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# “My Heart So Wrapt”: Lesbian Disruptions in Eighteenth-Century British Fiction

Carolyn Woodward

## Desire in the reading room

THE BIBLIOGRAPHIC ENTRY read, “Heroine is an apologist for women’s rights,” and so I ordered up *The Travels and Adventures of Mademoiselle de Richelieu* (Erskine 1744, 1:1–2).<sup>1</sup> It was summer, and rain splattered on the high windows of the British Library’s north reading room. *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* arrived: three tiny volumes, crumbling leather covers tied up with muslin ribbons. I opened volume one, trying not to sneeze from the dust. A thin ray of sun shone aslant my page from one window, as I began to read about women’s rights: the right to write, to travel alone, to cross-dress. Pages were brittle and cracking and sometimes falling from the bindings. I read on: the right to choose not to marry, to choose not to bear children. By now the clouds had vanished and blue sky filled the windows. Sun streamed through, making the air in the north library heavy and warm. I stayed with *Mademoiselle* and eventually discovered the right to parody gender expectations, the right to desire and love women, and the right to write about desire—these rights

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<sup>1</sup>The work was published in 1744 in London and also as a Dublin edition “Printed for Oli. Nelson,” sold by a number of booksellers including George Faulkner, and as a second London edition “Printed and Sold by S. Ballard.” The note that led me to this work appears in Smallwood 1989, 191.

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represented in a playful and tender story that ended with two women settling down together in sweet contentment for the rest of their lives. But given all this truly daring subject matter, I wondered why this treasure had gone unnoticed for more than two centuries. Something, I thought, about our standard paradigm of reading had kept this story from us.

Reading for “women’s rights,” I had in *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* found lesbian desire: my own desire, for representations of our desire. Because lesbian love unsettles prevailing expectations, its representations in eighteenth-century fiction are problematic. Canonized novels, those given sanctity by English departments and considered crucial to the so-called rise of the novel in English, consistently recapitulate patterns of male quest and female subordination.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I will break open the domain of patriarchal narrative by looking at what happens when women, desiring other women, undermine the dominant fiction described by Samuel Richardson’s grand plotter and rapist Lovelace as “the old patriarchal system” (Richardson [1747–48] 1985b, 970).

*Mademoiselle de Richelieu* gives us a particularly rich example of the ways that realist conventions cannot contain stories of lesbian love. For if we choose to call this narrative a novel, we call into question what we mean by that term. In its attempt to tell (and possibly to camouflage) its transgressive story, this text simultaneously follows and departs from modes such as the picaresque, travel narrative, scandalous memoir, tales of cross-dressing, and Shakespearean comedy. Even though they reflect a time when experiments with form were common, the formal experiments of *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* are unsettling. Linear expectations of plot are deferred or thwarted. Fragments are common, seeming digressions become central, and the ending hints at but finally refuses closure: contentment is both a state and a process, “home” is mobile, and the joyful couple is neither married nor not married.

Masquerades were popular entertainments in eighteenth-century England, and commentators viewed with mingled horror and fascination various sorts of antidecorous behavior that encouraged ambiguities about social class, age, and gender: for example, Eliza Haywood (1745, 1:324) and Henry Fielding (1728) both voiced alarm that public masquerades, with their spectacles of Amazonian women, would lead to sexual chaos.<sup>3</sup> In both form and content, *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* plays at masquerade. Authorship is its first mystery. The title page claims that these “Adven-

<sup>2</sup> It is fitting that perhaps the most influential (“seminal”) critical work on eighteenth-century British novels is Ian Watt’s suggestively titled *The Rise of the Novel* ([1957] 1971). And the religious connotations of a word like “canonized” suggest a sanctity that should not be questioned. Recent critical works that resist the masculinist hegemony of canonized fiction include Spencer 1986; Spender 1986; Todd 1989; Hunter 1990, 1990–91; and Spacks 1990.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of transvestism at public masquerades, see Castle 1986.

tures” were originally written in French and translated “from the Lady’s own Manuscript” by “the Translator of the Memoirs and Adventures of the Marques of Bretagne and Duke of Harcourt.” If one looks at the title page of the *Memoirs and Adventures*, one reads that they were translated “from the Original French, By Mr. Erskine” (Erskine 1743). This particular masquerade raises tantalizing questions. Did a Mr. Erskine really translate a French “Lady’s” manuscript? Was “Mr. Erskine” a man or a woman? Was the French “lady” a woman or a man? Was there, in fact, a French manuscript at all? This mystery nicely foreshadows questions of gender that the text itself raises as the “lady” cavorts across Europe in the guise of a cavalier.

And, just as the author (or translator?) may be in masquerade, and the narrator (who may or may not be the author) cross-dresses, so the “work” itself plays at masquerade. The title claims that this is a travel memoir, and much of the text consists of descriptions of Paris, Milan, London, and other European cities. In addition, though, to reflections on culture, the travelogue features pieces of short fiction. (Is this a travel narrative? Or a collection of short stories? What is masquerade, what is “real”?) These stories focus on various trials and tribulations, and—with the (cross-dressing) narrator’s help—happy outcomes of heterosexual amours. (But, we might ask, are these stories “really” fiction? The narrator behaves as if they really happened.) And finally, in this complex game of masquerade, where is the heart of the text? Taking up very few pages, digressively slipping in and out of the travel narrative, and providing an envelope for everything else, is the lesbian love story: sweet, playful, and celebratory. Here, however, the masquerade may have been all too successful. No one—not in 1744, not anywhere I can find in the 248 years since then—has publicly noted this story. Its invisibility, I believe, points to our need for a new paradigm of reading that does not close itself on the heterosexual romance.

