Rereading the Patriarchal Text: *The Female Quixote*, *Northanger Abbey*, and the Trace of the Absent Mother

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> Would the veil in which Mrs. Tilney had last walked, or the volume in which she had last read, remain to tell what nothing else was allowed to whisper? No: whatever might have been the General's crimes, he had certainly too much wit to let them sue for detection.[1]
>
> Jane Austen

> In reading, one encounters only a text, the trail of an absent author.[2]
>
> Patrocinio P. Schweickart

In an attempt to create a community of women readers, writers, and critics who can construct a literary discourse amenable to feminist concerns, Patrocinio Schweickart proposes a gender-coded dual reading strategy. When reading "*certain* (not all) male texts," feminists should invoke "a dual hermeneutic: a negative hermeneutic that discloses [the texts'] complicity with patriarchal ideology, and a positive hermeneutic that recuperates the utopian moment ... from which they draw a significant portion of their emotional power." By thus bifurcating their responses, claims Schweickart, feminists can practise Judith Fetterley's resistance to the "immasculation" that normally uses the woman reader

1 Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Anne Henry Ehrenpreis (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 196. References are to this edition.

2 Patrocinio P. Schweickart, "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading," in *Gender and Reading*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 47.

"against herself"[3] by soliciting "her complicity in the elevation of male difference into universality," while simultaneously allowing themselves identification with the male hero, because, in many cases, "stripped of its patriarchal trappings, [the hero's] struggle and his utopian vision conform to [feminists'] own." When reading "female" texts, on the other hand, the feminist reader should take "the part of the woman writer against patriarchal misreadings that trivialize or distort her work," and should take as her ultimate "destination" the writer's "heart and mind": a key "feature of feminist readings of women's writing [is] the tendency to construe the text not as an object, but as the manifestation of the subjectivity of the absent author. ... To read [a woman writer], then, is to try to visit with her, to hear her voice, to make her live *in* oneself."[4]

In recent rereadings of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, feminist critics have practised something akin to what Schweickart prescribes for the feminist reading of "female" texts, attempting "to recuperate ... the tradition ... that would link women writers to one another, to women readers and critics, and to the larger community of women." Just as the heroines, Catherine and Arabella, recover texts of "absent mothers" and reinterpret them in feminist ways, so have feminist critics recovered the texts in which they appear, taking the novelists' part "against patriarchal misreadings" as they evince "the need 'to connect'" with these literary foremothers.[5] To these ends, they have discovered heretofore ignored alliances between Austen and Lennox, on the one hand, and the female writers of Gothic novels and French romances, on the other: some now view as celebratory intertextual relationships that had long been painted as parodic and scornful.

If the novels hold a lesson for feminist readers of "female" texts, however, they have perhaps even more to teach the readers of "male" ones. For, as internal readers and hence as models for external ones, Catherine and Arabella read not only published romances which are the texts of absent mothers, but also, and more significantly, the patriarchally constructed worlds in which they live, including, in Catherine's case, an absent mother *as* patriarchally constructed "text." In deciphering these "male" texts, the heroines seem to pursue Schweickart's bifurcated approach of resistance and identification. This pursuit meets with

3 See Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

4 Schweickart, pp. 43–44, 42, 42, 46, 47.

5 Schweickart, p. 48.

varying degrees of success, however, because, as Teresa de Lauretis argues, narrative delineates a "female position" fraught with difficulties for the feminist reader or spectator. In traditional narrative, built around what both de Lauretis and Peter Brooks, among others, see as an Oedipal plot structure,[6] woman is cast not as the subject of the desire that drives the plot but as an object—an obstacle to the narrative movement or the figure of its closure, the "space" toward which the narrative and its protagonist move. In order to "be actively involved as subject" in the stories she reads, then, the female reader must simultaneously identify "with both the subject and the space of the narrative movement, with the figure of movement and the figure of its closure." According to de Lauretis's theory, this "double identification," which upholds "both positionalities of desire, both active and passive aims: desire for the other, and desire to be desired by the other," would occur automatically, and prior to any conscious effort to recode the hero as a feminist or to uncover and resist complicity with patriarchy. "This," notes de Lauretis, "is in fact the operation by which narrative and cinema solicit the spectators' consent and seduce women into femininity," into submissively "performing their gender"[7] by playing their role in the story of men's desire.[8]

And indeed, in the "happy" endings of their stories, Arabella and Catherine both wind up being "seduced into femininity"—"for society's profit," as de Lauretis remarks.[9] In the process, however, they leave for future feminists a record of their seduction and revealing portraits of the society that profits by their femininity. And whereas Arabella seems ultimately to succumb entirely to identification with the figure of closure, Catherine retains some residue of the subjectivity she has borrowed from the "figure of movement": her self-construction as a sort of *detective*, the protagonist of her own plot of reading, enables her to collaborate with Austen in laying bare the workings of patriarchal society—and enables the external, feminist reader, in turn, to disclose the male text's "complicity with patriarchal ideology." If we can use the reading strategies taught

6 See Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), pp. 90–112, and Teresa de Lauretis, "Desire in Narrative," *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 133.

7 Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), p. 272.

