the first time in 1935 and reissued some forty years later after the discovery of the so called «Lennox Collection»⁷. «The most unusual aspect of these letters», Duncan Isles has pointed out, is that «we see so eminent men of letters all writing to, and being engaged in the problems of one person – and a relatively obscure person as that»⁸ (Isles, 1970: 323). Lennox was probably introduced to Johnson by Samuel Paterson, the publisher of her first book of poems (Lennox, 1747). Johnson, in turn, introduced her to Richardson and by November 1751 the two of them were helping Lennox to have *The Female Quixote* published, and this latter gave some criticism and persuaded Millar to have it published (Isles, 1965: 685). Another female critic, Susan Kubica Howard, observed in 1995 that «those middle-class women writers who wrote to make a living and whose domestic pressures often denied them the leisure of discipleship to a great literary figure or entrance into the circle of the Blues occupied a marginal position in the contemporary literary scene» (Kubica Howard, 1995: 23).

But Lennox was neither a middle-class woman, nor a woman who occupied a marginal position in the literary establishment of her own day. Quite the contrary was true, in fact. Norma Clarke has recently demonstrated that Lennox had become one of the most influential writers of her time. (Clarke, 2000: 18).

She was not official member of any particular literary group but she collaborated with many of her contemporaries, both male and female. Furthermore, in 1996 Dustin Griffin numbered Lennox among the well-established authors of her time pointing out that it is not even clear why Lennox needed Johnson's help. (Griffin, 1996: 208). Griffin, though, seems not to consider the fact that Lennox

⁷ This body of forty-six letters probably represents the greatest discovery about Charlotte Lennox's life and works. Twelve of these letters are from Dr. Johnson to Charlotte Lennox and one to Alexander Lennox, her husband. Until 1964, when they were found in Scotland, no letter from Johnson to Lennox had been known to exist. They were kept in an album deposited with the British Linen Bank in Dunfermline in the name of Alexander Sutherland and some efforts were made in that year to trace his heir. The album was then sent to the National Library of Scotland where Duncan Isles, then a graduate student, was allowed to transcribe them (Isles, 1970).

⁸ See also D. Isles (1965), and M. Hyde (1965). For the relationship with Richardson and Johnson see J. Carroll (1964: 223) and D. Isles (1989).

was a woman author and that, as such, she needed to draw on a superior literary authority, in the case of Johnson the highest literary authority of her time.

3. The sentimental scandal of *The Life of Harriot Stuart*

Charlotte Ramsay Lennox's novel, *The Life of Harriot Stuart, Written by Herself* (1751), is a first-person narrative, whose protagonist is a rebellious young girl running away from her mother who wants to marry her to a man she doesn't love. Eventually she meets again with her previous lover and marries him⁹. The relevance of the book resides in the fact that *Harriot Stuart* has often been considered the author's autobiography.

It is possible that Lennox, in her first novel, followed the example of her predecessor Delarivier Manley, in particular, who had used this reading public's habit, of viewing texts as autobiographical statements, to her own advantage. When Charlotte Lennox was writing *Harriot Stuart*, the *romans scandaleux*, also called *romans a clef*, written by Délarivière Manley, Jane Barker and Eliza Haywood (De Michelis, 1983), and published in England in the first half of the eighteenth century, were being gradually replaced by narratives without keys, probably because of a «new authorial will to property» (Gallagher, 1994: 160).

According to Felicity Nussbaum, scandal writing is to be interpreted as «the first significant public form of self-writing that women take up, other than spiritual autobiography», and as «narratives of experiences from which men are excluded» (Nussbaum, 1989: 180). «What the scandalous memoirs have in common with Methodist writing is the production of a private emotional interiority as the 'truth' of identity, but rather than reading them as precursors to the romantics, I will consider them as sites of converging and competing discourses that display ideologies of gendered character» (Nussbaum, 1989: 179).

Through these works women writers articulated feelings previously unexpressed, feelings «allowing women to make female interiority an object of consumption and a commodity for exchange as they possess themselves. Once a 'fallen woman' speaks a textual 'self' she becomes a subject – the perceiver instead of the perceived» (Nussbaum, 1989: 185).