Besides *Mademoiselle de Richelieu*, I will consider briefly five other novels to suggest connections between transgressive narrative, literary conventions, and the pleasure of reading. In these five novels, the closest suggestions of lesbian love inhere in evocations of sentimental friendship between women or in representations of women-centered communities. Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* ([1747–48] 1985b) and Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752) are novels that tease the reader with representations of women’s frustrated longing for one another but then silence that longing as a way of keeping “realist” patriarchal order in the narrative: in the end, a woman must turn from her female friend(s) and become either “his” in the marriage bed or “dead” in the narrow bed of the coffin. But when love between or among women is made central, the writer turns from realism toward new modes of narrative production

such as essayist digressions, multiple plot lines, and the avoidance of closure, as we can see in Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* ([1762] 1986), Sarah Fielding's *The Adventures of David Simple* ([1744, 1753] 1987), and Sarah Fielding and Jane Collier's *The Cry: A New Dramatic Fable* ([1754] 1986), works that experiment with narrative form, sometimes to the point of inaccessibility.<sup>4</sup>

### Reinventing the word/world

The connections we trace are important. Writing about lesbian(s) as sign and subjects, Bonnie Zimmerman brings into her own essay Nicole Brossard's transformative challenge, "A lesbian who does not reinvent the word/world is a lesbian in the process of disappearing" (Zimmerman 1992, 10). In contrast, in 1742 when Henry Fielding attempted to define *Joseph Andrews*, he insisted that he was writing a "comic epic-poem in prose" (Fielding [1742] 1986, 25). In claiming the epic as his literary model, Fielding invited his readers to think of the *Odyssey*, for example, and thereby suggested that *Joseph Andrews* would reinscribe a dominant fiction of Western history and literature. Although Fielding was conscious that he was doing something new, his move spoke against transformation and for the rule of the same, the word of the fathers: dominant fictions in which fathers rule families and kingdoms, and sons wander in search of what they lack. "Woman," figured in these stories as both obstacle and prize, "lacks the lack," and therefore is sought/won/resisted/killed. The patriarchal narrative of Oedipus, in which woman is represented always and only as a figure of desire, is from Sophocles to Freud a dominant fiction.<sup>5</sup>

Narrative is how we give shape to (random) events and make for ourselves lives that have meaning. What lives are available to us depends on the stories we can imagine, and the stories we can imagine depend on our location in ideology. Rachel DuPlessis refers to narrative structure as "the place where ideology is coiled" (DuPlessis 1985, 5): dominant fictions are those stories that inscribe dominant ideology, in narrative and in life. In the eighteenth century, bourgeois ideology was becoming dominant at the same time that the novel was taking shape primarily as a genre that uses realist conventions.<sup>6</sup> One feature of literary realism is its illusion

<sup>4</sup> Although I follow literary historians such as Spencer 1986 in choosing to believe that Fielding and Collier coauthored *The Cry*, some scholars argue for Fielding as sole author. See Hunter 1990–91.

<sup>5</sup> For feminist critiques of Oedipal theory, see Benjamin 1986 and Cixous (1976) 1989. Cixous writes, "What psychoanalysis points to as defining woman is that she lacks lack. . . . The Lack, lack of the Phallus" (483).

<sup>6</sup> In Hunter 1990–91, Hunter argues that eighteenth-century fiction was more complexly experimental than this summary suggests. But the novels that succeeded in dominating the canons of literary studies were overwhelmingly "realist."

of transparency: realist fiction appears to give us life as it really is. Because of this, the ideology embedded in realist fiction seems “natural,” rather than itself a construction. The individual in realist fiction represents the subject positions of the dominant fictions of our society—the narratives of patriarchy—in which those who act and desire are masculine. The subject positions of realist fiction allow little space for a female subjectivity that may be contradictory, resisting, and desiring.<sup>7</sup>

In eighteenth-century fiction, experimental devices such as gaps in narrative, genre mixing, and avoidance of closure are frequently used by writers who wish to represent female subjectivity. For example, Linda Joyce Brown acknowledges gaps in the narrative of Elizabeth Inchbald’s *A Simple Story* ([1791] 1991): “Whatever is ‘not here’ . . . is central to the process of en-womaning, becoming a female subject in a patriarchal culture” (Brown 1992, 17). When female subjectivity includes anything like lesbian desire, how much more imperative is the demand for experimental form: Kiley Moran argues that to construct the unconventionally virtuous Galesia—an “unwed and child-free” woman who studies medicine, writes verse, and enjoys “a red-hot affair of the heart” with her female muse—Jane Barker in *A Patch-work Screen for the Ladies* ([1723] 1973) stitches together genres “that would be kept separate in conventional patriarchal narratives” (Moran 1992, 1, 13). And Susan Sniader Lanser (1992) notes that Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni writes beyond the heterosexual ending of *Lettres de Milady Juliette Catesby à Milady Henriette Campley, son amie* (1759) by ignoring Juliette’s wedding night and instead focusing the closing pages on Juliette’s letter of yearning for her “chère” Henriette.

Lesbian desire transgresses the boundaries of stories that are imaginable in dominant fictions, and the representation of that desire transgresses the expectations of realist conventions. In both these ways, stories of lesbian desire can be thought of as transgressive narratives, to use Marilyn Farwell’s phrase (1990). But we have all been taught how to read by means of dominant fictions that inscribe the word/world of the fathers.<sup>8</sup> How much pleasure/how much discomfort awaits us in narratives that are full of gaps, genres that slip around, and endings that won’t stay shut? Transgressive narrative, the representation of lesbian desire, may not, finally, be recognized as *representation*. That is, Barker’s fiction may be (and certainly has been) dismissed as not quite the stuff of canonical novels. Or the “chère” in Riccoboni’s “chère Henriette” may go largely unnoticed. Even today, lesbian desire transgresses comfortable expecta-

<sup>7</sup> Belsey 1985 and de Lauretis 1984, 1987 usefully discuss problematics of the representation of female subjectivity in dominant fiction.

<sup>8</sup> Feminist strategies of readings are proposed by Fetterley 1978; Kolodny 1980; and Schweickart 1986.

tions.<sup>9</sup> Can we begin to imagine just how unimaginable lesbian subjectivity was in the England of two centuries past?

### **Patriarchy and lesbianism: Eighteenth-century contexts**

Lesbianism in eighteenth-century Britain must be read in the context of a patriarchy grounded in the emergence of urban capitalism. In the nuclear family, women were generally under the physical and economic control of their fathers (and sometimes their brothers) and, later, their husbands (and sometimes their sons). Few paid occupations were open to middle- and upper-class women, most of whom needed the economic protection of marriage. Selling one's writing was an option, however; a majority of published mid-century women novelists were either single women or married women whose husbands could not or would not support their families.<sup>10</sup>

As a sign of exchange value on the marriage market, female chastity was supremely important; and a heterosexual adventure could mean ruination, that is, loss of value on the market for a single woman or banishment from home and children for a married woman. In all likelihood, however, dalliance between women was overlooked or even smiled upon, because these encounters were not considered quite "sexual." In the eighteenth century, one dominant fiction was that all sexual desire began with the phallus: thus, desire between women was hardly imaginable. But some behavior did threaten male dominance: "serious" cross-dressing (i.e., cross-dressing with the intent of actually passing as male), fraudulently marrying a woman while under such guise, and using a dildo to sexually penetrate one's partner. If discovered, the cross-dressing "female husband" would be punished and perhaps examined for supposed evidence of hermaphroditism (such as an enlarged clitoris). Randolph Trumbach (1991) argues that, while hermaphroditism as a third-sex category had been common in the seventeenth century, it began to disappear in the middle of the eighteenth century, at about the same time that writers such as Henry Fielding (1746) and John Cleland ([1749] 1985) began referring to aggressive lesbians not so much in sexual terms (biological monsters) as in gendered terms (corrupt and sick women). The eighteenth century, in fact, was a period of increasingly intense anxieties about sex and gender distinctions, in which science redefined women and

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., essays in Jay and Glasgow 1990 and Munt 1992. Farwell 1990 and de Lauretis 1987 usefully discuss ways in which lesbian desire transgresses narrative expectations.

