

From “Woman as Thing” to a “Subject-In-Process”: The Dynamics of Courtly Love in Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752)

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ABSTRACT

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This research counters Slavoj Žižek’s psychoanalytical analysis of “courtly love” through a reading of Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752), drawing on Kristeva’s theory of subjectivity. Žižek’s analysis concludes that the courtly image of the Knight’s subservience to his Lady actually masks the reality of male domination. However, his own analysis seems complicit in the same problematic. In assuming the male partner as the subject from whose vantage the relationship is theorized, he strips the woman of any subjectivity or agency by rendering her an absolute object, a radical Otherness, a monster, and an automaton. While Žižek painstakingly represents the male-subject as the victim-agent in being the director of the masochistic performance, the female is rendered a perpetrator-object who, despite enacting the terms of the same contract, is termed an inhuman partner and hence a sadist. This lack of complex theorization of the Lady that renders her absolute evil reinforces conventional representation of femininity as evil. Whereas Žižek’s analysis writes the Lady off as a vacuum, Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752) provides an interesting alternative for theorizing courtly love from the position of the Lady via the protagonist, Arabella. A suitable framework for understanding Arabella’s investment in the conventions of courtly love may be found in Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytical model that allows for reconceiving the Lady in courtly love as a subject. This essay argues that, given her preoedipal maternal severance, Arabella’s delusional immersion in romances signifies her proximity to the “semiotic chora.” Her preference for the “feminine” form of romance, reflective of the subversive force of the semiotic, represents Arabella’s defiance of the rational, masculine, novelistic discourse of the eighteenth-century symbolic.

Keywords: Courtly Love, semiotic-symbolic, subject-in-process, Arabella, *The Female Quixote*, Charlotte Lennox

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This research argues that Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752) provides an alternative understanding of “courtly love” that counters Slavoj Žižek’s psychoanalytical analysis of it. In his essay, “Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing” (1994), Slavoj Žižek critically analyzes the Medieval European tradition of “courtly love” from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective. In explaining the “libidinal economy” of courtly love, Žižek, first and foremost, dismisses the spurious notion of the Lady as “sublime”. While the tradition of courtly love elevates the Lady to a “spiritual guide” like Dante’s Beatrice or “an abstract Ideal” that is the subject of all poetic address, emptying “the feminine object” of any “real substance,” for Žižek, however, the Lady is “a cold, distanced, inhuman partner” (p. 89). Quoting Lacan, he notes that the Lady is not distinguished by any “concrete virtues” such as “wisdom,” “prudence,” or “competence.” Indeed, as opposed to a kind, empathetic fellow-human, the Lady’s relationship with the knight is that of “subject-bondsman”; the knight is a “vassal” to his “master” who subjects him to absurd, outrageous, and arbitrary “ordeals.” Far removed from “any kind of purified spirituality,” the Lady, for Žižek, is simultaneously “a radical Otherness” and a pure “machine”, emitting/generating “meaningless demands at random.” This renders her an “uncanny, monstrous character” bereft of all empathy (p. 90).

Given her “traumatic Otherness,” Žižek characterizes the Lady as what Lacan calls “the Real” via Freudian “*das Ding*”: “the hard kernel that resists symbolization”. As such, the elevation of the Lady to a sublime “Ideal” is, in fact, a secondary process: the Lady serves “as a mirror on to which the subject projects his narcissistic ideal” while “the mute mirror-surface” itself is a “black hole” and “a limit whose Beyond is inaccessible” (p. 90-91). As such, the “place of the Lady-Thing” is emptiness around which the subject’s desire plays out. And since Desire is by definition impossible, the unattainability of “the Lady-Object” is sustained in courtly love (p. 94). The Lady comes to serve “as a unique short circuit in which *the Object of desire itself coincides with the force that prevents its attainment*” (p. 96). The Lady is thus “the self-retracting Real”; indeed, “the Lady qua Thing can also be designated as the embodiment of radical Evil” (p. 98).

The second feature of courtly love that Žižek characterizes is its lack of investment in love or passion that defies social rules. Instead, it is “thoroughly” about “etiquette” whereby “a man pretends that his sweetheart is the inaccessible Lady”. As such, Žižek compares courtly love to the phenomenon of masochism. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze to distinguish masochism from sadism via the modality of negation, Žižek notes that whereas sadism involves “direct negation” based in “institutional power”, masochism characterizes negation as “disavowal” and “feigning” that “suspends reality” and is grounded in the victim’s contract with the master (p. 91): “It is the servant, therefore, who writes the screenplay—that is, who actually pulls the strings and dictates the activity of the woman [dominatrix]: he stages his own servitude” (p. 92). As such, masochism, contra sadism, is essentially “theatrical” in which violence is simulated.

Žižek concludes his analysis by acknowledging that “the courtly image of man serving his Lady is a semblance that conceals the actuality of male domination” (p. 108); however, Žižek’s own analysis seems complicit in the same problematic on

multiple levels. To begin with, while Žižek explores the concept of courtly love within a psychoanalytic frame, his analysis assumes the male partner as the subject from whose vantage the theorization takes place while the female is rendered an absolute object beyond the field of theorization. Whereas courtly love provides a semblance of agency to the woman, Žižek turns the entire Knight-Lady relationship on its head, thereby stripping the woman of any subjectivity or agency by rendering her a monstrosity, a radical Otherness, and an automaton. The lady is nothing but the projection of the male subject's narcissism. Within this framework, why does the Lady emerge as an absolute monster-object that does not merit complex theorization? Is it possible to theorize the vantage or the positionality from which the Lady participates in this exercise? Does she sometimes assume the place of the subject? Žižek, however, leaves a vacuum, a darkness, and a nothingness in the place of the Lady. In doing so, his own analysis reifies the subject-object relation that he unveils in the phenomenon of courtly love.