8 de Lauretis, pp. 141, 143

9 de Lauretis, p. 143.

by Austen and Schweickart in *re*reading *The Female Quixote*, we will uncover in its midst not only an embedded feminist reading of a female text that attempts to create a community of women, but a secret cache of resistance to immasculation by a male text. By rereading *The Female Quixote* from the subject position made possible by Austen and twentieth-century feminism, we can discover a narrative movement apart from the chivalric plot in which Arabella attempts unsuccessfully to serve as subject: the plot of the patriarchy which punishes her for "doing her gender wrong,"[10] first by continually re-objectifying her and finally by seducing her into the permanent femininity of "sanity" and marriage.[11]

The Reader Reread

Traditional readings of both *The Female Quixote* and *Northanger Abbey* construed them as warnings to the seducible reader, the one who could not distinguish fiction from reality—and who, according to popular opinion in the eighteenth century, tended to be female. Indeed, in enumerating the ways in which Lennox's *Quixote* surpassed that of Cervantes, Fielding lauded its realism on this score:

> as we are to grant in both Performances, that the Head of a very sensible Person is entirely subverted by reading Romances, this Concession seems to me more easy to be granted in the Case of a young Lady than of an old Gentleman ... I make no Doubt but that most young Women of the same Vivacity, and of the same innocent good Disposition, in the same Situation, and with the same Studies, would be able to make a large Progress in the same Follies. ... I cannot omit observing, that ... our Author hath taken such Care throughout her work, to expose all those Vices and Follies in her Sex which are chiefly predominant in Our Days, that it will afford very useful Lessons to all those young Ladies who will peruse it with proper Attention.[12]

10 J. Butler, p. 273.

11 If the anachronism of such a reading appears to fly in the face of another of Schweickart's recommendations for the feminist reader of "female" texts—the need to acknowledge that "a literary work cannot be understood apart from the social, historical, and cultural context within which it was written" (p. 46)—we may be able to historicize the interpretation in a way that parallels the historicizing of the texts themselves: just as Arabella and Lennox may have been compelled to conform to their male mentors' modes of thinking in order to be taken seriously in a patriarchal world (see the argument in "Patrimony's Matrimonial Plot," below), so might female or feminist-minded critics have felt compelled to fall in with the line of thought outlined by Henry Fielding's early interpretation of *The Female Quixote* as a didactic and parodic work in order to be taken seriously as critics. Moreover, such a possibility suggests that what seem to be anachronisms in feminist rereadings *might* in fact be only-recently-sanctioned revelations of the historical impossibility—or inadvisability—of overt expressions of feminist positions. The trace followed below in rereading *The Female Quixote* may prove one small indication that such positions were indeed expressed covertly.

12 Henry Fielding, *The Covent Garden Journal*, no. 24 (review of *The Female Quixote*), in *The*

"Women, who have been addicted to common novel-reading are always acting in imitation of some Jemima or Almeria, who never existed," wrote Maria Edgeworth.[13] In *The Progress of Romance*, Clara Reeve's spokeswoman Euphrasia informs her friends that French heroic romances so intermingled truth and fiction "that a common reader could not distinguish them, [and] young people especially imbibed such absurd ideas of historical facts and persons, as were very difficult to be rectified." Romance, says Euphrasia, "taught young women to deport themselves too much like Queens and Princesses."[14] Women, according to Lennox's contemporaries, "are particularly susceptible to reading passionately";[15] their passive roles render them "infinitely receptive," and they become "imitative readers who, evidently, tend to repeat in life what they read in fiction."[16] This tendency may present serious dangers when the fiction is romantic, for "romances elicit 'amourous passions ... which are apt to insinuate themselves into their unwary Readers,'"[17] and who knows what havoc the lust of women might wreak once aroused!

Given conventional wisdom about the perils of perusal, it stood to reason that, in laying bare such text-reader dynamics, Lennox and Austen sought to make a clean break with their romantic precursors. Hence, Fielding's view of the didactic aim of *The Female Quixote* became standard, and when *Northanger Abbey* came along, critics applauded it as a similar rejection of the "women's" romance of its author's predecessors. Austen, many thought, "wanted to make a point about the unreality of the world of romance";[18] she staged her novel as a criticism of Gothic fiction "for its artificiality and irresponsibility," an attempt "to laugh her readers out of extravagant imaginings into right judgement."[19]

But, as a number of recent feminist critics have argued, female writers may not experience the same "anxiety of influence" as that which might

Criticism of Henry Fielding, ed. Ioan Williams (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 193–94.

13 *Practical Education*, quoted in Bridget Hill, *Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), p. 61.

14 "The Progress of Romance," *The Progress of Romance and the History of Charoba, Queen of Aegypt* (New York: Facsimile Text Society, 1930; reproduced from the Colchester edition of 1785), pp. 65, 67.

15 Robert Uphaus, "Jane Austen and Female Reading," *Studies in the Novel* 19 (1987), p. 336.

16 Marilyn Butler, "The Woman at the Window: Ann Radcliffe in the Novels of Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen," in *Gender and Literary Voice*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holms and Meier, 1980), p. 140; Uphaus, p. 336.

17 Richard Allestree, *The Ladies Calling* (1677), quoted in Uphaus, p. 336.

18 M. Butler, p. 137.

19 Coral Ann Howells, "Gothic Themes, Values, Techniques," *Love, Mystery, and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction* (London: Athlone, 1978), p. 7.

inspire their male counterparts to reject their precursors so emphatically. For one thing, Harold Bloom's Freudian account of the relations between son and father not only leaves out the possibility of a daughter, it also ignores the third vertex of the Freudian triangle—the mother. "For Bloom," explain Doane and Hodges, "the mother is dangerous"; the very "logic of [Bloom's] Freudian account requires the repression of the mother. Yet for Bloom, even acknowledging this need for repression grants the feminine too much power."[20] Gilbert and Gubar reinscribe both daughter and mother into the equation, and conclude that (nineteenth-century) women novelists felt an "anxiety of authorship." In this formulation, the female writer must engage in a "battle ... not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*," that reading which insists that she cannot—or ought not—write at all. In her "revisionary struggle," she must throw off this father by redefining "the terms of her socialization," and, "frequently ... she can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a *female* precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible."[21]

This return of the repressed mother underwrites many recent feminist rereadings of *Northanger Abbey* and *The Female Quixote*. Gilbert and Gubar themselves assert that

> Rather than rejecting the gothic conventions she burlesques, Austen is very clearly criticizing female gothic in order to reinvest it with authority. ... Austen rewrites the gothic not because she disagrees with her sister novelists about the confinement of women, but because she believes women have been imprisoned more effectively by miseducation than by walls and more by financial dependency ... than by any verbal oath or warning.[22]

In other words, in showing the true evils that lurk behind the tropes of Gothic romance, Austen validates the visions of her (mostly female) predecessors, rather than defining her world as anti-Gothic. The Gothic

20 Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, "The Anxiety of Feminist Influence," in *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference: The Resistance to Contemporary Feminism* (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 87–88. For the original concept of the anxiety of influence, see Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

21 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 49. "Bloom," notes Annette Kolodny, "effectively masks the fact of an *other* tradition entirely—that in which women taught one another how to read and write about and out of their own unique ... contexts." "A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," *New Literary History* 11 (Spring 1980), p. 65.