Richardson found scandal writing a threatening, if elusive and contradictory, assertion of female autonomy and of an aggressive and distinctive female identity (Nussbaum, 1989: 184, 185). He wrote in a letter to his friend Sarah Chapone, Hester Mulso Chapone's mother-in-law and member of his circle at

⁹ *The Life of Harriot Stuart* is sometimes also dated Dec. 1750. It was published by John Payne to whom Lennox was introduced by Samuel Johnson. Payne was the member of Dr. Johnson's Ivy Lane Club and had published the *Idler*, the *Adventurer*, and with Bouquet, (1975), the *Rambler*. Susan Kubika Howard (1995), (ed.), Repr. New Haven, Farley Dickinson University Press, Madison.

North End. «I send to your worthy son (I could not before) that Part of a bad Book [Lady Vane's *Memoirs*] which contains the very bad Story of a wicked woman. I could be glad to see it animadverted upon by so admirable a Pen. Ladies, as I have said, should antidote the Poison shed by the vile of their Sex» (Carroll, 1964: 173).

Harriot like other heroines of sentimental and escape literature by women writers, closely resembles Richardson's famous character Clarissa Harlowe: «Her beauty [...] makes her desirable; her family [...] has plans for her which seldom take into account her future happiness; [and] an undesirable man wants to possess her. She is confined to a [...] single room; her privacy, her self are under siege» (Backscheider, 1979: 4).

Ernest Baker who in his study *The History of the English Novel* (1929) put Charlotte Lennox under the heading «Minor Contemporaries», observed that *Harriot Stuart* was «much more sensational than any of Richardson's novels» and that the theatrical effects used in the novel were poor substitute for the dramatic tension at culminating moments in such stories as *Pamela* or *Clarissa* (Barker, 1929: 39). Barker also maintained that Lennox was probably influenced by «a more romantic variety of sentimental fiction», that was soon to outgo and supplant that of Richardson, that is Abbé Prévost's *Cleveland* (1732).

Harriot Stuart is an epistolary novel in which the protagonist writes and addresses her letters to a phantomatic Amanda who never replies. «You ask me, my dear Amanda, to give you the relation of my life. Your request has always the force of a command with me, and I obey you, notwithstanding the affliction the remembrance of my past misfortunes raises in my soul» (Lennox, 1751: 63).

As observed by Lorna Martens, the fictive reader in an epistolary novel can be reduced to a «nonpersonality», a mere ear for the reception of confidences, so that the existence of the addressee does not affect the content, quality, or tone of the letter writer's thoughts, as it is also the case with both *Harriot Stuart* and Frances Sheridan's eponymous heroine in *Memoirs of Sidney Bidulph* (1761), another example of «letter journal to a ghostlike kind of confidant» (Martens, 1985: 78).

As clearly explained by Janet Todd, even though always denied formal education, women were allowed to indulge in letter writing; on the one hand, it was considered appropriate for women and was part of their formal education, on the other it represented a good medium for exploring emotions and maintaining relationships. The most direct consequence of this widely accepted activity was that «[t]he brilliant, colloquial, witty and sentimental correspondence, often published or at least much circulated, inevitably influenced fiction and was in turn clearly influenced by it. The most striking examples come from *Bluestocking* and aristocratic ladies with the leisure and social subjects for lengthy and entertaining relationships by post» (Todd, 1989: 136-7).

The move from a private occupation to a professional activity represented a clever move for some feminist scholars. According to their interpretation, women,

in fact, transformed their private literary occupation into a public paid performance, thus gaining a voice originating a new literary form (Spender, 1986: 4,5).

In her first novel, Charlotte Lennox introduces the protagonist as a *coquette*, a woman who apparently conforms to social rules and who is able, at the same time, to reverse the stereotype reinterpreting social conventions to her own advantage. Harriot's coquetry soon becomes a form of self-love and the basis of a self-confidence which allows her to express disappointment openly. The male gaze becomes for the female protagonist the way of acquiring a power she will exert to recreate a version of herself in the eyes of the world.