Secondly, Žižek explains courtly love through the matrix of masochism. As per the masochistic bond of courtly love "the terms of the contract" are set down by the "man-servant" with his "woman-master" in a "businesslike way": "what she is to do to him, what scene is to be rehearsed endlessly, what dress she is to wear, how far she is to go" vis-à-vis "physical torture". However, violence is always "feigned" and "never carried out" as it is part of the "performance" (p. 92). This begs the question that if the Lady is simply acting out the terms of the contract and if "violence" always "remains suspended" (p. 92), then how does the Lady qualify as an "inhuman partner" and "a monstrous character" who utterly lacks empathy? Indeed, while Žižek painstakingly represents the male-subject as the victim-agent, the architect of his own subjugation and the director of the theatrical performance, the female is rendered a perpetrator-object who despite enacting the terms of the same contract is nevertheless posited as a "monster". In fact, owing to this lack of theorization within the masochistic contract, the Lady emerges as the sadist in this relationship on account of being a "cold, distanced, inhuman" monstrosity (p. 89) who derives pleasure from humiliating the man. Why is the Lady not theorized from the perspective of the masochistic relation whereby her monstrosity is considered as staged as per the contract? Indeed, even at the end of the masochistic performance, the male subject voices his query before parting, "Thank you for your favour. Same time next week?" (p. 92), while the female partner is rendered mute and absent.

This has at least three serious implications. First, a lack of complex theorization of the female partner in the masochistic relation that renders the Lady absolute evil reinforces the conventional notions and societal characterization of women and femininity as evil, manipulative, and irrational, entrenched in myriad religious and cultural discourses (Farnell et al. 2015; Ruthven & Mádlo 2012; Dearey et al. 2017). Thus, while attempting to unveil male domination, Žižek's own analysis replicates the subject-object relation that he critiques in the exercise of courtly love. Secondly, this is typical of the Western philosophical tradition that has always rendered the female "as deficiency, atrophy, lack of the sex that has a monopoly on value: the male sex" (Irigaray 1985, p. 69). As such, "psychoanalyzing a woman is

tantamount to adapting her to a society of a masculine type” (Irigaray, p. 73). Finally, and most importantly, by declaring a “deadlock in contemporary feminism” on account of its tendency “to deprive woman of her very ‘femininity’”, Žižek, while bemoaning the inescapability of the asymmetrical love relationship (p. 108), also seeks to reify it, especially in a male-female context. Elsewhere, Žižek has reinforced his preference for a reassertion of “femininity”: “We shouldn’t be afraid of claiming that there is something that specifically identifies feminine subjectivity. I’m not afraid here of the term ‘essentialism,’ the idea that then you fix the definition of the feminine” (qtd. in Olson and Worsham 2001, p. 252). While in “Courtly Love” Žižek identifies a “deadlock” in feminism, in his conversation with Olson and Worsham, he provides a way out by reasserting femininity and embracing essentialism, in other words, restoring the status quo.

Reimagining the lady in courtly love through semiotic chora

While Žižek’s analysis of courtly love writes the woman off as a vacuum onto which the male subject projects his narcissism, Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752) provides an interesting alternative for theorizing the phenomenon of courtly love from the vantage point of the Lady. In the absence of a willing knight who is the agent of his own victimization and the director of a theatrical performance grounded in the projection of his ego ideal, Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* focuses the lens upon the Lady. Without a compliant lover, Arabella, the protagonist, poses as the unattainable object of love in her bid to become the agent of her own destiny. A more suitable framework for understanding Arabella’s investment in the conventions of courtly love can be found in Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytical theory that foregrounds the maternal and the feminine. Owing to the singular trajectory of her psychosexual development, Arabella’s proximity to the semiotic chora provides a perspective for understanding her defiance of the eighteenth-century Symbolic. I seek to argue that the Kristevan psychoanalytical perspective not only allows us to imagine the Lady beyond her reduction to a cold, monstrous, inhuman partner with “meaningless” demands, but it also helps theorize the Lady’s own struggle vis-à-vis the Real.

Diverging from Freudian and Lacanian models, Kristeva’s theory of psychic development lays specific emphasis on the maternal body in the preoedipal phase and the semiotic and symbolic modes of signification that constitute subjectivity. The semiotic is “a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases”, which emanates in what Kristeva terms the “chora”—the preoedipal phase of mother-child coadunation (Kristeva, 1984, p. 25-6). The semiotic chora is “the place of the maternal law before the Law”, and the “maternal body is the organizing principle of the semiotic chora” that regulates the drives (Oliver 1993, p. 46). A prerequisite for entry into the symbolic and “a precondition of narcissism”, the passage from the “chora” into the symbolic is what Kristeva terms the “thetic phase” that “marks a threshold between the two heterogeneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic” (Kristeva 1984, 25-6). The thetic phase is tied in with what Kristeva calls the process of “abjection”. In order to sustain the post-mirror-stage self-other distinction that is a prerequisite for the constitution of subjectivity through entry into the symbolic, the subject must forever engage in maternal abjection through

its projection onto all possible manifestations of the abject: corpses, excrement, evil, and otherness. Else, as a trace of the semiotic, it boomerangs recurrently to rupture our sense of order, boundaries, and identities (Kristeva 1982, p. 1-14).