22 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 135.

inheritance, agrees Judith Wilt, "remains as material for, even as a kind of foundation of, Austen's worlds of fiction."[23] Claudia Johnson outlines *Northanger Abbey*'s alliance with the Gothic it purports to parody, concluding that it "does not refute, but rather clarifies and reclaims, Gothic conventions in distinctly political ways."[24]

It seems to have taken feminist critics a bit longer to attempt a parallel rereading of *The Female Quixote*, perhaps because the received wisdom not only positioned Lennox's *novel* as self-consciously divergent from "women's fiction," but pegged Lennox herself as a "man's woman" inimical to her female contemporaries. A friend of Johnson and Richardson, reviewed favourably by both Richardson and Fielding, Lennox found herself accused of attracting powerful literary men by feminine wiles rather than skill or intelligence. Her alleged alliance with the men led to rumours that women disliked both her and her writing—appeals to stereotypes of jealous women which ignored the facts of Lennox's patronage by several prominent noblewomen and her friendships with other women writers.[25] In reality, Lennox's "anxiety of authorship" may have been weightier than Austen's—not only because she lived earlier, but also because she may have been more concerned about publication and acceptance at the point when she wrote *The Female Quixote* than Austen was when she wrote *Northanger Abbey* (which, though an early work, was not published until after Austen's death). Whatever the cause, Lennox's reclamation of her matrilineal inheritance was more covert than her successor's, and she put on a better show of accepting the rules of her "fathers" and "brothers," acquiescing to the advice of her male contemporaries.

But in the past several years, critics have begun to re-evaluate the standard view of *The Female Quixote* as pure anti-romantic didacticism. Writing in 1986, Jane Spencer noted the romance that infiltrates Lennox's superficially anti-romantic world, concluding that "despite Lennox's conservative moral view, *The Female Quixote* with its romance appeal gives its virtuous woman power, importance and a history."[26] By 1990, a number of feminist readings of Lennox's novel had begun to re-evaluate its position on the power of romance. Patricia Meyer Spacks, for instance,

23 Judith Wilt, *Ghosts of the Gothic: Austen, Eliot and Lawrence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 124.

24 Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 34.

25 Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Writers before Jane Austen* (London: Pandora, 1986), p. 198.

26 Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 192.

wrote that "through the character of Arabella, the novelist demonstrates the truth of fiction," and Mary Anne Schofield saw Lennox as "using the romance to empower herself and her art."[27] Collectively, these critics reinstal Lennox into a "women's" tradition, setting her up as a pillar of their feminist countercanon just as they argue she restored the romance writers.

Even if Austen and Lennox could be seen as wholeheartedly celebrating the "female" texts on which they draw, however, their *heroines* have a more complex relationships to the texts *they* read. Whereas Arabella may attempt to "connect" with the heroines of "women's" romances—the texts of "absent mothers" who include both their authors and her own literal mother, their previous reader—she also reads the "male" text of her world with the "double identification" outlined by de Lauretis. Despite her efforts to identify with the "figure of movement," she slips into kinship with the "figure of closure." Catherine Morland, too, reads "women's" romances, but, having learned not to accept a superficial division of texts by gender, she seems to recognize that even "absent mothers" themselves can be read *as* "male" texts. These human constructions of patriarchy's expectations, demands, and limitations have been seduced into "femininity" and thus inevitably reproduce the same Oedipal tales that render woman as "space" or "closure" and which require a strategy of reading founded on resistance.

Mighty Miss-Reader?

Having lost her mother at an early age, Arabella can only retrieve her female heritage in the form of the French romances the Marchioness left behind her.[28] The legacy of a life spent in confinement, the mother's

27 Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Subtle Sophistries of Desire: *The Female Quixote*," in *Desire and Truth: Functions of Plot in Eighteenth-Century English Novels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 22; Mary Anne Schofield, *Masking and Unmasking the Female Mind: Disguising Romances in Feminine Fiction, 1713–1799* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), p. 132. See also Laurie Langbauer, *Women and Romance: The Consolations of Gender in the English Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), who has already moved on from the reclamation of feminine romance to its ultimate loss: Lennox's novel, she says, "is unable to do more than show that such romantic qualities haunt it even as it rejects them—to gesture nostalgically to what it constructs as a lost realm, an illusory female heritage it can never forget and can never retrace" (p. 65).

28 Although some (notably Langbauer, p. 90n36) have taken for Lennox's own Arabella's belief that the romances of Mlle de Scudéry, which form a substantial portion of her reading, were written by Scudéry's brother, under whose name they were published, it seems possible that Lennox knew of their true authorship. (As Margaret Dalziel notes, "a look at the dedication to Part V of the 1661 translation of *Clelia*, or at Bishop Huet's treatise on the origin of romance

books have been appropriated as material possessions by the patriarch, who has transferred them, presumably unread, to his library. When he discovers the effect they have had on his daughter's notions and expectations, he has no qualms about burning them—and only reluctantly agrees to refrain because Glanville, to whom he intends to transfer possession of Arabella, requires them as a tool for the manipulation and capture of the resistant, wilful daughter. Thus, the romances stand as both evidence and emblem of the repression of the mother: the actual mother bought and read them because the patriarch did not allow her to engage in activities she might have preferred, and the same patriarch wishes to destroy them because the women's fantasies they contain "turn" the minds of young women, rendering them uncontrollable. In her reading of them, then, Arabella has already performed a political act of recovering and allying herself with the absent mother in defiance of the father.