I was a child, 'tis true; but I had the talent seeds of coquetry in my heart. [...]
I first discovered my propensity to gallantry upon this occasion; for I managed my looks with such art, that I soon had the eyes of some of these young gentlemen upon me. [...]
I was born a coquet, and what would have been art in others, in me was pure nature (Lennox, 1751: 65, 66).

The theme of coquetry had already been discussed by Lennox in a poem *The Art of Coquetry* (1747), first reprinted in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1750¹⁰.

First form your artful looks with studious care,
From mild to grave, from tender to severe.
Oft on the careless youth your glances chart,
A tender meaning let each glance impart.
Whene'er he meets your looks, with modest pride
And soft confusion turn your eyes aside,
Let a soft sight steal out, as if by chance,
Then cautious turn, and steal another glance¹¹ (Lennox, 1747: vv. 1-8).

The Art of Coquetry is relevant to our discussion because in it Lennox clearly establishes a connection with a previous tradition of women writers, in particular with the school of Aphra Behn and, because of this association with «non-virtuous» writers, Lennox was harshly criticised by her contemporaries, some of them famous Bluestockings belonging to Elizabeth Montagu's group. Elizabeth Carter after reading the poem wrote to Catherine Talbot: «the poetry is uncommonly correct, but the doctrine is indeed by no means to be admired. It is intolerably provoking to see people who really appear to have a genius, apply it to such idle unprofitable purposes» (Clarke, 2000: 75).

¹⁰ Cave one of Dr. Johnson's friends and publisher of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, had printed a poem in praise of Lennox in June 1749: «To Mrs. Charlotte Lennox, upon seeing the Poems and Proposals for Printing Them». Another poem appeared in November 1750 along with Lennox's two compositions: one of them was *The Art of Coquetry*.

¹¹ «The Art of Coquetry» is partially reprinted in Lonsdale's anthology (Lonsdale, 1989: 222).

The character of Harriot Stuart also represents an anticipation of the character of Arabella, the protagonist of *The Female Quixote* (1753), even though, according to Ronald Paulson « [t]he Quixote fiction permits Lennox to render comic the straightforward first-person narrative of her earlier novel [...]. There Harriot had no enabling factor or fiction to justify her self-assertiveness in the face of male courtship; her actions were only somewhat mitigated by being located in the uncivilized American colonies» (Paulson, 1998: 172).

The most evident difference between the characters is represented by the fact that Harriot though being well-read in romances, her mother judges those books a «horrid» reading which has «turned the girl's brain», while on the contrary, in *The Female Quixote* Arabella's passion for reading romances is inherited by her mother.

Hester Mulso Chapone will write in *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1773):

I would by no means exclude the kind of reading, which young people are naturally most fond of – though I think the greatest care should be taken in the choice of those *fictitious stories*, that enchant the mind – most of which tend to inflame the passions of youth, whilst the chief purpose of education should be to moderate and restrain them. Add to this, that both the writing and sentiments of most novels and romances are such as are only proper to vitiate your style, and to mislead your heart and understanding. [...] (Zuk, 1999: 336, 337).

Harriot's mother thinks romances offer bad examples of women because the heroines of those books are always disobedient. In Lennox's novels reading often becomes a point of contrast between rebellious daughters and their mothers, and this latter are always represented as the voice of convention that if on one hand encourages coquetry, on the other, discourages learning in women. «My mother, who thought knowledge a useless acquisition for one of her own sex, beheld my attachment to study with concern. [...] and I believe the bent of my inclinations to intellectual improvements, was the ground of the indifference she always expressed for me» (Lennox, 1751: 64).

Harriot Stuart, like other young girls presented in Lennox's novels, for example Arabella in *The Female Quixote* (1763) and Clara Bellenden in *Euphemia* (1790), love reading romances and do that «as if they [were] prescriptive literature [...]. She reads as mid eighteenth-century women readers were being exhorted to read [...] but she misreads because she has applied the didactic model of reading to the 'wrong' texts»¹² (Clarke, 2000: 93).