Thus, the semiotic and the symbolic operate dialectically whereby the symbolic imposes stability while the semiotic generates “negativity” that interrupts the unitary and homogeneous identities enforced by the symbolic through its return to the maternal. While the Lacanian model foregrounds desire vis-à-vis a totally inaccessible Real, Kristeva’s dialectic of the semiotic and the symbolic displaces Lacanian “lack” with negativity. As a disruptive energy of the maternal semiotic, negativity obstructs stable identities, generating a “subject-in-process” (Kristeva 1984, p. 130-1). However, while the semiotic drive’s recurring interruption of the symbolic is liberatory, an exaggerated proximity to the former can disintegrate the boundaries between the two realms, thereby pushing the subject close to psychosis. Thus, for a healthy, functioning individual, a constant mediation between the semiotic and the symbolic realms is critical.

Kristeva’s psychoanalytic model not only helps understand the cultural identification of the maternal as the abject reflected in women’s characterization as evil in various discourses that also subtly informs Žižek’s analysis of courtly love, but her theory of psychosexual development with its focus on the maternal also allows for reconceiving the Lady in courtly love as a subject. In this regard, Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* provides an interesting case study. Given her separation from the mother in the preoedipal phase prior to the formation of self-identity, Arabella reflects a proximity to the semiotic chora that explains her switch between the “imaginary” world of the Romances and the “rational” world of the eighteenth-century Symbolic. While her constant shift between the two signifies her desire to return to the chora given her traumatic severance of the maternal bond, the societal abnegation of her behaviour reflects the threat this poses to the stasis, boundaries, and identities of a patriarchal Symbolic order.

Since its publication in 1752, Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* has received considerable critical attention. Compared to Lennox’s earlier publication, *The Female Quixote* received sympathetic appraisal in the popular press not least by her contemporary male novelists including Richardson, Fielding, and Johnson (Hanley 2000). While, during the nineteenth century, the novel continued to enjoy popularity, it came to receive significant critical attention during the twentieth century especially from feminist scholars. A number of these studies have focused on the novel’s contribution to the discourse on the relationship between the romance, the novel, and history (Langbauer 1984; Todd 1989; Spencer 1994; Levin 1995; Martin 1997; Doody 1997). A great deal of this scholarship criticizes Lennox for reinforcing a gendered generic binary that masculinizes the novel and feminizes the romance.

More recent studies of the novel have, however, challenged these readings to foreground the feminist potential of the text. Birke (2016) notes that the novel “complicates” the “figure of the silly woman reader” (p. 57) while Wyett (2015) holds that the novel counters “stereotypes about women’s critical failings” through a

heroine that represents women's "intellectual and ethical ambitions in a world inimical to their interests" (p. 1). Hodges (2013) argues that the novel instructs its readers in reading "English social spaces in terms of discourses of power" that shape their positionalities in "both romantic and unromantic public spaces" (p. 1). Palo (2005) asserts that Lennox's "romance-reading heroine" critiques the contemporary ideal of true womanhood and highlights the significance of female education in redefining women's societal roles (p. 204). Babbages (2002) notes that the novel considers "the extent to which a woman can defy convention and control the narrative of her life" (p. 150), while Watson (2011) sees Arabella's beauty, social standing, and rejection of the masculinized novelistic discourse as a source of power over men (p. 31-32).

While developing on the scholarship that explores the novel's negotiation of the gendered eighteenth-century English society through a rebellious heroine, this essay deploys a psychoanalytic lens to understand Arabella's confrontation with the eighteenth-century Symbolic. Most critical readings of the novel have attributed Arabella's delusional immersion in the world of romances to her confinement to the castle of her father, the Marquis, and her lack of exposure to the external world. This essay, however, uses Kristeva's model of psychosexual development to understand Arabella's absorption in the romantic world as reflective of her fixation on the maternal.

Whereas Žižek's analysis of the libidinal economy of courtly love posits the male as the subject of the "theatrical performance" who projects his narcissistic ego on the female object, in the absence of a willing knight (and thus the agent), Lennox's text offers a case study of the Lady as the subject. Looking at the Lady's perspective via Kristeva's theory of psychic development, I argue that Arabella's immersion in the delusional world of romances signifies her proximity to the semiotic chora given her preoedipal severance from the maternal before the onset of subjectivity. As such, the world of romances, especially as the romances belong to her mother, symbolizes her overinvestment in the semiotic chora that obstructs her total entry into the symbolic. As such, her preference of a "feminine" form, reflective of the subversive force of the semiotic, represents Arabella's defiance of the rational, masculine, novelistic discourse of the eighteenth-century patriarchal order. Thus, while Arabella's "cure" is the societal demand to subject her to the Law of the Father, it is also a warning against a dangerous proximity to the semiotic in favor of a constant mediation between the semiotic and the symbolic realms.

Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752) is about Arabella, a young heiress, who is delusionally immersed in the archaic world of chivalrous romance to the neglect of the demands of the eighteenth-century pragmatic and rational English society. Seeking to match "the illustrious Heroines of Antiquity, whom it is a Glory to resemble," Arabella emulates their conduct, their speech, and their romantic worldview. Hence, introduced into the larger social world, Arabella's peculiar behavior vis-à-vis other men almost all of whom she conceives as potential "ravishers" renders her a source of ridicule. The only suitor who persists through the tribulations of her pursuit and the aberration of her conduct is Arabella's cousin Glanville until the penultimate chapter effects "the Cure of Arabella's Mind" (p. 221) at the hands of a "doctor" who successfully convinces her of her "Folly" of conflating

the ‘real’ world of eighteenth-century England with the ‘imagined’ world of the archaic romances. With some recent exceptions, most critics have read this binaristic structure of reason/passion, masculine/feminine, practical/ideal as reinforcing the novel’s underlying binary of the novel/romance genre that “condemns” the latter “as specious fiction” (p. 29). As Langbauer (1984) notes:

Arabella’s excesses of behavior actually reflect what is wrong with romance. She acts the way she does because she believes in romance and is simply acting out its conventions. Through her, *The Female Quixote* shows that romance is excessive fiction, so excessive that it is nonsensical, ultimately mad. The silly extravagances of romance that Arabella illustrates are meant as a foil for the novel’s strengths. (p. 29)

More recent criticism has reinterpreted these binaries to claim that Lennox, in fact, “reverses the terms of her contemporary critical discourse on realistic and fantastic fiction” and offers “a lesson about the dangers of interpreting desire according to the rules of realistic writing” (Watson 2011, p. 31). While this paper revisits some of these ideas especially the binary between the imaginative and the real, the masculine and the feminine, the quixotic and the pragmatic within the gendered structures of the eighteenth-century English society, it does so within the framework of Julia Kristeva’s semiotic-symbolic signifying structure that affords unique insights into Arabella’s personal and social struggle. The psychoanalytic lens also allows us to understand the Lady’s investment in the libidinal economy of courtly love that remains untheorized in Žižek’s analysis.

Arabella’s “follies” and the “narcissistic crisis”

Most critics have attributed Arabella’s idiosyncratic behavior to her childhood “seclusion”. Disillusioned by the conspiracies that deposed him from his distinguished position at the Court, Arabella’s father, the Marquis, “resolved to quit all Society” and “devote the rest of his Life to Solitude and Privacy” in a remote castle removed by several miles from any town. Adorned with “immense Riches”, the Marquis’s “Epitome of Arcadia” was finally complete with his marriage to “a young Lady” who, though inferior to him in both years and rank, was blessed with “Beauty and good Sense” (Lennox 1752, p. 4). After a couple of years, the Marchioness gave birth to Arabella and “died in Three Days after her Delivery”. Since the Marquis “never admitted any Company whatever,” Arabella was raised in isolation (p. 5). Interestingly then:

At Four Years of Age he took her from under the Direction of the Nurses and Women appointed to attend her, and permitted her to receive no Part of her Education from another, which he was capable of giving her himself. He taught her to read and write in a very few Months; and, as she grew older, finding in her an uncommon Quickness of Apprehension, and an Understanding capable of great Improvements, he resolved to cultivate so promising a Genius. (p. 5)

Severed from her mother before she could come to see her as other, Arabella was also denied the company of nurses to share her father’s isolated

lifestyle. Lennox portrays a romantic image of an almost perfect heroine: "Nature had indeed given her a most charming Face, a Shape easy and delicate, a sweet and insinuating Voice, and an Air so full of Dignity and Grace, as drew the Admiration of all that saw her. These native Charms were improved with all the Heightenings of Art". Except that Arabella had one flaw; from a very early age, she was exposed to her mother's "great Store of Romances" that "unfortunately" took up "her whole Time". Just as romances had been a source of comfort for the "Solitude" of the Marchioness, they also proved "a most pleasing Entertainment" to Arabella "who was wholly secluded from the World". Her life thus took "a romantic Turn" as she deemed romances "real" from where she "drew all her Notions and Expectations" (p. 5).

Intriguingly, most scholarship has focused on Arabella's paternal origin, the Marquis's isolated life, to explain her neurotic obsession with the romantic world. I want to shift focus towards her maternal connection or lack thereof to understand her fascination with romances. Kristeva's model of psychosexual development gives a central place to the maternal role in the development of the subject. As per Kristeva's model, the semiotic chora is the earliest stage of psychosexual development in which a child does not perceive herself as distinct from the mother and the contiguous world. The semiotic chora signifies plenitude of the Lacanian real; it is the maternal space of preoedipal mother-child coadunation. Subjectivity is enacted via a transition from the semiotic chora into the mirror stage, which is a prerequisite of narcissism. This transitional phase is characterized by maternal abjection and identification with an imaginary father, which redirects the pre-objectal desire, establishes self-other boundary, and allows entry into the symbolic. This renunciation of oneness with the mother is the price the subject must pay for the privilege of becoming a subject and a self. Battling the desire for a narcissistic union with the mother, the subject nevertheless surrenders this union to become a speaking subject.

