CHAPTER 6

FEMINIZING QUIXOTISM: THE POLITICS OF GENRE AND GENDER IN CHARLOTTE LENNOX’S THE FEMALE QUIXOTE

The politics of modern Romance
In Clara Reeve’s Progress of Romance (1778), Euphrasia, a learned lady engaged in a dialogue with Sophronia and Hortensius on the conflicting genres of Romance and novel, describes Charlotte Lennox and her most acclaimed novel, The Female Quixote, in the following terms:

The Female Quixote was published in the year 1752. – In this ingenious work the passion for the French Romances of the last Century, and the effect of them upon the manners is finely exposed and ridiculed. – The Author of it is since well known as one of the distinguished female writers this age has produced among us – Mrs. Lennox .... Mrs. Lennox’s character is established upon works of a superior kind, which are above our retrospect, though we can only speak here of her Novels.¹

Of all “her Novels”, The Female Quixote of 1752, a Cervantic hypertext, is Lennox’s best-known novel. It addresses both the question of women’s writing guided by figures like Samuel Richardson and Dr Johnson and the problem of the female Quixotic practice of reforming eighteenth-century English mores and manners. The conjoining of the two aspects purport the idea that Lennox’s novel substantiates “gender as a determining factor in the development of the narrative” ² by focusing on the problematic

¹ Reeve, The Progress of Romance, II, 7.
Quixotism in English Novels, 1742-1801

Quixotic intermingling of domestic/private knowledge with political/public concerns.

Richardson’s unstinting support provided to a witty lady of letters whose major characters are females may be understood as an accretion to his preoccupation for feminine psychology and sensibility epitomized by *Pamela*. Bringing to light several fragments from two recently discovered letters containing Richardson’s criticism of Lennox’s manuscript, Duncan Isles contributes considerably to the reception of Charlotte Lennox as a key author who reassesses female identity and remaps the boundaries between Romance and the novel. The following excerpt from a letter dated 13 January 1752 is living proof of both Lennox’s acknowledged talent as a female writer and Richardson’s recommendation that Lennox should comply with the rules of the literary market in order to achieve fame and financial comfort:

> You are a young Lady have therefore much time before you, and I am sure, will think that a good Fame will be [in?] your Interest [sic]. Make, therefore, your present Work as complete as you can, in two Volumes; and it will give Consequence to your future Writings, and of course to your Name as a Writer; And without a Complement I think you set out upon an admirable Foundation.³

The “admirable Foundation” Lennox set upon thanks to Johnson’s and Richardson’s strong encouragement broadens our understanding of both eighteenth-century women’s writing and the stand female writers took on social and political matters in the patriarchal Republic of Letters.

In terms of formal differences between Romance and the novel, Euphrasia pertinently observes that *The Female Quixote* ridicules seventeenth-century French Romances because of their noxious effects upon manners. Sure enough, Henry Fielding’s patented recipe of reshaping the classical epic by discarding unfashionable pieces of fiction like *Clelia*, *Cleopatra*, *Astraea*, *Cassandra* and *the Grand Cyrus* – Arabella’s favourite readings in Lennox’s novel – was there for the taking. Though *The Female Quixote* upholds Fielding’s

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³ Duncan Isles, “Johnson, Richardson, and The Female Quixote”, Appendix to *The Female Quixote*, in Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote, or the Adventures of Arabella* (1752), ed. Margaret Dalziel, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 424 (all further references to this edition will be given in the text).