<sup>10</sup> Staves 1990 discusses the economic status of married women in the eighteenth century, and Stanton 1991 observes that eighteenth-century women who wrote more than two novels did so out of financial necessity.



men as biologically incommensurate, and gender ideology constructed rigid parameters of normalcy.<sup>11</sup>

Given the century's increasingly rigid sex-role expectations, middle- and upper-class women and men may have lived very separate lives. Intimate friendship between women, then, could ease a wife's loneliness and act as a support to the patriarchal family. Lillian Faderman (1981) has argued that eighteenth-century lesbianism manifested itself as romantic friendship, which she posits as common among women of the middle and aristocratic classes, at least. Faderman's thesis has provoked healthy debate about how to conceptualize European and Euro-American lesbianism before the twentieth century. But her idea is problematic. She separates relationship from lust and claims that respectable eighteenth-century women would not have recognized sexual desire. Because this argument locates sexually desirous women beyond the pale of respectability, it marginalizes "serious" cross-dressing women perhaps more than their own culture did. Further, Faderman's insistence on the sexual blindness of most middle- and upper-class women encourages, on our part, blindness to erotic intensities that may exist in their writings.<sup>12</sup> Another major problem is that Faderman's discussion is limited to women in the middle and aristocratic classes and so implies that romantic friendship was exclusively a phenomenon of these classes. Much more work is needed regarding the question of intimate friendships among laboring-class women.<sup>13</sup>

There is today a disconnection in lesbian theory between those—like Faderman—who stress relationship, and those who follow Catharine Stimpson (1982) in insisting on the carnality of desire.<sup>14</sup> Neither of these approaches is sufficient to describe lesbians in the eighteenth century: Faderman presumes that earlier women were sexually naive, and Stimpson privileges a sexual tension that may be peculiar to the twentieth century. In her discussion of the historical roots of the modern lesbian identity, Martha Vicinus says that people in the eighteenth century conceptualized desire between women in terms of "*relationships* that involved no sex acts" or in terms of "*homosexual acts*" performed by "female husbands" (Vicinus 1989, 175). Many eighteenth-century women may have been lovers in mind and spirit. But we cannot help but wonder what their bodies were up to. Our curiosity is frustrated by a paucity

<sup>11</sup> Laqueur 1987 discusses some problematics of the eighteenth century's new biology.

<sup>12</sup> For discussion of this point, see Andreadis 1989 and Castle 1989.

<sup>13</sup> Landry 1990 addresses the question of intimate friendships among laboring-class women: see her discussion of poetry by Ann Yearsley and Mary Leapor, esp. 33–34 and 82–91.

<sup>14</sup> Binhammer 1992 points to this disconnection in order to argue the limitations in writing a lesbian literary history.



of evidence. Christine White argues convincingly for “a ‘pro-sex’ history of lesbianism” that grants to earlier women “at least some credit for awareness and strategic practice” in their attempts “to create a cultural space for themselves” (White 1990, 206, 204). The silence of eighteenth-century women about their sexual lives may have been an effective strategic practice. Assuming that many of these women’s passionate relationships with other women were indeed sexual may, as White suggests, be respectful of earlier women’s intelligence and creativity. And, rather than adopt a platonic perspective, we might as well let the page heat up with lesbian desire—for example, when Elizabeth Carter writes to Elizabeth Montagu, “Are you in your dressing room alone, my dear friend, and wishing for me, with as much impatience as I am wishing for you?” (Pennington 1817, 1:241) But, finally, the corporeal specifics of that desire are not essential to its significance.

I would define as lesbian any desire for intimate connection between women. We can read the eighteenth century for signs of that connection both in relationships between women and in acts of lust. Additionally, we can be alert to ways in which the lesbian behavior of some women and the representations of lesbian desire in some literary texts may have enacted modes of resistance to a gender ideology that constructed “woman” always and only in relation to “man.” Through the primacy of connection between women, eighteenth-century lesbian desire sometimes resisted patriarchal hegemony. Resistance may not have been pure, because human subjects are as much subjected to (dominant) discourse as we are subjects of (our own) discourse. Nonetheless, the impure, conflicted, and often camouflaged modes of resistance enacted by eighteenth-century women in life and in literature helped make it possible for later women to speak their desire for women.<sup>15</sup>

While some romantic friendships supported the patriarchal family, others represented lesbian resistance. At mid-century, Charlotte Charke and her woman friend lived and traveled together as Mr. and Mrs. Brown, and Sarah Scott left her husband and lived with Barbara Montagu. Later in the century, Sarah Ponsonby and Eleanor Butler eloped to Llangollen, where they lived together all their lives.<sup>16</sup> While these women may not have thought of themselves as resisting the patriarchal family, they created alternatives to that family, and their behavior is being used by modern lesbians to construct our history. Or perhaps I should say, our *histories*: we may notice ways in which “Mr. and Mrs. Brown,” Sarah

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of lesbianism as a mode of resistance, see Ferguson 1990. For a counter discussion of how deviant subjectivities both express and resist dominant sex/gender ideology, see Terry 1991.

<sup>16</sup> See Charke (1755) 1969; Mavor 1971, 1986; Spencer’s introduction to Scott (1762) 1986, v–xv; and Larson 1991.