Arabella loses her mother at the primary level, in the chora, the psychic space of plenitude before the symbolic figures, which has implications for her subjectivity. As McAfee notes, indeed, a "loss suffered in the semiotic chora hampers one's entry into the symbolic" (p. 61). McAfee further writes:

With the process of abjection derailed—primary love is lost before it can be expelled—the child can never properly make the break between subject and object. Lacking the ability to discern and judge—because the child has not entered the thetic phase—the child cannot name what she has lost. It will never be an object for her, but an unnameable thing. (p. 61)

Given the significance of the mother and the imaginary realm in the child's acquisition of language, the formation of self-identity, and the entry into the symbolic, this early loss has serious implications for the child's psychosexual development. In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989), Kristeva theorizes this as a kind of melancholia that she terms "narcissistic depression": "The child king becomes irredeemably sad before uttering his first words; this is because he has been irrevocably, desperately separated from the mother, a loss that causes him to try to find her again, along with other objects of love, first in the imagination,

then in words” (Kristeva 1989, p. 6). The mother disappears before the child comes to understand her as another; hence, the child experiences a loss that cannot be articulated. While the child may go on to have a normal childhood, the onset of another trauma later in life may trigger the early loss and transport the subject into depression that significantly exceeds the immediate trigger. Kristeva (1989) notes:

The depressed narcissist mourns not an Object but the Thing. Let me posit the “Thing” as the real that does not lend itself to signification, the centre of attraction and repulsion, seat of the sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated. (p. 13)

Situating Arabella’s obsession with the romantic world within the framework of Kristeva’s conception of melancholia, I use the term “narcissistic crisis” as opposed to Kristeva’s “narcissistic depression”. As Kristeva (1989) writes: “Knowingly disinherited of the Thing, the depressed person wanders in pursuit of continuously disappointing adventures and loves; or else retreats” (p. 13). Through a close engagement with the “adventures” Arabella undertakes, I seek to argue that given the disruption of her primary narcissism, Arabella wants to revert to “the form of self-love present in the chora before the subject-object distinction arises” (McAfee 2004, p. 55). Arabella seeks this fulfilment in the romances (that belong, significantly, to her mother and hence evocative of her) and romantic “adventures,” which reflects her desire to reject the symbolic order and return to the plenitude of the semiotic chora. In her narcissistic crisis, she returns to the primary narcissism whereby she identifies with the characters in the romances to replace the lost object. The romances make up her world; each time she is faced with a situation in life, she resorts to romances to decide her course of action. Hence, she disregards the eighteenth-century social order, the Law of the Father, and the patriarchal economy of desire in her preference for an imaginary life immersed in the romantic world. Representative of the symbolic, the eighteenth-century English society is grounded in order, boundaries, and rules that assign power to men and find expression in the novel whereas the world of romances representative of the semiotic disrupts order, boundaries, and rules to allow Arabella a power that is otherwise denied to women in her society.

Given her narcissistic crisis, Arabella is introduced in the novel as soliciting an “object” that could replace “the Thing”. Although “Her Glass, which she often consulted, always shewed [sic] her a Form so extremely lovely,” Arabella nevertheless sought a specular relation in the romantic world. She believes that she must “engage” in “Adventures” that “were common to the Heroines in the Romances” and hoped “a Croud [sic] of Adorers”¹ would pursue her (Lennox 1752, p. 5). As such, she is instantly and “wholly taken up with” the very first encounter she has with a potential admirer, Mr. Hervey. Arabella finds his “gaze” on her “so different” that she immediately concludes that “he was excessively in Love with her”. However, she behaves contrary to the conventional etiquette of courtship. As opposed to receiving “his presumptuous Thoughts,” Arabella, symptomatic of a melancholic, prefers being by herself “to be at Liberty to indulge her agreeable Reflections.” However, after a week passes without hearing from him, she is nevertheless “Surprised” at “so mortifying a Disappointment” (p. 6-7). Indeed,

Arabella engages in an ambivalent love-hate relationship with each of her suitors. This is best reflected in her encounter with Mr. Glanville, her Cousin whom Arabella's father has chosen as her future husband. Seeing him first, Arabella is "Surprize[d] at the Gracefulness of his Figure"; however, this is immediately offset by her "feel[ing] an invincible Repugnance" and "Disgust" for him (p. 17). Indeed, the closer an admirer comes to her, the more terrified she is because the proximity to the object makes her realize that it is not the Thing nor anywhere close to it.

Arabella seamlessly and recurrently switches between absolutely neurotic and perfectly rational states of mind. When engaged in the former, she is so disconnected from reality that it is impossible not to read her "follies" as neurotic. The "ridiculous Adventure" with Mr. Hervey where she perceives him as a potential "Ravisher" "astonishes" him so much that he attributes it to "Simplicity and Misrepresentations" by Lucy, as it is impossible to explain it "rationally" (p. 13). Instead of recognizing Edward as a gardener and a carp thief, she deems him "a Person of *sublime Quality*" who is "disguised . . . in order to have an Opportunity of declaring a Passion to her" (p. 14). Edward's "earnest" conversation with the House-Steward is construed as a plot to "carry her off" and Glanville is accused of "betrayal" and "Treachery" in abetting him. The Sea Service Officer's "intoxicated mistress" is perceived as a "disguis'd" Lady of "Quality" who needed Arabella's "Consolation" in face of her "Ravisher" (p. 201). Arabella smugly assumes that Mr. Hervey, Mr. Glanville, Sir George, and several others will compliantly embrace death or ward it off by the "power" of her "command" (p. 80). Thus, owing to her "strange" and "ludicrous" behaviour, Sir Charles and Mr. Glanville, often conclude that her "Brain is disorder'd" (p. 181).