This recovered female inheritance to some extent empowers Arabella to revise the world around her, just as it enables her creator to unveil a side of her social reality usually kept under wraps. Arabella may read her world according to a set of rules and equivalencies alien to it, seeing a lover in every gentleman, a disguised nobleman in every rogue, and an "adventure" around every corner. But she does have limited success in transforming her social circle into a facsimile of the world she reads it as. Unfortunately, since she reproduces a script with an Oedipal plot, that world proves no less patriarchal than the one she already inhabits, and Arabella thus establishes herself ever more firmly in the "female position" of object or "space." For, as de Lauretis argues, "in the best of cases, that is, in the 'happy' ending, the [female] protagonist will reach the place (the space) where a modern Oedipus will find her and fulfill the promise of his ... journey."[29]

Arabella does wield some power to rewrite her world: Sir George speaks the language of romance from the moment he discovers Arabella's inclinations, and if his greatest tribute to Arabella's mode of reading—his "real" romantic adventure—is staged, his wound at the hand of his rival certainly is not. Even the obtuse Lucy has already learned her

published in 1670 as the preface to Mme de La Fayette's *Zayde*, would have shown Arabella her mistake." Explanatory Notes to Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote or The Adventures of Arabella*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 392n62.) If so, the author's attribution of the romances to a man may merely call attention not only to the fact that they were actually written by a woman but also to the fact that this information was initially suppressed. In numerous other instances, after all, "Arabella does not remember quite accurately" the details of the romances (Dalziel, p. 409n285).

29 de Lauretis, pp. 139–40.

role when she importunes her mistress to prevent the suicide of Edward "by laying your Commands upon him to live."[30] Arabella's romantic self-image may leave her open to all manner of ridicule, but it also impresses into wondering silence a roomful of people at Bath, just as the self-possession of a romance heroine would do.

When Glanville discerns Arabella's "foible," he recognizes that "the Oddity of her Humour would throw innumerable Difficulties in his Way, before he should be able to obtain her" (p. 45); and indeed, he, like any hero of romance, must not win the heroine's heart without "an infinite deal of Trouble" (p. 27). He finds himself, in spite of his insistence on Arabella's folly in predicting it (p. 155), fighting with Hervey in defence of the heroine; and if he does not cause "his Rival's Death" as she supposes (p. 166), his success has the same effect in terms of the story of Arabella's life, for he drives the amazed Hervey out of the novel. Spencer notes that in his tortured relation to Arabella, his standing "in such Awe of her, and dread[ing] so much another Banishment, that he did not dare, otherwise than by distant Hints, to mention his Passion" (p. 81), Glanville has begun to take seriously the terms of romance which Lennox parodies.[31] He has begun to play the role Arabella writes for him. But although she may write the script, it is he who gets to play the hero, the *pursuer* of the quest; Arabella, as a woman, can only hope to play its *quarry*.

If, for all her efforts, Arabella cannot become the hero of her own narrative—cannot, as Schweickart suggests, recuperate for feminist uses the "Utopian moment" of the Oedipal plot—she may still be able to perform the other half of a Schweickartian feminist reading by revealing the complicity of male texts with the patriarchy. For one thing, "her" resistance to immasculation by *Don Quixote* reveals the chivalric quest plot's inherent sexism. For another, even when she most severely embarrasses Glanville by her seemingly absurd readings of the world around her, as when she takes a prostitute disguised as a boy for a heroine seeking to evade a ravisher, Arabella comes close to discerning some "truth"—in this instance, the realization that the patriarchal power that endangers heroines also "ruins" more ordinary women and drives them to take up the only profession they can, one which gives them the illusion of power over their own commodification.

30 Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote or The Adventures of Arabella*, ed. Margaret Dalziel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 26. References are to this edition.

31 Spencer, p. 91

This power to read the misogynist subtext of the "realistic" world affects Lennox as well as her heroine. She prods the surface of the romance form in order to lay bare the complicity, even of these texts, with the patriarchy, exposing the ultimate powerlessness of female characters, the illusion of female potential that inspires women readers to bury themselves in romantic fiction, and the real reasons for such strong opposition to that fiction on the part of the male power structure. She shows that even the romance-given power of women, frightening as men might find it, defines a severely limited dominion, circumscribed by the confining association of the female with the body, as the object of desire. Even the heroines Arabella most admires control their lives and their men by virtue of "feminine" attractions. If they resist the pressure to marry one suitor, it is only to be faithful to another; they can select the lesser of two evils but cannot opt out of the wedding altogether. If they control strong and skilful warriors by a nod of their pretty heads or a blush of their silken cheeks, they do so only by performing their gender correctly, by submitting to play the dainty love goddesses that men have made them.

Lennox, too, finds herself circumscribed by men's definitions of her. Although there remains some doubt whether Samuel Johnson actually *wrote* the penultimate chapter of *The Female Quixote*,[32] he certainly influenced its argument, which, in the persuasive voice of the Church, asserts the supremacy of rationalism. And, as Duncan Isles documents, Lennox gratefully adopted the suggestions of Richardson as well. Her ties with noblewoman-patrons notwithstanding, Lennox clearly found her most powerful literary advocates in Johnson, Richardson, and Fielding, and had, if she wanted to ensure the success of her writing, to acquiesce to the portrait of her and her novel which they painted. So while she may well have discerned some disturbing truths behind both romance and its suppression, if she wished to survive in the man's world of "serious" novels, Lennox could not make her discoveries public.