Scott and Barbara Montagu, and Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby created alternatives to patriarchal family structure that differ one from another according to such variables as class and vocation.<sup>17</sup>

But mid-eighteenth-century fiction does not offer us similarly varied histories. Nearly all mid-century British women novelists were from the (upper) middle classes. A few were from the aristocracy. No laboring-class women at mid-century seem to have published fiction, although some did publish poetry. Further, the novelists draw characters who represent a tiny elite part of society. For example, in *Mademoiselle de Richelieu*, *Millenium Hall*, *David Simple*, and *The Cry*, it is money or property, gained through patterns of patrilineal inheritance, that allows women to break from patriarchal family structures. Only rarely can we find examination of class difference. Although the title page of *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* says that Mademoiselle is “attended by her Maid Lucy as her *Valet de Chambre*,” Lucy’s voice is never heard. And in *The Female Quixote*, the “low” dialect of Arabella’s devoted maid is comically represented. In these works of fiction, the stories of laboring-class women are, at best, glimpsed in half-light and from the standpoint of an observer whose middle- or upper-class bias is never acknowledged. And sometimes the assumption of class privilege slides into an equally silent assumption of class superiority. The charitable “ladies” of *Millenium Hall*, for example, depend on domestic surveillance in their management of almshouses for aging, laboring-class women. Various unacknowledged representations of surveillance in *Millenium Hall*, in fact, underscore ways in which hierarchies work together: while laboring-class women and “monsters” (persons with disabilities) are on display for the ladies, the ladies themselves are on display for the men who visit and write about the utopian community.<sup>18</sup>

These novels are typical of eighteenth-century fiction in that they are part of what Nancy Armstrong (1987) discusses as the dominant ideological construction of woman as middle class. They break from dominant ideology in their attempts to construct lesbian desire. Without the voices of laboring-class women, however, these fictions leave us with frustrating questions: what sorts of connections did laboring-class women imagine among themselves? What kinds of connections did some women risk making across class boundaries? *Mademoiselle de Richelieu*, for example, does indeed present us with a narrow scope, the story of aristocratic women at play. But in their play, these women dare to give

<sup>17</sup> Lorde 1984; Gallop 1986; Molina 1990; and Zimmerman 1992 speak to the importance of acknowledging differences.

<sup>18</sup> Moore 1992 and J. Smith 1991 discuss gender/class problematics in *Millenium Hall*. Regarding class and gender intersections in the writings of early eighteenth-century British women, see King 1992 and Sharrock 1992.

each other their primary attention. By creating Mademoiselle and her friend/lover, the writer of this text has dared the construction of unimag-inable desires. In order to accomplish this, the author has shaped a text that is neither one genre nor another, or, perhaps better said, both/and another: to pun with Luce Irigaray (1977), this text which is not one.

### A, gasp, story of true (lesbian) love

In a mode that Nancy Miller would call narrative criticism, the speaker in *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* begins by situating herself as woman/writer/critic in a feminist essay that refuses domesticity.<sup>19</sup> The narrator claims her prerogative to write and to do so specifically as a woman. She will not appeal “to the Male Sex, who think it a monstrous Presumption in a Woman to pretend to write,” but, rather, “would have those vain Creatures to know, that though, out of our great Condescension, we may allow them the masculine nervous Stile [*sic*], yet the soft and tender is all our own” (Erskine 1744, 1:1–2). By her use of “we” to mark a group distinguished from “the Male Sex,” the narrator intends that both she as implied author and we as implied audience will be female.

The narrator explicitly rejects the construction of a “femininity” that by the end of the eighteenth century equated female identity with domesticity and motherhood.<sup>20</sup> Asserting her right to travel in male disguise, she laughs at those “flegmatick Fellows” and “antiquated Matrons” who “will cry, Fie upon this impudent Girl to shake off the Modesty of the Sex, and gallop over the World” (Erskine 1744, 1:2). The narrator’s impudent deviance inheres even more in her desire to gallop over the world than in her decision to do so in the attire of a male. The title page has informed us that Mademoiselle de Richelieu “made the Tour of Europe, dressed in Men’s Cloaths [*sic*],” and here the narrator alludes briefly to her disguise “as a Cavalier” (1:3). But the energy of her defense is focused on her decision to travel: in traveling alone, she shakes off the modesty of her sex, because her “Curiosity” and “insuperable Passion to see the World” have “dragged” her from “the calm and easy Occupations of the tender Sex,” in order to satisfy “the mad Whims of a romantic Brain” (1:2–3). The narrator perceives that her readers will find her behavior scandalous—not cross-dressing but travel, which denies woman’s natural domesticity. The narrator, however, flouts domesticity,

<sup>19</sup> See especially Miller’s essay “Getting Personal: Autobiography as Cultural Criticism,” in which she argues that personal/theoretical writing raises questions “about the constitution of critical authority and the production of theory” (1991, 2).

<sup>20</sup> For discussions of ways that eighteenth-century fiction, autobiography, and conduct books contributed to and/or resisted this construction of femininity, see LeGates 1976; Spacks 1976; Poovey 1984; Armstrong 1987; and Nussbaum 1989.

admonishing her critics, “your Notion of a Woman is, that she is a domestic Tool designed for no other Use but to satisfy the brutal Inclinations of her Lord and Master Man.” Further, she states that she abhors “the shameful Drudgery to which my Sex is fatally subjected in propagating the Species.” Her rejection of women’s supposed biological destiny is wonderfully satiric. She says that her detractors “could chime in with that old doating Fool of a Stoic who very gravely said, ‘Women were a Sort of Tubs prepared to hold the Juice of Life till it ripens into Maturity.’” But her story “is a Tale of a Tub with a Witness,” that is, she is claiming her tub—her fecundity—with a vengeance, as her own. She insists on her right to choose, and her choice is decidedly against child-bearing: “if the World were to depend on my Tub, the Source of Life should be at an End” (1:2).

At mid-century, people seem to have been simultaneously repulsed and attracted by the gender ambiguities of cross-dressing. For example, Henry Fielding’s *The Female Husband* (1746) represents the aggressively cross-dressing lesbian as a monstrous deviance from normal femininity. In his work in the theater, though, Fielding encouraged women to play what were referred to as breeches parts, and at least two of those women—Meg Woffington and Charlotte Charke—published memoirs about their experiences. Charke cross-dressed in life as well as on stage, and her *Narrative* is one of a spate of cross-dressing accounts popular at mid-century (Charke [1755] 1969). When the narrator in *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* attacks eighteenth-century gender ideology (and when she identifies its grand perpetrator as woman’s “Lord and Master Man”), she is participating in something of a convention in cross-dressing memoirs: the implication that gender is a construct is typically embedded in a critique of women’s vulnerability to abuse by men. But when she implies that her audience is female, the narrator makes a move that is distinctly hers. Other cross-dressing accounts are addressed either to men or to readers of no particular gender. But here, in language that is both playful and bold, the narrator identifies herself as part of a community of women, specifically women who write.<sup>21</sup>

Three pages into *Mademoiselle de Richelieu*, the mode shifts from essay toward plot with the invitation, “Let me now set out upon my Adventures, as a Cavalier” (Erskine 1744). It is here that the writer begins to challenge our expectations for “realistic” form. In the narrative

<sup>21</sup> Although women’s literacy was less than men’s, it increased significantly over the course of the eighteenth century, and both novels and conduct books, in particular, were often addressed to women. On the question of women as readers, see Armstrong 1987 and Hunter 1990. For an analysis of conventions in cross-dressing accounts, see Easton 1990.

that follows, essay and story modes intermingle, and no hierarchy is established by which we might settle into reading the text as primarily either “essay” or “novel” (“novel”? or “autobiography”?—this particular genre distinction is unclear as well). Further, what sort of story is meant by the narrator’s “Adventures, as a Cavalier”: conventional travel narrative? Or short stories of heterosexual romance? Or lesbian romance? In a text such as *Mademoiselle de Richelieu*, how does one distinguish between centers and margins, stories and digressions? Once I caught on to its story of girl-meets-girl, I read quickly through details of the succession of the kings of France, picturesque descriptions of the Alps, and listings of the principle manufactures of Milan to get to the juicy bits.