However, Arabella is also capable of engaging in perfectly rational and inspiring discourse on the most sublime subjects. On such occasions, "the Wit and Vivacity which was natural to her" earned Arabella looks of "passionate Tenderness" from Glanville, "Admiration" from Sir George, and "Wonder and Delight" from Sir Charles. In fact, she "so absolutely charmed the whole Company that no one of them remembred any of her former Extravagancies" (p. 120). In her discourse on "Raillery" with the company at Bath, Arabella not only knows more history than her company of men but also speaks so eloquently on the subject that Sir Charles calls her "an Orator" with many "Signs of Admiration" in his eyes (p. 160). As such, Arabella's frequent switch between her romantic immersions and her rational conversations is so evident, abrupt, and distinct that it renders her behaviour "quite unintelligible" (p. 50). This paradox is best reflected in Glanville's contemplation:

Here he sat, ruminating upon the Follies of Arabella, which he found grew more glaring every Day: Everything furnished Matter for some new Extravagance; her Character was so ridiculous, that he could propose nothing to himself but eternal Shame and Disquiet, in the Possession of a Woman, for whom he must always blush, and be in Pain. But her Beauty had made a deep Impression on his Heart: He admired the Strength of her Understanding; her lively Wit; the Sweetness of her Temper; and a Thousand amiable Qualities which distinguished her from the rest of her Sex. (p. 70)

The fact that the only thing that sets Arabella apart from other women in the novel is her preoccupation with the romances, “a Thousand amiable Qualities” could thus be attributed to the former. This rational/irrational switch then reflects a constant mediation between the symbolic (stasis) and the semiotic (negativity), the logical and the emotive, the conscious and the unconscious realms. However, it is significant that given her preoccupation with the lost maternal object, Arabella’s speech is primarily reflective of the semiotic/romantic. Hence, her “unintelligibility” to everyone who wants her to conform to the symbolic/rational eighteenth-century ethos.

Indeed, Arabella defies everything that the society expects from her. Her father wants her to marry her cousin, especially if she is to retain all her estate. Arabella, however, wishes to remain single: “My first Wish, my Lord, replied Arabella, is to live single, not being desirous of entering into any Engagement” (p. 25). It is curious then as to why Arabella hopes to receive “a Croud of Adorers to demand her of her Father” (p. 5), and perceives every man she encounters as a potential suitor including her uncle, Sir Charles. Indeed, Glanville, her most persistent admirer, manages to touch her yet “the insensible Arabella” is not “Charmed”. Indeed, “The Truth is, she had too much Discernment not to see that Mr. Glanville had a great deal of Merit,” (p. 18). However, Arabella does not want to follow the conventional trajectory of love that consummates in a union. Instead, owing to her narcissistic crisis, she is caught up in primordial desire: “I should be to blame to desire to be beloved by Mr. Glanville” (p. 19). Thus, she schools him in the etiquette of romance that he is “quite ignorant of”: she “commands” him to “take Orders from no one but [her]self” and expects him “to suffer whole Years in Silence before he declares his Flame to the divine Object that causes it” (p. 19). Arabella’s ambivalence thus betrays her yearning for the lost Thing as opposed to an investment in the patriarchal economy of courtly love. Therefore, the closer she comes to an admirer, the more aversion she displays towards him.

Indeed, as opposed to Žižek’s denial of any “wisdom,” “prudence,” or “competence” to the Lady (p. 90), the narrator sets Arabella apart from almost all other women characters as superior in both “character” and “mind”. Her immediate foil is Miss Glanville who is outshone by Arabella in both person and intellect. In being “perfectly elegant and genteel,” Arabella surpasses her cousin not only in beauty but also character; however, while Miss Glanville “could not find in her Heart to return” the “Praises” received from Arabella on account of the former’s “jealousy,” Arabella, like the ancient heroines, “knew not what Envy or Emulation meant” (p. 48). Instead of acknowledging Arabella’s sincerity however, Miss Glanville, wondered if it was “possible” for “one Woman [to] praise another with any Sincerity” (p. 54). Indeed, while Miss Glanville spent “Hours in dressing herself to the greatest Advantage,” she is surprised by “the Haste and Negligence” that Arabella displayed in “this important Employment” (p. 50). Likewise, when Arabella’s company in Richmond is “entertaining themselves with the usual Topicks [sic] of Conversation among young Ladies, such as their Winnings and Losings at Brag, the Prices of Silks, the newest Fashions, the best Hair-Cutter, the Scandal at

the last Assembly, & c.,” Arabella is “disgusted” with their “insipid discourse” (p. 216).

As for her person, Miss Glanville thinks Arabella is “always so grave,” she “does not know what to say to [her]”, while Arabella believes her cousin “has so strange a Disposition for Mirth, that she thinks all her Moments are lost, in which she finds nothing to laugh at” (51). This is because Arabella’s favourite “Company” are her books while Miss Glanville prefers “Pump-Rooms,” the “Parade,” and “Parties of Pleasure”. Arabella instead believes that “People who spend their [time] in such trifling Amusements, must certainly live to very little Purpose” (p. 166). However, this does not render Arabella prudish or moralistic. Even a person like Miss Charlotte who lacks “virtue” and grace as per the eighteenth-century ideal of womanhood is treated respectfully by Arabella who defends her character against Miss Glanville’s condescending opinion. Indeed, the only thing that distinguishes Arabella from other women characters is her investment in Romances from where ensue the strength of her character and “a Thousand amiable Qualities which distinguished her from the rest of her Sex” (p. 70). As such, the romances reflect the liberating potential of the semiotic that challenges the rigidity of the symbolic. However, a total immersion in the former threatens the very subjectivity, which is the case, at times, with Arabella.

