

The Good Effects of a Whimsical Study:

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Romance and Women's Learning in Charlotte

Lennox's *The Female Quixote*.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**The Good Effects of a Whimsical Study:
Romance and Women's Learning in Charlotte Lennox's
*The Female Quixote***

Sharon Smith Palo (bio)

Heroism, romantick Heroism, was deeply rooted in her Heart; it was Her habit of t hinking, a Principle imbib'd from Education.¹

In recent years, studies of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752) have focused largely on Lennox's contribution to the discourse surrounding the development of the novel. These readings usefully explore Lennox's representation of the complex relationship between the romance and the novel and frequently cite the attempts of novelists such as Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding to assert the superiority of their writing projects by distinguishing them from those of romance writers.² Yet such interpretations fail to consider **[End Page 203]** how Lennox appropriates the representation of romance reading perpetuated by these novelists in order to participate in other kinds of discourse, most notably that concerning women's learning. Janet Todd briefly considers *The Female Quixote* within the context of female education, but suggests that the text functions as a conduct book encouraging women's submission to an ideal of womanhood characterized by self-denial and restraint.³ I will argue that Lennox uses the representation of her romance-reading heroine to critique this ideal and to explore the potential of female education to completely reshape women's role within society, particularly within the public sphere.

Lennox's exploration of women's learning has its roots in the debate surrounding female education that materialized during the late seventeenth century. This period saw the publication of numerous defences of women's learning, texts that declared women to be men's intellectual equals and called for greater parity in women's and men's educations.⁴ Her satirical representation of romance reading becomes the vehicle for a serious examination of concerns that proved central for proponents of advanced learning for women. Chief among these concerns is the powerful and often stymieing influence of social custom upon efforts to bring about changes in women's education and, ultimately, in women's lives. Lennox explores this issue throughout her

novel as she represents a heroine who attempts to gain control over her life by negotiating between the customs of romance and the customs of eighteenth-century English society. In doing so, she raises the possibility of women's increased participation in public life.

In *The Female Quixote*, Lennox creates a heroine, Arabella, who is "wholly secluded from the World" and leads an isolated existence within the confines of her father's country estate (7). To relieve her boredom, Arabella reads "very bad Translations" of French romances (7). She consumes so many of these voluminous works that she becomes incapable of distinguishing fiction from reality, a condition the narrator describes as the "bad Effects of a whimsical Study" (5). Believing the texts she reads to be accurate representations of her world, Arabella imagines that she herself is a romance heroine, and like these heroines, she resists marriage and seeks adventure. When Arabella **[End Page 204]** comes of age and is introduced into society, she is often ridiculed for her bizarre notions and seemingly unaccountable behaviour. For this reason, many of Lennox's earliest critics assumed the novel sent a warning to its readers regarding the risks posed by the indiscriminate reading of "dangerous" books;⁵ however, Lennox represents Arabella as morally and intellectually superior to the other female characters in the novel, and she clearly illustrates that this superiority is not in *spite* of the heroine's romance reading, but *because* of it.

Arabella's education is undertaken by her father when, at the age of four, he removes her from the direction of her nurses and female attendants: "Finding in her an uncommon Quickness of Apprehension, and an Understanding capable of great Improvements, he resolved to cultivate so promising a Genius with the utmost Care" (6). Despite the encouraging tone of his resolution, Arabella's father calls in teachers to instruct his daughter in primarily ornamental accomplishments— music, dance, French, and Italian. Certainly, this instruction is comparable to the education that many young women of Arabella's social standing would have enjoyed. But Arabella's...



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