The Problem of *The Female Quixote*: Arabella’s Sanity

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Critics of Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* have sought to demonstrate that the opposition between realism and romance that the novel puts into play lacks stability. According to James Lynch, the narrator ‘employs many of the same narrative conventions that had become [the] clichés’ (51) of romances, so the linear movement of the plot cannot take place without the novelist employing the techniques of romance fiction, as if they belonged to the realistic narrative. Laurie Langbauer, while making a similar point, also notes that on a synchronic level, ‘the line between [realism] and romance disappears’ (32), because at distinct points in the novel — such as when Glanville attacks Hervey or when he stabs Sir George (See Langbauer, 31-32) — reading the novel either as a romance or a realist text will not alter the significance of the observed events. Hence, the realistic novelist and her characters unwittingly transform Arabella into the type of heroine that she believes she is, and the novel confirms the value of the perspective it is attempting to eradicate.

The opposition structuring the novel, both Lynch and Langbauer suggest, must be deconstructed in order for Lennox to achieve closure, although Langbauer adds that Lennox attempts to conceal the
dismantling of the opposition by allowing romance to 'stand for whatever the defining agent rejects or taboos' (Langbauer, 49) The aspect of Lennox’s novel is not very surprising. It was common to discount texts as inauthentic fictions by labeling them *romances* throughout the eighteenth century, and a variety of writers sought to validate their work by defining it against such fictions. Novelists were no exception (see McKeon, 65-89). But while many eighteenth-century novelists ‘explicitly subvert the idea and ethos of romance’ as Michael McKeon observes, ‘they nonetheless draw upon many of its stock situations and conventions’ (2).

Lynch and Langbauer have really done nothing more than situate Lennox within a cultural paradox. What is absent from their studies is an analysis of the problem that the clash between the two modes of discourse creates for the novel’s characters. Consequently, Arabella’s hermeneutic foibles have been approached as if the critic should become a version of Mr. Glanville, albeit slightly more educated and more sympathetic with the romantic view. In other words, the critic should, like Glanville, admire Arabella’s intellect but abhor her romance delusion. Consequently, the realists’ perspective continues to be affirmed, even as it is demonstrated that their perspective is not completely reliable, and Arabella’s condition is defined as a form of ‘madness’.¹ Mr. Glanville’s task – to convince Arabella to interpret her experience using a realistic frame of reference – is thus treated as an unproblematic attempt to cure this madness.

Critics who categorize Arabella’s malady as a form of madness are approaching *The Female Quixote* as Foucault approaches *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615), which marks, he argues, ‘the end of the old interplay between resemblance and signs and contain[s] the beginnings of new relations’ (46). In Foucault’s view, Don Quixote’s hermeneutic principles are determined by the *episteme* of the sixteenth century and before: his ‘whole journey is a quest for similitudes’ (47).

¹ According Langbauer, ‘The Female Quixote shows that romance . . . is nonsensical, ultimately mad’ (27). She later claims that ‘romance has disordered [Arabella’s] brain, driven her ‘out of her senses’ (35). In a similar vein, Lynch notes, ‘eventually, Arabella is cured of her madness’ (61). Even Scott Paul Gordon, who argues that romance promotes positive values that are missing in the real social world, argues that Arabella’s ‘position exists to place her in . . . “mad space”’. See ‘The Space of Romance in Lennox’s *Female Quixote*’. (Studies in English Literature 38 [1998]), p. 508.
in an age that no longer establishes knowledge on the basis of resemblance. The ‘truth’, Cervantes makes clear, can only be obtained by accepting the perspective of those who have not been deluded by romances, those characters whose thinking is determined by the epistemological mode that emerged in the seventeenth century, when Quixote’s perspective is, if not totally incomprehensible, only vaguely understood. And ‘right up until the advent of nineteenth century psychiatry, [the madman] is the man who is alienated in analogy’ (Foucault, 49). If Foucault is accurate about seventeenth- and eighteen-century representations of madness, then Arabella can be mad only if, like Quixote, she is a ‘heroine of the Same’ (47).

The epistemological problem in Lennox’s novel, however, differentiates it from that of Cervantes in ways that have been misunderstood when alluded to at all. The Female Quixote does not really ask the reader to oppose Glanville’s method of interpretation to that of Arabella. Her romantic vision is undoubtedly represented as something that needs to be reformed, but a comparison of the two apparently competing modes of interpretation will demonstrate that the difference between them is not as radical as a superficial reading of the novel suggests. That there is a similarity between the two modes has not been recognized, because while some critics have analyzed, on a surface level, the way Arabella interprets her world, no one has sought to establish the process of interpretation that the realists go through, nor has anyone attempted to reconstruct, on an archeological level, the conditions which make interpretation possible for both parties. Lennox, nevertheless, seems to ask us to analyze the way both Arabella and the realists try to understand the world. Arabella, after all, is not the only character to face quixotic interpretive problems, as Lynch has shown (See 57).