Reinforcing the unfortunate fact of the powerlessness of the common woman reader, Lennox positions her implied readers in the same frustrating predicament in which she finds herself caught: we, the real readers who take our cues from the implied one, can see women's impotence, but we cannot, by virtue of our reading, correct it. For one thing, we know the truth only intellectually, as we gaze upon Arabella from a comfortably superior distance; unlike her, we cannot identify with the heroine

32 See Duncan Isles, "Johnson, Richardson, and *The Female Quixote*," Appendix to Lennox, p. 422.

of books (at least not this one), and thus we gain from our reading no transformative delusions. From the outset, Lennox situates her implied readers outside the satire, where they can judge, along with the author, the "extravagance" of Arabella's expectations (p. 8), the absurdity of her "Foible" (p. 21), and the outlandishness of her speech and behaviour. Even if, at times, "we're not so much laughing at Arabella, we're watching the other characters laughing,"[33] we are represented in the world of the novel less by Arabella than by those other characters—particularly when they find her repetitive and egotistical absurdities exasperating rather than humorous. In fact, we have more cause than they for an utter lack of sympathy with her, for although Lennox insists repeatedly that "her Conversation, which, when it did not turn upon any Incident in her Romances, was perfectly fine, easy, and entertaining" (p. 65), even that "*Arabella*, when she was out of those Whims, was a very sensible young Lady, and sometimes talk'd as learnedly as a Divine" (p. 314), she does not vouchsafe to us so much as a taste of Arabella's sane discourse until the debate with the good doctor. Through her very chapter titles, the author distances the implied reader with the knowledge of her conventionality (introducing an adventure which proceeds "after the accustomed Manner," p. 10); and she differentiates the narratee's standards of judgment from Arabella's: "An Instance of a Lady's Compassion for her Lover, which the Reader may possibly think not very compassionate" (p. 13), or "Containing what a judicious Reader will hardly approve" (p. 77). At her least offensive, these labels imply, Arabella acts in ways "we" would find strange, giving Lucy, for example, "curious Instructions for relating an History" (p. 121).

Nor do we align ourselves with Arabella by virtue of our shared experience. Lennox does us the honour of treating us as thinking subjects rather than as objects of ridicule akin to either Arabella or such implied readers as *Tristram Shandy*'s "Madam" or Swift's "entrapped" reader.[34] She tends to grant us more complete knowledge than she gives her heroine, and it is the gaps in her knowledge that allow Arabella to impose readings that do not jibe with the facts. We know, for instance, that no ravisher

33 Langbauer, p. 70.

34 Interestingly, Tristram's ridicule of Madam frequently takes the form of scoldings for her overly sexual nature. See Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, vols 1 and 2 of the *Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Melvyn and Joan New (University Presses of Florida, 1978)—for example, pp. 56, 64–65, 739. On Swift's entrapment of his readers, see, for example, Frederik N. Smith, "The Danger of Reading Swift: The Double Binds of *Gulliver's Travels*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 17 (Spring 1984), 35–47, and Brian McCrea, "Surprised by Swift: Entrapment and Escape in *A Tale of a Tub*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 18 (1982), 234–44.

carries her away during her fainting fit, that Hervey has only ridiculed and not attempted to ravish her, that Edward (probably) has not a drop of royal blood in his body. In only one instance does Lennox withhold information about the reality Arabella misreads, and this we quickly decode as no reality at all but a fiction—the story of the Princess of Gaul and the faithless Ariamenes. It seems likely that Lennox expects her readers to know that someone, probably Sir George, has concocted this "adventure" to manipulate the heroine, much as Don Quixote's acquaintances (the priest and the barber as collaborators in part 1, the Duke and Duchess as full-fledged authors in part 2) take over from him the invention of adventures in Cervantes' novel. Moreover, we ought to suspect the truth based on a careful reading of Lennox's own text, in which she highlights time and again the gaps between romance and reality; in contrast, the contrived adventure begins thus: "This Adventure, more worthy indeed to be styl'd an Adventure than all our Fair Heroine had ever yet met with, and so conformable to what she had read in Romances, fill'd her heart with eager Expectation" (p. 341). If we have not figured out the truth by the time Arabella accuses Glanville of the crimes of Ariamenes, Lennox makes us feel very foolish indeed, even as she lets us in on the secret before Arabella is informed: Glanville, the romantic illiterate, pieces together the story almost immediately. "You have been impos'd upon by some villainous Artifice," he declares (p. 353); and then "he easily conceiv'd some Plot grounded on her Romantick Notions had been laid, to prepossess her against him. Sir *George*'s Behaviour to her rush'd that Moment into his Thoughts" (p. 354).

Our knowledge and our assembly of the pieces of this puzzle require that "we" take some sort of subject role *vis-à-vis* the narrative—a positioning that ensures that we do not entirely replicate Arabella's complicity with her own objectification. But having given us no invitation to suspend our disbelief and no incentive to identify with the heroine, Lennox neither facilitates her readers' recuperation of a "Utopian moment" nor endows us with an Arabellan facility for applying the principles of a fictional world to our own lives. Although we may witness Arabella's self-enabled objectification, we come away from *The Female Quixote* with no inevitable generalization about patriarchal co-optation of women, and hence no more politically empowered than we began.