¹² Arabella's romances are inherited from her mother. She had used them to alleviate her solitude and they offer her daughter «a direct link to the mother she has never known, [...] a female legacy that inspires Arabella's desire for broader social horizons» (Barney, 1999: 262). Soon after the death of Arabella's mother they are removed from her room and housed along with philosophy, history, and tomes on rhetoric, and seem part of the respectable canon. Those romances

That Harriot is fascinated by books and also by the very idea that only owning them can change a woman's social status, is something clearly stated in the description she gives of the beautiful library in the house of Lady Cecilia. «[A]nd then saluting me, led us into her library, with which I was really prodigiously struck. The great number of books of which it was composed gave me a very advantageous idea of a lady, who could be at such an expense to furnish herself with intellectual entertainments» (Lennox, 1751:171-2).

In *Women's Reading in Britain* Jacqueline Pearson observes that

[b]y the mid eighteenth century the private library had become a major feature of the rebuilding projects of noble families. The trend also began to spread downwards to the middle classes, a visible sign of class and economic as of gender privilege. [...] It was expected that a young middle-class woman would accumulate books of her own [...] but what is intended is a library in the sense of a number of books rather than a private space where they can be enjoyed¹³ (Pearson, 1999: 152).

Lady Mary Wortley Montague thought it unusual even for an upper-class woman to own a library and mentioned her friend Lady Cecilia Isabella Finch, Lennox's first patroness in England, as the only Lady at Court who did. At the time when the novel was published she was in Italy and read, along with letters, a selection of books sent by her daughter. Among them she found *Harriot Stuart*. Lady Mary recognised her friend in *Harriot Stuart* and was outraged by Lennox's parodical depiction of her.

The episode of Lady Cecilia in *Harriot Stuart* has often been read as a revenge against Lennox's first patroness, Lady Cecilia Isabella Finch, who probably promised to help her and failed to keep that promise. «[S]he cast an obliging look at me, assuring me it should not be long before I should have no reason to regret the disappointment I had met with. 'I take upon myself, miss, said she, the care of making your fortune; and you may depend upon the absolute promise I now give you, to procure you a genteel place about the princess» (Lennox, 1751: 172).

As recently maintained by Dustin Griffin, the episode though is not necessarily to be assumed as autobiographical. In his opinion, in fact, it rather represents «an almost archetypal scene of disillusion» in which «develops the situation, which earlier writers had used for satiric purposes, into an extended sequence more characteristic of Richardson and Fielding» (Griffin, 1996: 212-3).

introduce Arabella into the realm of language and convention and provide a bond between the two women (Meyer Spacks, 1990: 12).

¹³ See also «The Realm of the Father: Private Libraries, gender and power», in Raymond Irwin (1966).

4. Imitation with variation: *The Female Quixote*

Catherine Talbot in a letter to Elizabeth Carter mentioned *The Female Quixote* as a book promising «some laughing amusement» and described it as «whimsical enough and not at all low» (Pennington, 1817: I, 366). Two hundred years later, Richard Barney numbered *The Female Quixote* among the most important educational texts of the eighteenth century and identified two stages in the history of educational works published between the end of the seventeenth and the eighteenth century: the first is exemplified in works by John Locke, Mary Astell, François Fénelon, and Elizabeth Drake; the second by Delarivier Manley's *New Atalantis*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* and Eliza Haywood's *Betsy Thoughtless* (Barney, 1999: 113). The critic eventually concludes then that Arabella, the protagonist, «embodies a distinct, though often self-contradictory, sense of female assertiveness advocated by women educationalists, such as Mary Astell, Damaris Masham and Judith Drake since the turn of the century. Masham and Drake, in particular, had identified women who wanted a better education for themselves as female Quixotes, «amusingly distracted» and «mentally imbalanced» and had described these beings as women «daring enough to tilt at the landmarks of masculine authority or educational privilege and, in the process, to become [persons] neither entirely masculine nor traditionally feminine»¹⁴ (Barney, 1999: 277).