That the realists don’t always properly understand their world is only a minor point. What is interesting about Lennox’s novel is that in it both the quixotic and the apparently accurate interpretations of its characters are arrived at by the same means. To demonstrate that this is the case, I want to take as representative the ‘surprising Adventure on the Road’ between Arabella’s country seat and Bath, an adventure in which ‘Three or Four Men of genteel Appearance, on Horseback, who seemed to halt, and gaze’ (257) on Arabella’s party, are observed. During this adventure, Arabella sees knights who are coming to rescue her, while her friends see highwaymen. Neither Arabella nor
her friends wait to be attacked before linking the signified knights to highwaymen to the signifier horsemen. Glanville and the others would be irresponsible to wait; horsemen on the road between cities are a potential threat, especially when they halt and gaze, and if they turn out not to be highwaymen, nothing will have been lost by being prepared for the worst.

What is disturbing about the episode, in light of all the condemnation of Arabella’s habit of ‘conjecturing too soon’ (370), is that from the beginning of it, everyone, accept Arabella, believes that the men on horseback are without doubt highwaymen, and the reader blindly concurs. The narrator has, after all, introduced them as highwaymen, but notice that the men on horseback at first only seem to halt, and gaze on’ Arabella’s party: they could be doing something else. It is impossible for anyone to be sure who these men are, until they reveal their identities.

It might be objected that if the horsemen on the road are not highwaymen, what are they? But if the horsemen who appear at the end of the novel and from which Arabella attempts to escape by jumping into the Thames are not ravishers, as Arabella thinks, what are they? For the realists, the second group of horsemen is not significant enough to notice. All horsemen are not a potential danger. The first group of horsemen may not be dangerous either. After all, nothing more substantial than their appearance on the road and their apparent gazing persuades the travelers that they are about to be robbed. Arabella’s friends have performed an act of interpretation and transformed these horsemen into highwaymen, and this remains the case even if they turn out to be highwaymen. Arabella also performs an interpretive act, transforming the men into knights, and while the reader can be certain that they are not the kind of knights that Arabella sees, the irony of the situation is that she has as much, if not more, reason to believe that they are not insignificant horsemen.

Arabella knows the others believe they are going to be attacked, because ‘Sir Charles . . . cried out with too little Caution, How’s this? Are we in any Danger of being attacked?’ and ‘Miss Glanville screamed out’ (57). The horsemen then began ‘galloping towards them’ (258). Arabella is obliged to treat these horsemen as significant, and she categorizes them in the only way she knows how. She is being perfectly sensible, doing exactly what her friends have done, that is, she has seen a group of unknown men, who she feels obliged
to regard as significant, and she has placed them in a category that explains to her what they are. It would be unreasonable for us to expect her to place these men in the same category as her friends have, because she has never, we must assume, read or heard about nor been attacked by highwaymen. She has no way of knowing that the category *highwayman* exists. But she has heard about genteel men who save women from ravishers, so when she observes the men’s genteel appearance, she draws upon what she knows in order to understand what she is witnessing, just as her friends have done.

Arabella’s mistake is not the first of its kind. Earlier, when Arabella thought Hervey was going to carry her away, she ‘gave out a loud shriek’ (19) which prompted him to ride ‘eagerly up to her to inquire the reason of it’ (19). Her servants, not acquainted with romance categories but well accustomed to realistic ones, immediately decide that Hervey is a highwayman. During both adventures, the reader’s first reaction is to pronounce Arabella mad, and in the adventure on the road, to accept that Glanville and the others’ observation is correct, and in the adventure involving Hervey, to excuse the servants’ misreading because it is based on Arabella’s. The two episode are, however, almost exactly the same. In each, a horseman or men are seen, a reaction is provoked, and those who have not previously observed the man or men respond to the reaction and see villains.