Reading the Evils of Patriarchy

Unlike *The Female Quixote*, *Northanger Abbey* uses strategies similar to those which David Richter discerns in Gothic novels' "structures of sus-

pense" to presume an identification between the reader and the focal character and a demand for empathetic participation in that character's "perils and plight."[35] These expectations of the reader lend "us" an ability, which Lennox's implied reader did not have, to identify with the heroine in order to recapture the novel's Utopian moment (fleeting as it might prove to be). But while Austen borrows some of her reader-activating techniques from her Gothic mothers, her metafictional and political concerns make her theory of reception, like Schweickart's, somewhat more complex: in addition to rendering "us" detectives—subjects, "figures of movement"—along with Catherine, Austen gives us the distance necessary to resist complicity with patriarchy's plot. Not only do we receive with Catherine a lesson about General Tilney's ability to relegate the fair sex to the role of obstacle to man's plot; we also generate, with Austen's help, a more general meaning than the one Catherine perceives, a moral about patriarchal society's objectification of women.

Austen sets us up for this two-tiered reading experience—from points of view both beside and above Catherine Morland—from the moment she introduces her heroine. In her revision of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"), she self-consciously situates Catherine within a matrix of negated literary conventions and alerts the reader to her clever contrariness: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine" (p. 37). But at the same time as—and for the same reasons that—Catherine deviates from the norm of Gothic leading ladies, she practically *defines* the norm of young Englishwomen—and of (female) readers. We eye her with a wry and knowing smile in so far as she remains a clever invention of the anti-novel; but we must also, if we follow Austen's cues, adopt her as one of us.

In eliminating, in large part, the now-clichéd curtseys to the reader in which previous metafiction writers had indulged, Austen avoids constant reminders of our distance and allows us an immersion in the novel's world characteristic of nineteenth-century realistic fiction. On one memorable occasion on which Austen does address us *in propria persona*, she complains of the shameful disavowal of novel reading by novelists themselves. In novels, she tells us, we are to find "the most thorough knowledge of human nature" (p. 58). This metafictional digression confirms us in our dual perspective: its form, a direct statement of purpose

35 David H. Richter, "The Reception of the Gothic Novel in the 1790s," *The Idea of the Novel in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Robert Uphaus (East Lansing, Mich.: Colleagues Press, 1988), pp. 126–27.

and a comment about the type of work we are reading, reminds us of our status as readers who reside on Austen's superior plane of analysis; but not only does its content tell us that characters, just like us, partake of "human nature," its subject also specifically links us with Catherine and Isabella, for we all read the same sort of stuff—novels.

Unfortunately, Catherine has not had all of "our" advantages; she has had limited exposure to both literature and society. So, when she spends her time at Bath acquiring both kinds of experience, we watch from a distance not wholly unlike the one from which we observed Arabella (though the unassuming Catherine, in contrast to the haughty Arabella, wins our sympathy—even before she is entitled to our empathy). We recognize the selfishness and pretence of Isabella, though our heroine does not; we reject John Thorpe as a boasting, blustering idiot regardless of the good opinion of James Morland; and we do not take it on faith that Catherine's disappointment after a visit with the Tilneys "could not be General Tilney's fault," or that her conviction "that he was perfectly agreeable and good-natured, and altogether a very charming man, did not admit of a doubt, for he was tall and handsome, and Henry's father" (p. 139).

But when it really matters, when Catherine encounters a seriously sinister "text"—here the absent mother of the Tilneys *as* a text that seems to her to demand interpretation, rather than the romantic texts which an absent mother has left like bread crumbs to be followed—we find ourselves as ignorant as she. We do not know how Mrs Tilney lived or died, and her daughter gives us enough eerie clues—both in her relations with the General and in her allusions to her mother—to leave us in Gothic-like suspense. Even the admonishment from Henry, meant to put a stop to Catherine's imaginings of murder, leaves more unsaid than said and raises suspicions, if not of foul play, at least of more prolonged and insidious evils; these we, like Catherine, must fill in for ourselves. Henry equivocates: "He loved her, I am persuaded, as well as it was possible for him to—We have not all, you know, the same tenderness of disposition—and I will not pretend to say that while she lived, she might not often have had much to bear, but though his temper injured her, his judgment never did" (p. 199). Nor do we know *too* much more than Catherine of the reasons for General Tilney's abrupt and cruel banishment of our heroine—although we may, if we have learned our lesson particularly well, piece together clues as minimal and scattered as the General's theatre-box meeting with John Thorpe and Isabella's assumptions about James's fortune. For, along with Catherine,

we must become detectives to discover the truth behind the "common life" mysteries we encounter together at the Abbey. With her, we hone our skills in following typically Gothic trails, even if we have the advantage over her in bringing to those clues a frame of reference derived from life as well as literature.

This process ... is central to Jane Austen's novels and the conclusions often involve a final coinciding of the heroine's knowledge and the reader's knowledge, so that, although they start off at quite a distance from each other ... by the end the heroine and the reader occupy the same cognitive space. They finally know what is what, and we know what is what, and we know that they know.[36]

When, in the end, Catherine "knows what is what"—as the now-standard feminist interpretation has it, "penetrating to the secret of the Abbey, the hidden truth of the ancestral mansion, to learn the complete and arbitrary power of the owner of the house, the father, the General"[37]—we can capitalize on our double perspective. We can take a step back into our metafictional position, and recognize that "hidden truth" in our society, seeing the General Tilney built into the structure of the family and patriarchal culture as a whole.

Austen provides the distance necessary to see the dark and despotic side of the familiar and to experience it as "strange" rather than as proper and inevitable. *Northanger Abbey* accomplishes its social criticism, then, not only by what it says, but also by how it says it, for Austen creates an audience not only able but also inclined to read their novels and their societies with critical detachment.[38]

In spite of the progress she has made in her readerly education, and even when she recognizes the ordinary nature of the monstrosity she had misread as Gothic, Catherine does not have the luxury of such detachment. Living inside the Abbey even as she reads its secrets, in danger of becoming a variant of the text of the absent Mrs Tilney when she, in marrying into the family which General Tilney rules by terror, takes on that title herself, she has much invested in the detective work she undertakes. When Catherine braves the terrors of Mrs Tilney's bedroom, she not only ventures, like Don Quixote himself, out of the safety of her own room in search of some action, constructing herself as figure of movement rather than as passive figure of closure; she also begins to

36 Tony Tanner, "Anger in the Abbey: *Northanger Abbey*," in *Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 47.

37 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 135.