The Female Quixote, belongs to a group of eighteenth-century «Quixote novels» such as Smollett's *Sir Launcelot Greaves*, Richard Grave's *The Spiritual Quixote* (1773), and other anonymous works such as *The Country Quixote* (1785), *The Amicable Quixote* (1788), and *The Political Quixote* (1797)¹⁵ (Hoope, 1984). Henry Fielding called his play *Don Quixote in England* (1729) and in *Joseph Andrews* declared: «Written in Imitation of the Manner of Cervantes» (Paulson, 1998: ix-x).

¹⁴ Judith Drake maintained in her *Defense of the Female Sex* (1696) that romances could be held responsible for a more advantageous education of women. The idea that women could, through self-education, «establish their own form of empire» had also been expressed in 1694 in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* by Mary Astell. See Sonia Maria Melchiorre (2013a).

¹⁵ *Don Quixote* was first translated into English in 1606 by George Wilkins; the first complete translation into a foreign language was by Shenston and was published in 1612; the first critical edition of the Spanish text and the first biography and «portrait» of Cervantes was published in 1738 by Lord Carteret; the first published commentary was by John Bowle and was published in 1781. *The Female Quixote* was part of a group of eighteenth-century «Quixote novels»: Smollett's *Sir Launcelot Greaves*, Robert Grave's *The Spiritual Quixote* (1773), and the anonymous works: *The Country Quixote* (1785), *The Amicable Quixote* (1788), and *The Political Quixote* (1797). The earliest translation of Cervantes's work into German was in 1754: *Don Quixote im Reifrope* published at Hamburg and Leipzig. The French one is dated 1773, the Spanish by Don Bernardo Maria de Calzada, 1808. England produced the first complete translations into a foreign language (Shenstone's in 1612), the first foreign reference to Quixote (George Wilkins', 1606), the first critical edition of the Spanish text (Lord Carteret's, 1738), the first published commentary (John Bowle's, 1781), and the first biography and «portrait» of Cervantes (in the Carteret edition).

The Female Quixote has often been analysed as a simple work stressing the author's desire to ridicule the French heroic romances¹⁶, but while, on one hand, *The Female Quixote* «ridicules romances», on the other it exposes the attractions of what that form represents. What the novel locates as the problem of romance, that is the disorder and rigidity of its form, and the ambiguities of its language, becomes its own. According to Tzvetan Todorov, the fact that a work 'disobeys' its genre

[d]oes not make the latter nonexistent; it is tempting to say that quite the contrary is true. And for a twofold reason. First, because transgression in order to exist as such, requires a law that will, of course, be transgressed. One could go further: the norm becomes visible – lives – only by its transgressions [...]. Not only does the work, for all its being an exception, necessarily presuppose a rule; but this work also, as soon as it is recognized in its exceptional status, becomes in its turn, thanks to successful sales and critical attention, a rule (Todorov, 1976: 160).

Furthermore, as maintained by Michael McKeon, the movement from romance to novel «rests on an underlying epistemological shift from truth-as-historical-accuracy to truth-as-mimetic-simulation» (Gallagher, 1994: 164). He notices that when verisimilitude is accepted as a form of truth, rather than a lying fiction it becomes a category and founds the novel as a genre.

Helen Thomson, in her critical investigation on Lennox's work, observes that the authoress in *The Female Quixote* simultaneously invents and deconstructs the novel. At the same time, it is also «apparently bidding farewell to the romance as a superseded form of fiction», following in the steps of Cervantes but offering an opposite gender perspective, thus significantly altering the final message (Thomson, 1986: 125).

In her discussion she underlines how fiction has always been considered a feminised field, but when novel and romance have specifically been compared, the realism of the novel has tended to be gendered as masculine, the fantasy of romance as feminine. *The Female Quixote*, the critic observes «is wonderfully entertaining record of a perfectly self-aware and deliberate transition from one kind of fictional writing to another, with the complexity of aesthetic and moral value being firmly gendered» (Thomson, 1986: 125)¹⁷.

