CHAPTER 2

Charlotte Lennox’s *Female Quixote* and Orthodox Quixotism

I. Orthodox Quixote Narratives

Chapters 3 through 6 focus on texts that deploy the quixote trope in ways that subvert its orthodox use. But before investigating these texts, I will use this chapter to flesh out my argument about orthodox quixote narratives that reject the practice of quixotism. I focus here on Charlotte Lennox’s *Female Quixote*, or *The Adventures of Arabella* (1752), now the most widely read eighteenth-century female quixote narrative, in part to question the current critical consensus that celebrates Arabella’s quixotism as a strategy to subvert patriarchal oppression. I begin, however, with a series of female quixote narratives written fifty years later: Maria Edgeworth’s *Angelina; or, L’Amie Inconnue* (1801), Elizabeth Hamilton’s *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800), Tabitha Gilman Tenney’s *Female Quixotism: Exhibited in the Romantic Opinions and Extravagant Adventures of Dorcasina Sheldon* (1801), and Eaton Stannard Barrett’s *The Heroine: Or, Adventures of Cherubina* (1813). These novels differ from one another in many ways. They imagine different audiences (Edgeworth’s text aims at adolescents\(^1\)), their female quixotes suffer different fates, one was written for an American readership (Tenney published her novel in Boston), and, most significantly, the early nineteenth-century narratives participate in an Anglo-American culture significantly changed from that in which Lennox’s text appeared.\(^2\) These later texts are concerned to label “quixotic” types of writing, and forms of thought, quite different from those on which *The Female Quixote* focuses: in particular, the French Revolution provoked in Britain a conservative reaction that stirred up widespread anxiety over what women read and thought, and many texts, including

Hamilton’s *Memoirs*, mobilize female quixotes to manage this new, or newly fraught, “problem.” But while these later texts deploy female quixotes to manage problems of which Lennox’s text is unaware, their return to Lennox’s formula (at times even referring to *The Female Quixote*) both testifies to the continued usefulness of the quixote trope in demonizing threatening beliefs and helps us see clearly the structure of quixotism itself, abstracted from the content of particular quixotisms. Written at different historical moments, on different continents, and for different readerships, these texts share a commitment to “common sense” and aim to position the quixote’s active role in making her world as delusion. While each of these novels levels a critique at the world that surrounds the quixote, none portrays the practice of quixotism as a “creative” reformation or escape from that sordid reality; instead, these texts insist above all that quixotism, far from being creative, disables women from understanding either their own nature or the world around them.

Most orthodox quixote narratives begin, as Tenney’s *Female Quixotism* does, by describing the loss of a mother. This loss deprives the young girl of the figure “whose advice,” the narrator insists, “would have pointed out” to the protagonist, Dorcas Sheldon, the plain rational path of life; and prevented her imagination from being filled with the airy delusions and visionary dreams of love and raptures, darts, fire and flames, with which the indiscreet writers of that fascinating kind of books, denominated Novels, fill the heads of artless young girls, to their great injury, and sometimes to their utter ruin.

Quixote narratives regularly posit a mother’s absence as a crucial problem that has led to the production of female quixotes: in Lennox’s *Female Quixote*, Arabella’s mother “died in Three Days after her Delivery,” while the heroine of Mary Hays’s *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), who “sigh[s] for a romance that would never end” after reading “the Arabian Nights, Turkish Tales, and other works of like marvellous import,” lost her mother “in child-bed the twelfth month of her marriage, after having given birth to a daughter.” The first letter of Barrett’s *The Heroine* describes the quixotic Cherubina as “Motherless” (and “bereft of more than [her] mother,” her “good Governess,” at the “sensitive age of fifteen”). Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818) diverges from the convention only to satirize it, noting of Catherine Morland’s mother that, “instead of dying in bringing her into the world, as any body might expect, she still lived on.” By explicitly crediting mothers with the capacity to introduce