But consequently I may have missed something important in the travel details. To me, the hot center of *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* is its lesbian love story. But in sheer number of pages, travelogue outdoes love story by something like six to one. In his discussion of conventions in eighteenth-century travel literature, Charles Batten (1978) points out that too much autobiography would divert attention from the places that were the proper subject of the work. But what is the proper subject of this text? Reading for travel literature, one might miss something important in its frame story or in its digressive excursions. Percy Adams, in *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel*, reads right past the lesbian love story. Adams refers to the narrator as a “lively, curious apologist [*sic*] for women’s rights who as she travels provides a brief history of places visited, describes important spots, and tells of her inns and the people she meets in them” (Adams 1983, 190). Indeed she does, and many of those people are beautiful young women who fall in love with the mysterious “cavalier.” Of the convention of providing the narrator with some sort of companion, Adams writes, “Closely related to the teacher initiator . . . is the loyal companion. . . . Even in the third volume of Erskine’s *Madame* [*sic*] *Richelieu* . . . the heroine [Alithea] persuades Arabella to accompany her on travels through Italy and Spain, both in men’s clothes” (232). Well, it is in the second volume that Arabella is persuaded, and this (mutual) persuasion is spoken in the language of “tender Friendship,” “flattering Pleasures,” and “innocent Embraces” that are yet “more proper for a Lover than a Friend” (Erskine 1744, 2:240, 245). So Percy Adams reads this text and misses the lesbian connection; I read it and turn over whole sections of travel lore.

Reading as I do, foregrounding the “marginal” love story, I wonder why the writer chose to embed this story in travel narrative. Camouflage? Another possibility, though, is that freedom of movement could bring with it freedom of erotic expression. Alithea and Arabella are traveling in

disguise through sophisticated cities and gorgeous countrysides, blessed with aristocratic privilege and as much money as they could wish: how could they not experience a certain heady boldness?<sup>22</sup>

The travel narrative begins (and the stage is set for love and romance) on page three, when the narrator—having claimed a woman's voice but rejected woman's confinement—tells us that at the age of twenty-five, after coming into an inheritance, she determined to make a tour of Europe. Knowing that as a woman traveling alone she would be subject to both social ostracism and sexual violence, she decided to disguise herself as a cavalier. She says that on her travels, fair ladies received her/his "Addresses" as they would those of "a Lover very capable of bringing an Intrigue to the last Perfection," but that she always artfully managed things just when they were "coming to a Crisis," so that she/he was never suspected of "the unpardonable Crime of Incapacity" (Erskine 1744, 1:4–5). With loaded words like "incapacity," "crisis," and "last perfection," this might seem an outline for (male) pornographic fiction. But there are in this text no surreptitious hands on bosoms, as there are, for instance, in Richardson's prurient/moralistic novel *Pamela* ([1740–41] 1985a). And there is nothing here like John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* telling the story of her encounter with Phoebe, who lay down beside her, took hold of her hand, and "having rolled up her own petticoats, forced it half strivingly towards those parts, where . . . everything was so flat! or so hollow!" (Cleland [1749] 1985, 71). Alithea describes herself as "a whimsical Sort of a Creature who loves roving" (Erskine 1744, 1:29–30), and her adventures with fair ladies are above all playful.

Terry Castle notes that female transvestism was not unusual in the eighteenth century, and that disguised women "could travel alone . . . take on work or social functions otherwise denied them, particularly in times of economic depression . . . [and/or] make unobserved and hence unimpugned erotic contacts with other women" (Castle 1982, 606). Lynne Friedli (1988) observes that while men who were prosecuted for homoerotic behavior were charged with sodomy, women who "seriously" cross-dressed were charged with fraud, the major issue being their usurpation of privileges belonging to the male sex. Punishments included standing pillory, being publicly whipped, and serving time in prison. Sometimes hermaphroditism was suspected; one woman was "medically" examined, and another was exhibited at Southwark Fair. A doctor reported dissecting a dead woman's body and removing her genitals but finding nothing "unusual." All this is part of the eighteenth-century con-

<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Vicinus 1989 suggests that wealth or expatriate status may have given early twentieth-century lesbians confidence and that "bohemian" cities may have given these women "space to explore their sexuality" (187).

struction of pathologies, as are pornographic and medical works attacking and exploiting “tribadism.”<sup>23</sup>

But while some cross-dressers intended actually to pass as males, others played with transvestism at masquerade balls or in the theater. It is not surprising that these women were considered cute and sexy. In her playful disguise, Alithea reminds one of the saucy and sweet heroines who don breeches in Restoration comedy or the charming Rosalinds and Violas of Shakespearean comedy. But while these stage disguises play up an “essential” femininity and allow the heroines to move adeptly toward heterosexual pairing, *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* overturns such expectations. Neither Alithea nor her cross-dressing friend Arabella shows the slightest interest in men; their play is for each other’s delights.

In one of Alithea’s first adventures, gender as performance is highlighted when she/he meets a young man who turns out to be a young woman disguised like Alithea is, and a hilarious flirtation ensues. In another adventure, Alithea/the cavalier is challenged to a duel by a jealous lover. Alithea, refusing to be bound by gender categories, tells us that she has “no Taste” for either the feminine duty of matrimony or the masculine duty of dueling (Erskine 1744, 1:30).