From “narcissistic crisis” to a “subject-in-process”

The text, therefore, provides us a character that reflects this balance—“The celebrated Countess” at Bath. When “Arabella’s uncommon Beauty had gain’d her so many Enemies among the Ladies” who “ridiculed” her by turn, the Countess immediately “declar’d herself in her Favour” on account of Arabella’s “Wit and Spirit,” which silenced everyone given the Countess’s “universally acknowledg’d Merit, and the Deference always pay’d to her Opinion” (p. 194). The narrator describes the Countess:

This Lady, who among her own Sex had no Superior in Wit, Elegance, and Ease, was inferior to very few of the other in Sense, Learning, and Judgment. Her Skill in Poetry, Painting, and Musick, tho’ incontestably great, was number’d among the least of her Accomplishments. Her Candour, her Sweetness, her Modesty and Benevolence, while they secur’d her from the Darts of Envy, render’d her superior to Praise, and made the one as unnecessary as the other ineffectual. (p. 194)

Despite her short appearance, the Countess is the only woman character other than Arabella who is praised at length in the text. Significantly, the narrator ends this praise of the Countess with a comment about her being “deep read in Romances”. This alongside her critical visit to Arabella makes her an important character in the plot and in Arabella’s transformation. However, despite being as well read in Romances as Arabella, the Countess’s discourse reflects a perfect balance between the real and the imaginary that Arabella has trouble negotiating at times.

Indeed, the Countess’s character may also be read as reflective of “the Thing” that Arabella is seeking to resolve her narcissistic crisis. Being an older woman, equal in Quality to Arabella, and well versed in Romances, the Countess is

reminiscent of Arabella's mother, which also explains Arabella's peculiar response to her that surprises everyone. The Countess is the first woman that Arabella takes a particular liking to even before she has met her, which even "confounds" Miss Glanville (p. 195). Indeed, Arabella is expecting the Countess "with great Impatience," and "the Moment she enter'd the Room flew towards her with a graceful Eagerness, and straining her in her Arms, embrac'd her with all the Fervour of a long absent Friend." Both Sir Charles and Glanville are "embarrass'd at the Familiarity of this Address" (p. 195). This is followed by the only significant address of admiration that Arabella makes for any character in the novel:

You cannot imagine, lovely Stranger, said Arabella to the Countess, as soon as they were seated, with what Impatience I have long'd to behold you, since the Knowledge I have receiv'd of your rare Qualities, and the Friendship you have been pleas'd to honour me with. And I may truly protest to you, that such is my Admiration of your Virtues, that I would have gone to the farthest Part of the World to render you that which you with so much Generosity have condescended to bestow upon me. (p. 195)

So strange is her greeting that "Sir Charles star'd" while "Mr. Glanville look'd down, and bit his Nails in extreme Confusion". However, the Countess, familiar with "the Language of Romance" responds "in a Strain as 13eroic [sic] as hers" (p. 195). As they continue their discourse, Arabella is further mesmerized by the Countess's "secret Charm". She feels "a Tenderness for her that had already the Force of a long contracted Friendship, and an Esteem little less than Veneration" (p. 198).

It is no surprise then that before the "doctor" appears to "cure" Arabella of her "Follies," it is the Countess whose hypnotic influence on Arabella sows the seeds of her transformation. The Countess does so by making Arabella conscious of her dwelling in the past with respect to the latter's discussion of romantic adventures: "Not one of these Things having happen'd within the Compass of several thousand Years, People unlearn'd in Antiquity would be apt to deem them idle Tales, so improbable do they appear at present" (p. 198). Although Arabella is "greatly surpriz'd at this Discourse, [she] did not think proper to express her Thoughts." Nevertheless, "[t]he *secret* [my emphasis] Charm in the Countenance, Voice, and Manner of the Countess, join'd to the Force of her reasoning, could not fail in making some Impression on the Mind of Arabella." At length, Arabella "was surpriz'd, embarrass'd, perplex'd," for the "Countess's Discourse had rais'd a Kind of Tumult in her Thoughts, which gave an Air of Perplexity to her lovely Face" (p. 198).

In challenging Arabella's conflation of the ancient romances with the contemporary world, the Countess's discourse asked for a balance between the "negativity" of the semiotic and the "order" of the symbolic. Although the Countess, who comes to represent a maternal figure for Arabella, "had resolv'd to take Arabella openly into her Protection," however, "her good Intentions towards our lovely Heroine were suspended by the Account she receiv'd of her Mother's Indisposition, which commanded her immediate Attendance on her" (p. 199). The

textual reference to the Countess's mother brings our psychoanalytical analysis of this encounter full circle. In reflecting a perfect balance of the symbolic and the semiotic, the conscious and the unconscious, and the logical and the emotive, the Countess represents a foil to Arabella precisely on account of her maternal connection that Arabella wants.