The servants’ mistake is not only the first hint that the interpretive process of the realistic characters is not entirely dependable, but it also suggests — especially when it is looked at again and compared with the mistake Arabella makes during the adventure on the road — that the realistic characters interpret their world in the same way as Arabella. Later, when Arabella makes her first appearance at Bath in a veil, the persons of fashion in the pump room confirm this suggestion. They ‘quote Examples of [the eccentric] Whims’ (264) of other ladies of high quality to appropriate her oddity into their world: ‘One remembered that Lady J— T— wore her ruffles reversed; that the Countess of — went to Court in a Farthingale; [and] that the Duchess of — sat astride upon a horse’ (264). An implicit analogy is made here between the realists’ method of reading and Arabella’s method of quoting examples from romances. On the surface, the only real difference between Arabella’s and the realists’ interpretive practices is that the reader is predisposed to trust the realistic characters’ observations and distrust Arabella’s.
The surprising aspect of the representation of the romantic and realistic view in Lennox's novel is that there is an implicit attempt to reaffirm the value of romance by equating the way the romantic observer interprets the world with the way the realistic observer does. Nowhere is this aspect of the novel more obvious than in its penultimate chapter, when the Divine disabuses Arabella of her romantic notions. Lennox's letters reveal that this ending was a second thought. Lennox originally planned to have the Countess, who appears briefly at Bath, cure Arabella by having her read Clarissa. Arabella would then have replaced a romantic with a realistic perspective. Problems of length forced Lennox to abandon this plan. The alternative ending has been found dissatisfying, and many have argued that it clashes with the rest of the novel. It has even been surmised that Dr. Johnson wrote the chapter (See Doody, 301; Ross, 459; and Langbauer, 43). If he wrote it, he understood Lennox's plan better than most, for although the present ending does appear forced (since the alternative perspective, which Clarissa would have provided, does not replace the romantic one), the cure as we have it or the cure by Clarissa raises the same question: How does one come to understand what one sees?

It may be unsafe to conjecture what Lennox would have written had she the space to give us the Clarissa-ending, but the problem may be clarified to a greater degree in the present text, for Arabella and the Divine establish in their dialogue what Fredric Jameson calls the 'absolute presupposition' (x) on which acts of interpretation in their world proceed. The possibility of this topic coming up in the Clarissa-ending is difficult to imagine. The Countess would have used Richardson's novel to expose Arabella to eighteenth-century social

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2 One extra-textual piece of evidence lends credence to the idea that Lennox regards Arabella's romances as more valuable than her novel seems to allow. A year after the publication of The Female Quixote, Lennox published Shakespeare Illustrated (1753) where she 'took revenge', in Margaret Ann Doody's words, 'for her ridiculed, chastened Arabella. The critical work seems the work of an Arabella unformed' (307). As Doody demonstrates, Lennox's study of Shakespeare discloses the playwright's reliance on romances, but it condemns him for misrepresenting his sources. He 'is guilty of the same fault as the male characters in The Female Quixote - he reads romances and stories wrongly ... And when he tries to rework them, he usually bungles the matter' (Doody, 303). Indeed, although romances are often condemned for absurdity, Shakespeare's absurdity is, in Lennox's view, far worse than what is found in romance novels (303–4). Margaret Anne Doody, 'Shakespeare's Novels: Charlotte Lennox Illustrated'. 
conventions, and she would have learned to situate herself within a
new social text. In the dispute, Arabella is able to force the Divine to
explain the interpretive process in order to insure that ‘The Laws of
Conference[, which] require that the terms of the Question and the
Answer be the same’ (371), are observed. Arabella is the first to bring
up the problem of interpretation. ‘Human beings’, she says, ‘cannot
penetrate Intentions, nor regulate their Conduct but by exterior Ap-
pearances’ (371), so they must regulate their conduct by interpreting
the intentions of others.

Expanding on this premise, the Divine outlines the process that
allows one to discover these intentions. Interpretation proceeds, he
argues, by comparing one’s present situation with what has happened
in the past to one’s self and/or others, something that one learns
through experience or, when that is lacking, ‘by Reading and Conver-
sation’ (372). In other words, in order for a signifier such as ‘three or
four Horsemen riding along the road’ (362) to be recognized as a
sign, one must connect a signified to it by placing it in a narrative or
what Arabella calls a history. When one is unaware of the history of
the horsemen that have appeared and has neither the time nor the
means of acquiring it, one must recall an appropriate history by draw-
ing upon the narratives that one has learned or constructed with the
aid of one’s own or another’s experience, that is, one is forced to
place the signifier into a narrative so that it can acquire a signified.

Earlier, Arabella had said essentially the same thing. When Sir
Charles wanted to know why Glanville had quarreled with Hervey,
Arabella claimed that it was ‘necessary [he] should be acquainted
with [her] whole History, in order to comprehend it’ (160). Glan-
ville’s quarrel, as far as Arabella is concerned, will be incomprehens-
able if one is not acquainted with the history in which it has meaning.