Midway through the travel narrative, Alithea befriends a young widow in financial distress. She/he helps the widow and lets her know that she/he is really a woman. The widow, whose name is Arabella, writes to Alithea, “What a terrible thing is Decorum, and how it grieved me to let you go from me without clasping you in my Arms, and assuring you of the most tender Friendship;” and she tells her to expect her “innocent Embraces” soon (2:240). The next night, once the servants have retired, the two women fly into each other’s arms, and this time it is Alithea who exclaims about her feelings: “What Difference between this Moment’s Liberty . . . my dear Madam, and the Constraint of that to which I was tied down when I left you last” (2:241). But although Arabella receives Alithea’s “caresses” with “pleasure,” she worries about what the “censorious world” will say when it sees Arabella, a woman, so much in the company of Alithea, a “man.” What should they do? Alithea could go back to women’s clothing, but this would mean the end of her adventures. Or Alithea and Arabella might marry. But they are aware that this “might be attended with dangerous Consequences;” at least for Alithea, “whom the world would look upon as a Cheat and an Imposter;” unless Arabella were to declare that she had known beforehand that Alithea was female, and even then, “our Whim . . . would make us be pointed at by all who knew us” (2:244).

<sup>23</sup> Other discussions of female transvestism may be found in Charke (1755) 1969; Faderman 1981; Easton 1990; and Trumbach 1991.



Finally, Alitheia and Arabella decide that Arabella will herself put on breeches, and they will ramble through Europe together, with their two maidservants passing as male valets. (Here, as elsewhere, the text is silent regarding its assumptions of class privilege.) Alitheia tells us that when Arabella agreed to this adventure, "I expressed my satisfaction in terms more proper for a Lover than a Friend; . . . I found my Heart so wrapt up in this lovely Woman" (2:245). Later, Arabella addresses Alitheia as "Husband, Lover and Friend" (2:328). When Alitheia sees Arabella in her new attire as gentleman traveler, she clasps her in her arms and is for a time speechless, gazing upon Arabella. Then she cries, "my dearest . . . were you really what you represent I believe I should have quite different Thoughts of Matrimony, for I am very sure I should fall in Love with you" (2:342).

This language is worth pausing over. Upon first realizing that she need not be separated from Arabella, Alitheia acknowledges that her heart has been captured. Romantic friendship is here, certainly, with its desire for relationship. But there is as well something suggestive of carnal desires. Alitheia is aware that a "lovely Woman" has inspired in her the feelings of a "Lover," and these feelings become more intense when Alitheia sees Arabella *en cavalier*. She cries out "my dearest" and clasps Arabella in her arms. And then Alitheia, who all along has maintained a steadfast rejection of the institution of marriage, declares that she wishes Arabella really were the cavalier she now so enchantingly represents, for then Alitheia would desire to be his/her wife. But it does not much matter who is the husband, who the wife; later Arabella, in her turn, addresses Alitheia as "Husband."

For each woman, cross-dressing originally had use value. Alitheia cross-dressed so that she might travel safely, and Arabella cross-dressed so that she might accompany Alitheia. But, in an excess of desire, cross-dressing is soon saturated with pleasure. The women experience pleasure in their mutual gazes and in the gender ambiguities that create yet more desire. It is significant, I think, that at no time in this story does either woman show the slightest erotic interest in a man. Nor does either woman notice anything "masculine" about her friend's behavior *en cavalier*. But neither, as we shall see in a moment, is it "possible" for either woman to be "in love" with a woman. A woman dressed up as a cavalier, however, allows for a new story: Alitheia gazes in delight at a supposed cavalier, beneath whose guise she knows is the "lovely Woman" in whom her heart is "wrapt." In human relationships as in literary texts, perhaps new stories demand new forms. Each woman gazes upon the other with what Trumbach has called in a slightly different context "the eye of the knowing beholder" (1991, 115), and each delights in the other's gaze. Longing for the union of marriage, each woman imagines herself as wife,

thus slipping right past the “monstrosities” with which eighteenth-century culture invested the figure of the female husband.<sup>24</sup>

And the text imagines the unimaginable—lesbian desire—by a representation that depends on contradictions. When, clasping Arabella in her arms, gazing upon this lovely woman turned cavalier, Alitheia cries, “my dearest . . . were you really what you represent . . . I am very sure I should fall in Love with you,” her words simultaneously enact and resist the mid-eighteenth-century technology of sexual deviance. Women cannot desire each other, and so Alitheia “knows” that she has not fallen in love. Yet her every gesture, gaze, and word spills over with pleasure and resonates with desire. Not “really” in love, then, these two (loving) friends embark on their rambles, in which with regularity beautiful ladies fall in love with one or the other of the “cavaliers” and are dissuaded just in the nick of time. During one of these adventures, Alitheia teases that she fears Arabella is smitten with the young lady. Arabella begins to cry, and, holding Alitheia in her arms, declares in a “languishing Tone” (Erskine 1744, 3:123) that Alitheia is cruel ever to suspect such an infidelity. Alitheia then admits to feeling jealous. They vow that neither will ever marry without first consulting the other.

As I read, I was prepared for the moment when the right young men would come along. Two weddings, I thought. But as I kept turning the pages, and getting nearer and nearer to the back cover of the final volume, that moment did not come. Finally, six pages from the end of the book, Alitheia and Arabella decide that they will stop their wandering, resume women’s dress, and return to their respective estates. Alitheia takes Arabella in her arms and laments that this will mean their separation. Arabella, though, has a plan: they should pass six months of each year together at Alitheia’s estate in Paris and six months together at Arabella’s estate in Languedoc.

At the time of her writing, Alitheia says that they have “regularly observed” this plan “for several Years.” In language recalling the Anglican marriage ceremony, she says they are “without the least Thoughts of altering our Scheme ’till Death parts us” (3:358). Their love has grown through the years: “the longer we are together, the more we love one another, and are happier in our Friendship and Freedom, than we could possibly propose to be in any other Condition of Life” (3:358). She remarks on their wonderful compatibility: “Arabella’s Temper is sweet with a little Mixture of Reserve; mine is gay with a little of the Ingredient called Whim; my Gaiety rouzes her now and then out of a Fit of Thoughtfulness, and her Reserve bridles my Vivacity, so that we play to

<sup>24</sup> For discussions of “the gaze” and also of gender ambiguities in dress, see Easton 1990; Straub 1991; and Trumbach 1991.

one another's Hands" (3:358). She concludes her narrative: "and if there be such a Thing as Happiness in Life we are the Persons who enjoy it" (3:358). At the "close" of their story, Alithea and Arabella are married—but not married. They live here—and there. They intend to live happily-ever-after, but for them this is still a process, not a state that in any way signifies "the end."

