

Unbearable Refusals: Resisting the Female Autonomy in Charlotte Lennox's *Henrietta*

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Not quite a bildungsroman, not quite a domestic novel, not quite amatory, and not fully picaresque, Charlotte Lennox's (1727-1804) 1758 *Henrietta* is a curious work. A novel of manners characterized by a transitional approach to narration, it is located somewhere between the picaresque tales of Daniel Defoe at the beginning of the 18th century and the formally-unified narratives of Jane Austen at the end, somewhere between the irony of Fielding and the sentiment of Richardson. Lennox is most well known for her second novel, *The Female Quixote*, published in 1752, but she is also the author of the first piece of sustained Shakespeare criticism that can be called feminist, (*Shakespeare Illustrated* [1753-4]), several other novels--*Euphemia* (1790) is an epistolary novel set in part in the New World, and recently scholars have been more and more interested in Lennox's transatlanticism--and a play based on the twist in *Henrietta*, which we'll talk about a little today. *Henrietta*, however, is interesting to me for a lot of reason; **my reading suggests that Lennox is staging the process by which her transgressive and illegible public persona is recuperated into a domestic logic that (not unproblematically) rewards her moral value.**

The story centers around a young woman thrust, alone and friendless, into the dangerous waters of the world--but it is also striking because of its form. A novel in four books, the first three

focus on Henrietta's skillful navigation of a materialistic social world that seeks only self-gratification; she is a woman alone who, though not without difficulty, is able to retain her self-possession and bodily integrity. Despite being routinely suspected of being so, she becomes neither a prostitute, nor a Catholic, nor a kept mistress, nor a beggar, and in the meantime, she is able to offer robust satirical commentary on an array of hypocritical people. In the last book, the narration shifts to focus on the surprising appearance of her brother, traveling incognito, and his companion, who has fallen in love with Henrietta but cannot marry because his father will not consent (she is relatively penniless, though of family). This narrative shift is notable and abrupt, and it seems totally at odds with the first three books that celebrate Henrietta's ability to negotiate a public social and economic world while maintaining her (unseen) moral center. It is also fascinating because this narrative shift hinges on a particular moment--and this is the twist I mentioned earlier--when her brother, in an attempt to gratify his traveling companion, essentially becomes a *procurer* for him, unknowingly propositioning his own sister. Once their identities are revealed to each other, through the arrival of a letter from a friend in common, Henrietta essentially disappears from the story, and the focus is entirely on her brother Charles' attempts to negotiate a fortune so that his sister and friend can marry legitimately. Because this paper is yet in its infancy, and I am only beginning to think about how Lennox's text is operating, my ideas are unpolished and underdeveloped--I welcome feedback, and a fuller picture of the plot, therefore, is essential. Today, I want to tease out some of the implications of the novel's formal and thematic structure, suggesting that Lennox is staging the process by which her transgressive and illegible public persona is recuperated into a domestic logic that (not unproblematically) rewards her moral value at the expense of her unbearable autonomy.

The novel revolves around the life and adventures of young Henrietta Courtney, the product of an unsanctioned love-match between a genteel but impoverished mother and a wealthy, titled father. At the opening of the novel, we learn that her parents have died, and as a result, the eponymous protagonist is thrust, friendless, into a hostile world filled with people who seek to appropriate her body, her gentility, and her family name for their own purposes. In the first glimpse we catch of Henrietta, she is as yet unnamed--she is "a young woman genteely dressed, with a small parcel tied up in her handkerchief." Repeatedly referred to as a "stranger," she is narratively set up as a question mark. Fleeing the safety of a wooded glen by the side of the road, she flags down the passing Windsor Stage, and we wonder who she is, why she runs, what her history will reveal. She is thoroughly alone: parents, deceased; brother, long abroad; guardian in London, absent, Henrietta must fend for herself, which is itself suspect in a world where respectable women were never left to their own devices. The Fielding-esque chapter titles indicate the irony of the novel as a whole; she is "our Heroine," but "introduce[d]... to the Acquaintance of the Reader in no very advantageous Situation."