The dispute allows Lennox to establish explicitly that Arabella’s
method of interpretation is not essentially different from that of the
realistic characters, for the Divine and Arabella find that they already
agree upon the manner in which ‘semiology and hermeneutics’, to
cite Foucault’s formula, ‘are superimposed’ (66). The rest of the dis-

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3 Semiology, for Foucault’s purposes, is a knowledge of the system that allows one to
transform a signifier into a sign, and hermeneutics is the skill which makes it possible
to recognize a sign when one is confronted with one (see 29). It is possible for semi-
ology and hermeneutics to be superimposed in alternative fashions. In both the epis-
pute consistently calls attention to this aspect of Lennox's representation of Arabella's quixotic hermeneutic, for although the Divine had set out to correct Arabella's reason, after the portion of the dialogue discussed above, he is obliged to change tactics. The immediate issue under discussion is whether or not Arabella had reason to fear some horsemen riding near the Thames. We know that Arabella had interpreted the intentions of these men, an interpretation that led her to jump into the river, with reference to the examples she has learned in her books, and since her reasons for supposing that she was in danger had followed from premises that the Divine agrees with, the his task is to prove that his stories are more appropriate ones to refer to, when one is interpreting what one encounters in the present world, or that the books Arabella refers to 'are absurd' (374). 'Truth', he grants, 'is not always injured by Fiction' (377), so even if he can prove that her books are fictitious, the possibility of regarding them as representations of truth remains. In the end, the dispute is not about Arabella's lack of reason at all.

If Lennox had the space to have Arabella replace romance conventions with those determining the social text represented in Clarissa, she would have implied the same thing, since Arabella would presumably have read the same way. Lennox would also have mitigated the difficulty the Divine has convincing Arabella to abandon her romantic vision. As things stand, the Divine runs into unforeseen problems because he and Arabella agree on so much. Arabella's sanity makes it next to impossible to change her mind. All the Divine can do is state that 'A long Life may be passed without a single Occurrence that can cause much Surprize, or produce any unexpected Conse-

tome of the sixteenth century and of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, semiology and hermeneutics are superimposed. The difference between the two epistemes is that in the former 'they [semiology and hermeneutics] . . . meet in the third element of resemblance', while in the latter, 'meaning cannot be anything but the totality of the signs arranged in their progression' (66), or as Arabella claims, certainty can only be established if one knows the complete history, or what she at one point calls a 'system' (142), that contains the sign. Unlike Don Quixote, Arabella is not anachronistically applying an epistemological mode that has been abandoned; her methods for acquiring knowledge are the same as those of the people that she encounters.
quence of great Importance' (379). Arabella offers her recent adventure with the horsemen as an example of one of the 'many Accidents' of which life is full, and the Divine objects that she cannot offer 'as an Argument the Fact which is under Dispute' (379). At this point, Arabella begins to question herself, but there is no reason for her to do so. She has plenty of examples, which have not been taken from books, to offer as facts that life is subject to many accidents: the story of the nobleman who disguised himself as a gardener and later came to carry her away. Mr. Hervey’s attempt to carry her away, Sir George’s history, and the history of Cynecia (the actress Sir George hires).

From the reader’s perspective, all these examples are as absurd as the romances, the result of either Arabella’s misreading or Sir George’s devices, but Arabella believes the adventures occurred, and following the premises the Divine puts forward as a means of producing a cure, she is justified in her belief. She has been able to appeal to 'the Evidence of [her] own Senses' (114) to substantiate her ideas. Indeed, everything she encounters furnishes, in Glanville’s words, ‘Matter for some new Extravagance’ (116). She had even found a friend, Cynecia, whose life story had confirmed her notions: Cynecia’s history had convinced her ‘that the Countess [who had tried to wean Arabella from her delusion] was extremely mistaken, when she maintain’d there were no more wandering Princesses in the World’ (347). Even after she has been cured, Arabella is not sure whether or not Glanville killed Hervey.

Arabella does have the ability to compare the examples offered in her books with the events of her own life as well as others. For this reason, the Divine has no alternative but to compel her to accept an appeal to his authority, ‘suffer[ing him] to decide ... whether Life is truly described in those books’ (379) or not. This method of proof is invalid; this is the fact under dispute, and according to the laws of disputation, it cannot be accepted as a proof of the Divine’s assertions. More importantly, the argument that the Divine hoped would lead Arabella to reform has the ability to validate the romantic view, at least for Arabella, as much as it validates the realistic view. The Divine’s arguments contradict Arabella’s own experience, so Arabella has no reasonable grounds for accepting the Divine’s authority.

Having raised these problems, Lennox, in a move towards closure, attempts to efface them by having Arabella, uncharacteristically,
offer only one example to illustrate the validity of her reasoning and by not having her, also uncharacteristically, object to the Divine's fallacious method of argumentation. The novel ends with an act that at once confirms the reader's assumptions about the world (since Arabella has been absorbed into that world) and denies these assumptions (since reason is incapable of affirming them). Lennox's satire seems to be directed not toward a particular mode of fiction but toward the manner in which knowledge is obtained in her own age. Lennox questions the ground on which all interpretation rests, because the manner in which Arabella is absorbed into the world of her contemporaries is not sanctioned by the system she is absorbed into and because this system damns those contained in it to the same absurdity that Arabella has been guilty of all along, that is, only being able to see what is already known. If Arabella is mad, so are those who inhabit the realistic world, or conversely, if the realistic characters are sane, Arabella has been proving her own sanity all along. ###

Works Cited