The love story that frames *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* is full of the "powerful attraction, playfulness, and ease" with which Toni McNaron, in another context, typifies the lesbian vision of likeness. McNaron suggests a lesbian aesthetic that would read for attractions that enact "a rejection of the very notions of either/or-ness" (1993, 26; 27, n. 5; and 10). Alithea and Arabella, in choosing each other, reject either/or and choose both/and. Their names are of special interest: very like, but playing slight variations. Also, the two women refuse to be defined either by duels and killing or by marriage and birthing, and they manage to live in both the city (Paris) and the country (Languedoc). Alithea and Arabella cannot be alone together without caressing, kissing, and gazing upon each other. They long to be together always, and they accomplish this. Their rambles are full of the spirit of play: they giggle together over their disguises and the havoc that their charms as young cavaliers wreak on gender expectations. And they are at ease with each other, not afraid to speak of their feelings, and content in the sweet compatibility they share. They cross-dress for fun and so as to be together. Neither wants to be a man except in those moments when one of them wishes she could be "in love" with the other. Alithea and Arabella are charming young women, but they are women whose identities are not limited to eighteenth-century constructions of either femininity or masculinity. *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* cracks open patriarchal narrative, making a space for love between women and helping to create possibilities for thinking about women and about identity itself.

The love story in *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* is celebratory. But textual problems exist. First, who wrote this book? Although the title page claims that this is a translation from a French woman's manuscript, I have not found evidence of such a manuscript. And although the translator ostensibly is a Mr. Erskine, I have not discovered "him." *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* was published in 1744. The text delights in masquerade. Alithea supposedly is cousin to the Duke of Richelieu, and Arabella's estate supposedly is in Languedoc. Now, let us consider: the witty and adventurous English writer Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was fluent in French; she wrote travel accounts that sometimes featured short pieces of fiction; and she authored at least one feminist essay. In January of 1744, living in Avignon, France, she went to the town of Nîmes, where—in a domino mask—she attended an entertainment given in honor of the

Duke of Richelieu, Governor of Languedoc, with whom she conversed for possibly three hours.<sup>25</sup> So, while the question of who wrote and/or translated *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* remains a mystery, I have lately begun to speculate that Wortley Montagu may be a candidate for authorship. At the least, it is fascinating to imagine her writing this story for an English audience from a perspective of cultural freedom encouraged by anonymity, aristocratic privilege, and travel in seemingly exotic lands.

But what of the vexing question of genre? Why does this love story exist in the form it does, enveloping (and emerging in little bits within) an/other sort of text, the travel narrative? The love story is only one of various entwined narratives in *Mademoiselle de Richelieu*, and it is formally not the most prominent of these. Patriarchal narrative could not have contained this story, in which the gender of the “author” is questionable, the gender of the narrator is in flux, and the love interest is between two women who meet as subject to subject in an attraction of like to like. But if new stories demand new modes of production, do such new modes then render their new stories inaccessible? The Register of Books in the February 1744 issue of the *Gentlemen’s Magazine* (vol. 14, p. 112) lists as item #10 “The Travels and Adventures of Madam [sic] de Richelieu. In 3 Vols 12 mo. pr. 9s. Cooper.” I find no eighteenth-century critical commentary. In our century, notice may be limited to its mild description as an apology for women’s rights. Perhaps the invisibility of its love story has to do with its innovative form.

### Filling up and spilling over: Some discomforts

Like *Mademoiselle de Richelieu*, the eighteenth-century works *Millenium Hall*, *David Simple*, and *The Cry* depart from realist conventions of patriarchal narrative. Because all three open out onto visions of families not bound by the heterosexual contract, they can be considered part of an emerging lesbian discourse; they are the only mid-eighteenth-century “novels” I know of in which women’s bonding is central. These four texts present difficulties for readers, difficulties that can be traced to genre expectations. *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* “is” a travel narrative, and so one expects essays dealing with geography and aspects of culture: an embedded love story might well go unnoticed. Yet *Millenium Hall*, *David Simple*, and *The Cry* are categorized as novels: given our training in reading for realist conventions, we may open these books expecting to be drawn into stories in which “rounded” characters move in time through a clear pattern of conflict and its eventual resolution or closure. But none of these three “novels” is a novel in the realist tradition. Each, rather, is

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Halsband 1960, 1965; and Montagu 1977.

an experiment in fiction that uses nonrealist devices to explore nontraditional subject matter.

To present a separatist community grounded in women's sentimental friendship, Sarah Scott in *Millenium Hall* uses utopian fiction, a mode in which individual characters are flat and interest centers in essays that define the principles of the community.<sup>26</sup> Women's communal space figures as well in Sarah Fielding's *David Simple*, which experiments with form by first establishing and then destroying a utopian community: *David Simple* ends as a woman and a young girl venture toward new community. Sarah Fielding and Jane Collier's *The Cry* explores questions about women writers, audience, and the representation of female subjectivity in narrative. This exploration occurs on three levels. The authors reach out to us in essays that speak to their desire for a community of readers and writers; the female protagonists Portia and Cylinda tell their stories and learn to listen to each other's stories; and within Portia's story, her lover Ferdinand is taught to let go of his will to dominate, which enables the re-formation of the heterosexual couple as part of a new, extended, women-centered family pattern.

In these three works, the subject/object pattern of heterosexual romance gives way to patterns of friendship between and among subjects, and textual boundaries are fluid rather than rigid.<sup>27</sup> For example, *Millenium Hall* does not follow a single story line but depends on intertextualities among the stories of various women. *David Simple* "ends" with four friends establishing their alternative community, then in "Volume the Last" starts all over again, in a darkly ironic representation of ways in which community is weakened through the debilitating effects of so-called feminine virtues such as innocence and passivity.<sup>28</sup> And in its examination of patterns of friendship, *The Cry* moves between essay, stylized drama, and fiction, in order to represent relationships between women writers and their readers, among women characters, and between female and male characters.

There is much to suggest that these works are often not aesthetically satisfying to twentieth-century readers. Essayist digressions figure prominently in attempts to find modes that will be flexible enough to allow for possibilities beyond the heterosexual romance. But our expectations for realist fiction may block appreciation for these digressions. In discussions about *The Cry*, for example, I notice that some readers complain that the

<sup>26</sup> See Johns 1991 for a discussion of eighteenth-century utopian fiction and Woodward 1992 for specific consideration of *David Simple*.

<sup>27</sup> Farwell 1990 proposes the notion of fluid textual boundaries as a feature of lesbian narrative space.

<sup>28</sup> "Volume the Last" has since its publication in 1753 been printed as the concluding chapter of *David Simple*, which was originally published in 1744.

story is irritatingly broken with long discursive passages, while others welcome the theory but wish they could leap over the plot sequences. The central problem here seems to be that *The Cry* does not establish a hierarchy of modes. Similarly, *David Simple* has been criticized for a hybridization of genres, as if Fielding couldn't quite decide what she was writing.<sup>29</sup> Nor does the form of *Millenium Hall* easily engage readers. Jane Spencer has noted that the story lacks conflict, because everyone is already in paradise, the women having "ended up happily unmarried" (Scott [1762] 1986, xii) before the novel opens. Further, readers often experience difficulty keeping track of the names of specific characters and wish for the "realistic" satisfactions of rounded characters.