This inaugural situation--a beautiful, apparently genteel young woman of merit suspiciously on her own--is replayed throughout the novel, affording many more opportunities for the satirical voice that, not coincidentally, *also* gets Henrietta into trouble (taking an opportunity to vent, she pens a scathingly satirical critique of Lady Meadows that her Aunt discovers). In each of these iterations of the fundamental structure of the first three books, Henrietta eschews being "thus bartered for...without [her] consent" (61)--whether what is being bartered is her body, her name,

or her moral sentiment. Lady Manning, a longtime friend of her mother's, first takes her in, but requires Henrietta to marry beneath her status in exchange for economic stability, satisfying Manning's simultaneous hatred of and desire for nobility. Her great Aunt on her father's side, Lady Meadows requires Henrietta to either marry a superannuated Catholic baronet or convert to Catholicism in exchange for a return to the family bosom. Having fled Manning and Meadows, determined to retain her moral, physical, and erotic autonomy--she was also threatened with the spectre of being locked away in a convent--Henrietta removes herself from the scene, and it is at this point that we meet her flagging down the stagecoach en route to London, and hopefully, the security of her guardian Mr. Damer.

Finally acquiring a seat on the stage, she commences a "violent friendship" with a young woman who reads far too much romance, to whom she imprudently tells her life story, in just the manner of a romance heroine. When a misdirected introduction lands Henrietta at the house of Mrs. Eccles, London milliner, instead of Mrs. Egret, London milliner, she finds herself uneasily lodged with a woman just shy of a madam: "She was one of those convenient persons with whom a lady, upon paying a certain sum of money, might lie-in privately, and be properly attended. She made no scruple of accommodating with lodgings a young wife, whose husband, for certain family reasons, visits her only now and then; and as she generally found her account in such sort of lodgers, she seldom desired, and indeed was seldom encumbered with any other" (20). This connection puts Henrietta--then going by the name Miss Benson--in the path of an unnamed, aristocratically louche beau. He, too, sees her as a desirable acquisition; the narrator notes with a tone of irony that "A young woman, eloped from her relations, with no body about

her of authority enough to control or direct her actions: these were very favourable circumstances for a man of intrigue” (93). Her guardian’s travels in Holland leave her with only his son, young Mr. Damer, to turn to--and he also, we learn, has designs upon her; despite his appearance of disinterest, he attempts to move her to his home in the country, which causes the respectable and motherly Mrs. Willis, with whom Henrietta lodges after removing herself from Eccles’ house, to harbor her own suspicions of Henrietta’s character. The pattern is so secure as to be, itself, almost comical. Lennox characterizes Henrietta’s autonomy as unbearable, “obstinate,” inscrutable to the world in which she lives--she is a young woman who refuses to be bartered for without consent, but because she is alone and friendless, she has to repeat herself (if not loudly, then often). It is assumed that she must have some “secret engagement” or another interest that trumps her conscience.

Now without money, guardian, or family, she takes the only path available to her and seeks employment. A ridiculous citizen's wife, the aged Mrs. Autumn, requires Henrietta to flatter without cause in exchange for a stable source of income and housing; her next situation, lady’s maid to Miss Cordwain, the rich daughter of a tradesman, reiterates similar patterns. In each case, again and again, Henrietta refuses to be bought, bartered, or commandeered for others’ gratifications. Cordwain, we learn, is engaged to the rich Lord B, now named, whom we had met earlier at Mrs. Eccles’ lodging house-cum-brothel--and who echoes Richardson’s B in more ways than one; when he sees Henrietta in the character of a servant, he is astonished and, aware of her true social class. His attentions are noted, and Henrietta is accused by Cordwain of theft; B offers a conditional proposal of marriage--convert to Catholicism (even if you don’t mean it,

perform the role!), win back your Aunt's favor (and, of course, the inheritance that would come with it), and we can marry! Henrietta refuses, to the utter incomprehension of both B and his father. She can only be rendered legible by the same registers of meaning that empower the Meadows, Mannings, Autumns, Eccles, Cordwains, Bs, and Damers of the world. B's mother, however, secures Henrietta another place, and eventually our heroine ends up working as a companion to the young Miss Belmour, who is traveling abroad in a bid to prompt her lover to jealous pursuit. There, Henrietta--still known as Miss Benson--meets a pair of young men, and it is at this point that the narrative structure I have laid out here today abruptly shifts, as we will see.