Intriguingly, Lennox effects Arabella's "cure" through the "good Divine" as opposed to her transformation via the Countess. Certainly, the doctor signifies the Law of the Father, the eighteenth-century patriarchal structure that Arabella must fully enter to mediate her desire. Her discourse with the doctor signifies the novel/romance, rational/emotive, masculine/feminine, and symbolic/semiotic binaries whose wrong side Arabella resides. It is no wonder that the doctor with his "Superiority" of having "lived long in a public Character" is to effect Arabella's "cure" with his long discourse on the "dangers" of romances. Lennox's choice of a patriarchal figure to "cure" Arabella that has been read as a "flaw or aberration" (Levin 1995, p. 271) may be reinterpreted in at least two ways. First, there has been considerable critical speculation about the possibility of Samuel Johnson writing part of this chapter (Brack Jr. & Carlile 2003). Whether this is true or not, there is no denying the fact that Lennox's earlier publications had received less positive appraisal, as Levin (1995) notes:

Instead of retreating, [Lennox] relied on her male mentors to ensure that *The Female Quixote* would be acceptable and successful. With Arabella's cure, Lennox acknowledged that the freedoms available to men were dangerous for women. To survive, she became a "woman writer" according to her society's specifications. (p. 271)

In other words, despite knowing otherwise, Lennox made a compromise "not only for her novel and its female readers, but [also] for herself" (p. 271).

Extending this reading, the second interpretation can be made via the Countess. Although Lennox needed a male figure and a doctor to "cure" Arabella, she offsets this by the role that the Countess plays in setting off the transformation. Indeed, the first feelings of surprise, embarrassment, and perplexity that Arabella experiences are evoked by the Countess's discourse with her regarding the antiquity of the ideals of romances. The interaction with the Countess and the discourse with the doctor are separated by about 30 pages that include two significant episodes that further shed light on Arabella's crisis. The first is her encounter with the "imaginary princess" by the name of Cynecia who has been planted by Sir George to discredit Glanville. While listening to her story, Arabella is reminded of the Countess's dismissal of the romances as archaic: "the Countess was extremely mistaken, when she maintain'd there were no more wandering Princesses in the World" (p. 209). While this may seem to reinforce her convictions, it also reflects a self-critical attitude on the part of Arabella that she had never displayed before. Indeed, the psychic tension that Cynecia's appearance and later disappearance generates precipitates Arabella's narcissistic crisis, leading her eventually to attempt suicide. Overcome by "Grief" and "the Anxiety of her Mind," Arabella "go[es] in quest of the Princess" (p. 216). Her search for Cynecia represents her

desperation at restoring her faith in romance that it brings about an absolute disintegration, on the edge of the death drive.

Kristeva notes: “In regressing from the symbolic, the subject returns to a narcissistic state. The narcissistic structure seems to share features of the death drive. Both lead to a kind of disintegration, a threat of the loss of subjectivity” (McAfee 2004, p. 64). Driven by the death drive, Arabella wants to bring a closure to her story. For Kristeva, “suicide is not a disguised act of war but a merging with sadness and, beyond it, with that impossible love, never reached, always elsewhere, such as the promises of nothingness, of death” (Kristeva 1989, p. 13). Indeed, “death” or “suicide” become “final triumph over the void of the lost object” (Kristeva 1989, p. 9). However, this attempt at suicide is what becomes the occasion of both her physical and mental cure by the doctor as he begins the cure by broaching “the Subject of her throwing herself into the River” (p. 221). Thus, while the doctor is the final face of Arabella’s cure, it is set in motion by her discourse with the Countess that is later challenged in Cynecia’s appearance that leads to the attempted suicide. Indeed, at the end of the novel, when Arabella’s “Mind was labouring under the force of Conviction”, Glanville deems it a perfect opportunity to “introduce” Sir George to her company in order to “confess the ridiculous Farce he had invented to deceive her” and thereby “add to the Doctor’s solid Arguments” (p. 230).

Since most of the critical scholarship has read Arabella’s transformation as a textual recapitulation to the eighteenth-century ideal of womanhood or an admission of the superiority of the novelistic genre, a Kristevan psychoanalytical reading of the novel offers an alternative interpretation. Arabella’s cure is entrusted to the “good Divine” because she is defying the rules of the symbolic which can only be restored through identification with an imaginary father to enter the symbolic. The resolution of what I have termed Arabella’s narcissistic crisis, therefore, comes about with her identification with the Law of the Father, which, for Kristeva, forms “the link that might enable one to become reconciled with the loss of the Thing” (Kristeva 1989, p. 13). However, it is mediated, significantly, by her engagement with the maternal figure of the Countess. Like the Countess, Arabella must find her balance between the liberating potential of the semiotic and the necessary order of the symbolic. While the novelistic genre is representative of the symbolic, the rational, and the masculine, the romance signifies the semiotic, the maternal, and the emotive. Only a resolution of her narcissistic crisis will render Arabella a subject-in-process who navigates the symbolic through the subversive potential of the semiotic. As Lennox’s text affects Arabella’s “cure” into the realistic discourse of the symbolic, it also valorizes her investment in the romantic world of the semiotic that sets the heroine apart from other women. The Kristevan psychoanalytical analysis also allows us to read Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* as an interesting case study of the libidinal economy of courtly love from the vantage of the Lady that Žižek’s analysis omits. As opposed to rendering the Lady an absolute object, a monstrosity, a radical Otherness, and an automaton, bereft of empathy, this analysis has foregrounded the Lady’s narcissistic crisis whose resolution presents her as a subject-in-process whose mediation between the semiotic and the

symbolic enables the transgressive potential of negativity and, hence, political resistance.

¹ Lennox uses archaic language used in the Romances before, during, and after the Eighteenth century. That is why there is an excessive use of capital letters apart from obsolete spellings in the selected text.

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