38 Johnson, p. 48.

"read" more actively than she has previously done. Her reading becomes a sort of writing, and if it does not change her reality even to the extent that Arabella's did, it is partly because Henry, the male authority to whom she turns even for instruction in taste, shames her into the dismissal of her unpatriotic suspicion. For she has sinned not only against his father but against her *patria*, her fatherland: "Remember that we are English," he exclaims. Although he has planted in her head some Gothic seeds of his own, with a "story" purposely designed to match the truth in some particulars, he must put her in her place when she dares to read further, or to become a writer in her own right. For her transgression, Henry accuses Catherine of delusionary imaginings (as Arabella's friends had declared her head "turned"), attempting to shake her back into her right mind: "What have you been judging from? ... Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you" (p. 199). He seems even to imply some slackness of virtue—a waywardness in her gender performance that does not accord with the "sanctions and proscriptions" of her culture's construction of women[39]—in his phrasing of the question that sends her running "with tears of shame" into her room: "Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas *have you been admitting*?" (p. 200, emphasis added).

Patrimony's Matrimonial Plot

Despite her active mode of reading, however, when Catherine at last discovers the truth (of General Tilney's greed, if not of his treatment of his wife), she learns it through no bold exploration of her own; Henry Tilney tells her. Moreover, he bestows this information on the now-passive heroine after proposing that she take her place in the supremely patriarchal Tilney family by becoming his wife. This marriage will obviously subject her to a lifetime of Henry's control: not having the advantages that allow Eleanor at least to hold her own against her brother, if not her father, Catherine has already come to rely mindlessly on Henry's *aesthetic* judgment—the sort of excessive dependence for which even *he* ridicules her (p. 178). But, more frighteningly, the union will also make her General Tilney's daughter-in-law, no longer able to take comfort in the thought that "the General's utmost anger could not be to herself what it might be to a daughter" (p. 195). That Henry himself lives in fear of his father's dissatisfaction suggests that even if her husband

39 J. Butler, p. 276.

represents an improvement in the patriarchal stock, Catherine's life as Oedipus's achieved "space" will be ruled for the foreseeable future by the great tyrant himself.

Austen gives us the wink, however, in her precipitate rush towards the standard "happy ending" of marriage. Reminding us once again of our detached perspective, Austen resorts to one of her rare references to the extratextual reader, as she points out the artificiality of conventional endings to "my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity" (p. 246). She proceeds through a paragraph-long romance in which Eleanor stars, and then, in an exposure of conventions we have not encountered since the early pages of the novel, marries Catherine off in one line: "Henry and Catherine were married, the bells rang and every body smiled" (p. 247). As Johnson notes, by drawing attention to the artifice of her conclusion, Austen implies "that the damage wrought by the likes of General Tilney is in fact not resolvable into the 'perfect felicity' of fiction, and that the convention of the happy ending conceals our all-too-legitimate cause for alarm."[40] If Catherine, like Arabella, has been "seduced into femininity," taking her place as the object of Henry's desire and relinquishing her short-lived career as detective, Austen will not let this traditional ending go unquestioned, or allow society to profit by it unexposed.

By the time Austen married Catherine off so cursorily, she could be reasonably certain that her readers would see more in the gesture than superficial domestic felicity, for, according to Nancy Armstrong, "by then it had been established that novels were supposed to rewrite political history as personal histories that elaborated on the courtship procedures ensuring a happy domestic life."[41] Back when Lennox reincorporated Arabella into the patriarchy through marriage, however, the transformational grammar which Armstrong outlines had not yet gained such widespread currency. Moreover, even the modern-day reader, reading not *with* Arabella but *about* her, would tend to find Lennox's conventional ending either comforting or merely unsatisfying, but hardly alarming. But armed with our newfound readerly power of discernment and the detective's suspicion we have netted from reading *Northanger Abbey*, we can find a repressed truth (or a truth about repression) lurking behind the conclusion of *The Female Quixote*.

40 Johnson, p. 48.

41 Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 38.

According to Isles, Lennox may have meant the "cure" of Arabella to occur more gradually, and to be effected by the Countess. Because Richardson "decisively condemned the idea of a third volume" and "had doubts about [the cure's] very nature," Lennox seems to have taken his advice in abandoning "so abruptly and oddly" the Countess strand, and in turning instead to the Johnson-inspired clergyman.[42] So if his rationalistic talking cure seems artificially tacked on to a novel written in an entirely different style, the artificiality may arise from Richardson's and Johnson's gentle coercion of Lennox to change the course that she had originally planned to pursue. In this case, Lennox may have planted some hints for readers, resembling those Austen gives us, or the ones Catherine follows toward a recognition of patriarchal power.