When in early nineteenth century a canon of the novel began to be formulated, it centred on male writers such as Richardson, Smollett and Sterne (Gorak, 1997: 561). By consequence, extraordinary works, such as *The Female Quixote*, dis-

¹⁶ Mockery of romance conventions is found in «Shallum and Hilpah», one of the best of her 1747 poems, and based on Joseph Addison's «The Story of Hilpa», previously published in the *Spectator*.

¹⁷ See also Zak Watson (2001) for a in depth analysis of the difference of realistic writing and romance.

appeared from the accounts of English literary history. According to Thomson, part of Lennox's literary value resides in the fact that «[she] was writing novels when the idea of prose fiction was undergoing a great change and the heavy distinction between romances and novels was made applying the neo-classical principle of probability» (Pearson, 1999: 199).

Such distinction seems to collapse, in fact, by the end of the century under the weight of the Gothic novel, interpreted as «a hybrid of novel and romance»¹⁸ (Barney, 1999). As Clara Reeve put it in 1785: «at the time it [*The Female Quixote*] first appeared, the taste for those Romances was extinct [...]. [T]his book came some thirty or forty years late. [...] Romances at this time were quite out of fashion, and the press groaned under the weight of Novels, which sprung up like Mushrooms every year!»¹⁹ (Langbauer, 1990: 64).

Lennox though was convinced that the same formula could still work by the end of the century, so that she reused it in her next novel *Euphemia* published in 1790. The narrative model for Lennox was obviously Cervantes, but while the original Don Quixote is «unable to distinguish between impulses originating from within and those originating from without and is, according to empirical standards, really crazy», English quixotes, like Arabella, are always reliable because they describe things as they appear to other characters. They are not, as Tobias Smollett put it, «visited by that spirit of lunacy so admirably displayed in the fictitious character exhibited by the inimitable Cervantes [...]. [T]hey see and distinguish objects as they are discerned and described by other men» (Smollett, 1988: 50).

Some critics have interpreted Cervantes's work as an invention to ridicule and get rid of romance. This reading does not consider, though, that Cervantes kept writing romances until the end of his life, as demonstrated by works such as *La Galatea* (1584) and *Persiles y Sigismunda* (1617). «It is from this romance tradition and not from the chivalric branch of it that the works read by Arabella: *Artamène, ou le Grand Cyrus* (1649-53) and *Clélie* (1654-60) emerge» (Doody, 1989: xi).

By shifting the tension to the story of a young woman rather than an old man, *The Female Quixote* inaugurates within the English novel tradition the inherent relation between heroines and romance. Since then the terms «romance» and «woman» have always appeared as «inextricably intertwined» (Doody, 1989: 1).

More recently feminist critics have investigated *The Female Quixote's* dependence on romance and have come to see romance as «a hidden code revealing female subversion of the male order of representation» (Gallagher, 1994: 176).

¹⁸ See the discussion about *The Female Quixote* and *Northanger Abbey* in particular about the characters of Arabella and Catherine Morland (Barney, 1999). Austen herself expressed her appreciation for Lennox's work in a letter to her sister Cassandra, 7 Jan. 1807. It «now makes our evening amusement; to me a very high one, as I find the work quite equal to what remembered it» (Le Faye, 1995: 116).

¹⁹ Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance* (1795) (Langbauer, 1990: 64).

Ellen Moers had also suggested that «women writers and readers see romance not as a «male prison» but as a woman's form finding in this recognition a source of feminism» (Langbauer, 1990: 85).

Other critics, such as Joseph Bartolomeo, consider *The Female Quixote* «a rewriting of *Clarissa* in a comic model». In his opinion Lennox, like Richardson, explores in her novel «the possibilities for a limitation upon the exceptional woman» (Bartolomeo, 1996: 163)²⁰. Some evident differences between the two novels reside also in the depiction of the male characters: in *The Female Quixote* Arabella's father differs enormously from *Clarissa's*, because in the end he cannot force her consent. Mr. Glanville, on his part, unlike Solmes or Lovelace, is more sensitive and in the end is the only man in the book who stands on Arabella's side. The Lovelace character, which Janet Todd sees represented by Arabella herself, is played in *The Female Quixote* by an apparently friendly character: Sir George Bellmour. He is, in fact, deceiving Arabella with the aim of convincing her to marry him. But Lennox decides otherwise and ridicules and traps him into a marriage he doesn't want. Arabella, on the other hand, becomes friends with another exceptionally educated woman, The Countess, «an eager reader of romances» herself, subverting one of the main rules of romances where women can only be rivals in love.