The fourth and final book of the novel presents a notable break that bears scrutiny. While the first three books focus primarily on Henrietta's experiences, with some small revelations of other characters' thoughts, the last book removes Henrietta and focuses on two young men whose travels intersect. Upon her arrival in Calais with Miss Belmour, they meet Melvil and Charles "Freeman," who are actually a young lord and his tutor making the Grand Tour. They accompany the traveling women to Paris, and while the young lord, Melvil, takes a particular interest Miss Benson, his tutor, Freeman, is convinced that this relationship with an unknown young woman would not be approved. As the two become more and more enamoured of each other--Melvil becomes ill with love--Freeman resolves to solicit Miss Benson as a mistress for Melvil. Convinced "that miss Belmour was a woman of intrigue and by consequence entertaining no elevated idea of her companion" (219), he is sure Miss Benson would "not refuse to listen to such proposals as his fortune enabled him to make her" (216). Ultimately, he "thought it less

dangerous to give him a mistress, than to trust him to the fantastic power of his passion, which might hurry him on to a clandestine marriage” (217). About to proposition her, a letter arrives from Mr. Damer the elder, Henrietta’s guardian, and Freeman, astonished, understands that he is her brother. Amidst the happiness of the discovery, the fact that he had been about to pimp his sister out to his friend is forgotten. She recounts her tale to her brother, who becomes a reader standing outside the plot thus far: “He observed with pleasure, that she laid no stress upon any part of her conduct, which might with justice challenge esteem and admiration, but appeared nicely conscious of every little imprudence; and, when she had ended, waited for his reply, with an anxiety that shewed she rather expected censure than praise” (226). Despite his approbation of her conduct, though, Henrietta is *still, significantly*, suspect. Suspicious that Henrietta would “listen to [Melvil] but too readily,” and not taking her response at face value (236), he asks her--ironically--to retire to the safety of a convent: “it will be more difficult,” he reasons, “for the marquis to get access to you in a convent than here; and as it is probable enough that this affair will make some noise, it will be more for your reputation to have it known that you lived in such a respectable society, where there were so many witnesses of your conduct, and such exact regularity required, than in private lodgings, where you were accountable to no body for your actions” (237). In the remaining 40 pages, Henrietta entirely disappears from the plot of the story, secreted away in the convent by her brother, who has already coopted the narrative focus itself. Eventually, Charles and Mr. Damer work together to acquire a fortune for Henrietta which will allow her and Melvil to marry, and the story ends with a list of each characters’ just desserts. Even her brother, reunited with her at the end of the novel, refuses to take Henrietta's avowed moral agency at her word, and instead creates a situation whereby he can “trust but verify and

ensure.” Like Manning and Meadows, Eccles and B, and all the others who transposed her actions into a semiotic register of self interest--how else could her “obstinate refusals” make sense?--her brother, too, remains suspicious.

This plot development is important, because it is at this point that Henrietta as an autonomous being navigating the dangerous, brackish waters of a self-interested world is virtually "disappeared"--much of the last book of the novel physically shifts our narrative focus away from Henrietta's “obstinate refusals.” What do we do with this? Why is her brother the one Lennox sends to procure her for Melvil? Why does he, like Meadows, want to ensconce her in a convent, and why does Henrietta consent now, where she couldn't possibly, earlier? What does the incest trick have to do with all of this? It is almost as though Melvil is an ancillary character, there to become a future husband, and the real story is the brother-slash-father-slash-prosthetic lover functioning as a catalyst of some sort, working to re-code Henrietta, to rewrite her autonomy within a patriarchal gender economy. If so, it is a perverse gender economy, indeed, and perhaps that is the point. This problematically literalizes the sexual contract of patriarchal authority, whereby the brother assumes sexual authority over the sister. Henrietta's disappearance in the last portion of the novel mimics something of the unbearable problem facing the eighteenth-century woman: under what circumstances does her moral autonomy cease to be autonomous?