And indeed, Lennox has left behind traces of her coercion by the male literary elite. Not surprisingly, they take the form of the return of the repressed mother. The Countess—like Arabella's real but absent mother, a woman well versed in the romances that symbolize that absent mother—takes on the maternal role of "curing" Arabella, attempting ever-so-gently to ease her out of her "foible." Her lesson about romance, however, teaches not that applying its principles to life is inherently ridiculous, but that it has been labelled as "mad" by a male power structure that fears, along with the moralists, the power of female sexuality. She knows that "gender ... is an historical situation rather than a natural fact," that "living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities."[43] Asked to recite her adventures, the Countess replies that "The Word Adventures carries in it so free and licentious a Sound in the Apprehensions of People *at this Period of Time*, that it can hardly with Propriety be apply'd to those few and natural Incidents which compose the History of a Woman of Honour" (p. 327, emphasis added); "a Beauty *in this [age]* could not pass thro' the Hands of several different Ravishers, without bringing an Imputation on her Chastity," she explains (p. 328, emphasis added). Significantly, her absurdly brief "life story" dwells at greatest length on that *sine qua non* of ladylike happy endings, marriage: "when I tell you ... that I was born and christen'd, had a useful and proper Education, receiv'd the Addresses of my Lord—through the Recommendation of my Parents, and marry'd him with their Consents and my own Inclination, and that since we have liv'd in great Harmony together, I have told you all the material Passages of my Life" (p. 327). Like Austen, the Countess alerts her

42 Isles, pp. 425–26.

43 J. Butler, pp. 272–72.

reader to the conventionality of such an ending, noting that, "upon Enquiry you will find [that these Passages] differ very little from those of other Women of the same Rank, who have a moderate Share of Sense, Prudence and Virtue" (p. 327).

Had the Countess managed the cure of Arabella, we would have had to read the heroine's rejection of romance as a *loss* of the permissible female sexuality of earlier ages, a regrettable transformation of "hegemonic social conditions" creating new social sanctions and taboos to compel the performance of a particular gender identity.[44] We would have had to see Arabella's co-optation as a loss of her youthful and unjaded spirit, rather than as the achievement of "sanity."

When the importation of the good doctor supersedes the Countess episode, and his plan to "reason" Arabella out of her nonconformity and into the patriarchal realm of marriage (in compliance with the will of her father) replaces the gentlewoman's sympathetic goading towards an acceptance of "the times," Lennox sends the mother figure away rather suddenly. The (now absent) mother apparently has to go to see *her* (absent) mother, whose "Indisposition" (p. 330) may be read as Lennox's code for the ills patriarchy has wrought (or, in the case of the novel's reconceived conclusion, is about to wreak). This chain of absent mothers seems to serve little purpose in the story, and critics have wondered about the peculiar dismissal, which Isles deems a legacy of Richardson's criticism. But if the Countess's cure was to be replaced by the clergyman's, why retain the Countess half-episode in the novel at all? Unlike many long novels, *The Female Quixote* was not published volume by volume, but in its entirety in 1752. Moreover, the entire Countess story, including the abrupt departure, occurs in book 8, so Lennox clearly knew by the time she completed that book in what direction she was heading, and could, at the very least, have smoothed the rough edges of the abandoned episode, even if that book were to be published before the final chapter had been written. That she did not do so would seem to suggest that she had left traces of the almost-absent mother for a reason. They mark Arabella's deprivation of maternal influence, as the doctor leads her into the man's world of rationalism. Like Richardson's and Johnson's advice in the man's world of serious literature, the clergyman's reasons may have a great deal of validity for the "realistic" thinker, but that both imply a requisite repression of the mother suggests that both rely not on value-neutral intelligence or "sanity" but

44 J. Butler, pp. 276, 271.

on coercion.[45] "As a strategy for survival," writes Judith Butler, "gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences ... those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished."[46]

Ultimately, the patriarchy has usurped what readerly power Arabella had, leaving her in a far worse position than Catherine. Austen's heroine may have an inkling of the sinister nature of patriarchal institutions;[47] at the very least, she has begun to prepare herself to read between the lines of her continuing saga and to strike a balance between the paradigms she is offered for interpreting it, between the Gothic characterization of General Tilney, the Patriarch, as the Devil Incarnate and his own apparent self-image as family-oriented hero. Arabella has only exchanged one illusion for another, discarding her romantic grid for a belief in the impartiality of the clergyman's rationalism. Ever the skilful wielder of such tools as she inherits from books, Lennox's heroine surpasses the doctor in her adherence to the rules of argument, in whose proper application she corrects him more than once. "Immasculated," in Fetterley's sense, she has been "taught to think as men [do], to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny."[48] Like Catherine, she is made ashamed of her earlier mode of reading: she, too, "burst into Tears" (p. 381) and then "continued for near two Hours afterwards wholly absorb'd in the most disagreeable Reflections on the Absurdity of her past Behaviour, and the Contempt and Ridicule to which she now saw plainly she had exposed herself" (p. 383). But unlike her successor, she does not reconfirm the substance, let alone the letter, of that reading; "Catherine, at any rate, heard enough to feel, that in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had

45 David Marshall sees in the discarding of the Countess "Lennox's apparent abdication of female authority and authorship," and he notes: "Perhaps Charlotte Lennox also found it necessary to appear in disguise: a transgressive woman dressed in the male persona of the writing-master Dr Johnson. The novel warns about the dangers of such disguises; but it also might tell us about their necessity. ... a woman might have to ... personate or impersonate a man in order to have the authority of authorship." "Writing Masters and 'Masculine Exercises' in *The Female Quixote*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 5 (1993), 117. But rather than studying the Countess episode for traces of subversive female authority, Marshall virtually ignores it, ultimately suggesting that "Lennox's apparent impersonation of Johnson in the penultimate chapter would not represent an act of self-empowerment—rather, through an internalization of the authority of the writing-master, Lennox plays Johnson to her own Arabella ... and in doing so stages an act of surrender and perhaps self-sacrifice in which she shows herself overpowered in single combat" (p. 133).

46 Butler, p. 273.

47 For arguments suggesting that Catherine develops a feminist political awareness, see Gilbert and Gubar, p. 143, and Johnson, p. 39.

48 Fetterley, p. xx.

scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (p. 243). If such patriarchs as the General retain despotic control over Catherine's world, this new "feminist" reader has won sufficient confidence in her own powers of discernment to refuse to be blinded by the most glaring of their tricks. If, rather than submitting to accusations of delusion, treachery, or impurity, she chooses to play the gender role Henry writes for her, at least she may have some idea that she is playing it.

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