Janet Todd, in her interesting comparison between the novels by Eliza Haywood and Charlotte Lennox, underlines that «friends seem there for the asking, and a woman must only vibrate with sensibility to attract a confidant to her bosom. The tension is not within the relationship but between it and the outside world of men and marriage» (Todd, 1980: 311).

The Countess then features in the novel not only as a personal friend but also as an «ideal instructor», a surrogate mother, who attempts to re-educate the girl explaining the historical changeability of concepts such as «Adventure» and «Virtue». The central character of the Countess, who also features in the novel as «an alternative to the manipulation of both Glanville and Sir George», suddenly, and quite inexplicably, disappears from the narrative. One possible explanation could be that Arabella cannot be «cured» by another woman as «power and authority can enter the text only as a man because only a man can dispel romance» (Langbauer, 1990: 82-3). As for the language used in *The Female Quixote*, it is worth noticing that the example of scandal writers is not completely forgotten by Charlotte. Scandal is, in fact, the mode of storytelling that the novel most often contrasts to romance, so that Arabella's language is understood by Charlotte Glanville as «the language of scandal».

When Arabella uses words such as «adventures» – meaning «high-heroic

²⁰ Bartolomeo finds several parallels between characters and plot: Arabella is *Clarissa Harlowe's* sister's name; Arabella's flight through a «Garden door» reminds us of *Clarissa's* flight with Lovelace; and the combination of elements from the stories of Sally Martin and Polly Horton resembles *Clarissa's* antagonists at Mrs. Sinclair's brothel.

actions of ladies in defence of their honour» – Miss Glanville understands it as «illicit sexual affairs»; when Arabella speaks of «favours» – meaning «trinkets a lady might give her champion» – the word is perceived by Charlotte Glanville as meaning «sexual commerce».

Arabella uses, throughout the whole narrative, a language the other characters only know as readers of scandal *memoirs* and *The New Atalantis* by Delarivière Manley is explicitly referred to in the episode of Mr. Tinsel at Bath (Craft, 1991: 833).

It is interesting to notice that critics have long debated on the controversial ending of *The Female Quixote*.

Wendy Motooka, for example, disagrees with the interpretation of those feminist critics who see the ending of *The Female Quixote* as «anti-feminist»: in the last part of the narrative Arabella is cured by a phantomatic Doctor, a necessary intervention, according to her reading, in a narrative where reason is equalled to masculinity and quixotism to femininity. In the early eighteenth century, she explains, «quixotism was not a laughing matter» but something that parodied rational discourse and «conjured images of innovation, cultural change and revolution».

The «sudden sentimental ending», Motooka maintains, makes then more sense that way, because quixotism is recognized as the parodic parallel of masculine reason, rather than its feminine opposite» (Motooka, 1998: 28). Likewise, Devoney Looser thinks that those critics who find the ending of Lennox's novel «disappointingly conventional should rethink their expectations» because: «[t]o assume from Lennox's adherence to convention that she was antifeminist or that she did not really mean for Arabella to marry is to misunderstand the function of conventions. Lennox bends some generic «rules» and conforms to others» (Looser, 2000: 112).

Charlotte Ramsay Lennox, apart from being a good fiction writer, also applied to other more «respectable» literary genres. Between the 1750s and 1760s she produced, in fact, two important works: *Shakespeare Illustrated* (1753), a critical study on the sources of Shakespeare's plays; and the *Lady's Museum*, a periodical, and one of the earliest women's magazines, she ingeniously used to serialise her own fictions. Lennox has been too long, and inexplicably, left out of the literary canon. By consequence, due to the important lack of information, her transgressive potential cannot be totally understood, not even by contemporary feminist scholars. Other investigations are thus needed in order to hand down a correct (re)vision of the tradition of English letters.

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