Because these three experiments in narrative have not been canonized and thus none of us has been taught how to read them, they make particularly heavy demands on readers. *Millenium Hall*, *David Simple*, and *The Cry* each centrally represents women bonding. In them, women look at, pay attention to, and connect with other women. Women live with other women. Because of the centrality of connections between and among women, the communities in these texts are startling and daring—so much so as to be outside the bounds of "normal" eighteenth-century fiction. But when patriarchal narrative is sacrificed, so may be readerly pleasures. In fact, we may not even pick up the books to begin with. It does seem significant that *Mademoiselle de Richelieu* is on no list of mid-eighteenth-century fiction that I have seen, and that *Millenium Hall*, *David Simple*, and *The Cry* are each unlikely to enter the canon of eighteenth-century literature anytime soon.

### Homophobic effacement and pleasure/power in community

A truism: dominant fictions cannot contain lesbian desire. A very few times in mid-eighteenth-century fiction women's love remains central, at the expense of patriarchal narrative. Much more commonly, though, the transgressive narrative gets shut down. Such is the case in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, firmly entrenched in the canon, and Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, perhaps the first mid-century novel by a woman to start biting its way into the canon. *Clarissa* tells the story of a young woman who escapes from imprisonment by her patriarchal family, who would marry her off for social and financial gain. But Clarissa escapes only to be imprisoned again, this time by the rake Lovelace, who psychologically abuses her and eventually drugs her and rapes her unconscious body. After this, Clarissa slowly dies of something like anorexia nervosa. The one person who has loved Clarissa throughout her

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Kelsall's introduction to Fielding (1744, 1753) 1987, esp. xii–xiv.

story has been her friend Anna; at Clarissa's coffin, Anna sobs uncontrollably, repeatedly kissing Clarissa's lips, cheeks, and forehead. Throughout the long telling of Clarissa's violation, love between Anna and Clarissa is at once emotionally sustaining but materially ineffectual. Bonding between women sounds as a long sob against the violence of patriarchal narrative and in that way effects a critique of it, but does not finally change its dynamics.<sup>30</sup>

In the heterosexual romance of *The Female Quixote*, Arabella gradually awakens into her love for Glanville (her father's choice), and the lovers marry. Along the way Arabella learns to shed her delusion that she can live singly as a heroine of medieval romance. To represent Arabella's resistances, Lennox created a form that often breaks from momentum and closure; Arabella's readings and reenactments of heroic romance digress from the courtship plot of Glanville's pursuit of and eventual marriage to her. Readers sometimes find these digressions tedious, suggesting again our expectations for the satisfactions of the realist conventions of dominant fiction. *The Female Quixote* tells the story of Arabella's longing for connection with women. A motherless child, Arabella sees beauty in every woman she meets, and her admiring gazes are full of hope for friendship. Although Arabella's desire for feminine intimacy is unfulfilled, her longing is reciprocated for one moment in the narrative, as the Countess of \_\_\_\_\_, who seems to be the mother Arabella never knew, turns toward her with affection. But the Countess suddenly is called away, and Arabella never connects with another woman. A (male) Doctor of Divinity teaches her that her attempts to fashion her own narrative had been a dangerous delusion: she learns to reject the fantasies of heroic romance and to submit herself to "reality," primarily through happy domesticity as Glanville's wife. In order to accommodate patriarchal narrative, Lennox shuts down the story of Arabella's love for women.<sup>31</sup>

In a provocative essay on lesbian implications in the fiction of Jane Barker, Kathryn King comments, "With no place in the received narratives of female desire and behavior," the lesbian's story can enact itself "only outside the borders of the cultural text" (1992, 25). Some mid-eighteenth-century novels perpetuate patriarchal narrative by dispatching the lesbian subject herself (finally Clarissa is dead and buried), while others have her trade in her quixotic adventures for submissive domesticity (Arabella marries Glanville). In those texts that make women's love and connections central, things are less simple. Here, lesbian liminality

<sup>30</sup> For provocative readings of the Clarissa-Anna relationship, see Todd 1980 and P. Smith 1991.

<sup>31</sup> Both Ballaster 1992 and Langbauer 1990 discuss gender/genre intersections in *The Female Quixote*.



occurs in the texts' deviant forms. Representations of lesbian desire teeter on the edges of the narrative: in frame stories, digressions that seem at best subplots, essays that break the narrative action, and endings that seem unsatisfyingly loose. Gender ambiguities may encourage genre instabilities that in themselves lead to readerly uncertainties. We may not recognize the representation of lesbian desire as representation. In mid-century British fiction, women's transgressive connections may move well beyond the forms we have been programmed to expect. But if that is so, how do we learn to read for these new forms, much less learn to enjoy them? Jennifer Terry (1991) has spoken about the homophobic effacement of lesbian stories. Effacement occurs when writers deliberately shut down lesbian desires, but it also occurs when we allow ourselves to remain blind to representations. In either case, we have to work to make visible those desires.

But how do we see what we have not seen? Kiley Moran has suggested that we can begin by "consciously opening ourselves to possible pleasures in new texts."<sup>32</sup> Sometimes pleasure may inhere in struggle—in the writer's struggle to tell a new story and necessarily "to assume a certain freedom in writing, not strictly perhaps within the limits prescribed by rules" (Fielding and Collier [1754] 1986, 1:14); in our struggle to claim community with those who have trod paths as risky as our own; and in the text's struggle to demonstrate new aesthetic and political principles. *The Cry*, for example, which at first frustrated me with confusing turns in genre, now delights me with those very turns, which I read as complex, necessary dimensions in Fielding and Collier's representation of female subjectivity in narrative.

With texts as with people, perhaps a desire to connect is what makes it possible to risk involvement with that which is different from the "reality" that seems "natural." Writing this essay, I have been motivated by the desire to connect. That summer's day in the British Library, I desired to connect with the story of Alithea and Arabella. Later, I desired to connect with "Mr. Erskine," whom by now I imagine as a literarily cross-dressing woman. Also, in preparing this article, I've been reading twentieth-century women whose work helps me see that Virginia Woolf did not dream in vain of lesbian literary community.<sup>33</sup> And I've been risking connection with readers—friends and colleagues, students, the anonymous *Signs* readers, and *Signs* editor Kate Tyler—who together

<sup>32</sup> In the seminar "Theories of Narrative and the 'Rise' of (the) Novel(s)," University of New Mexico Graduate Program in English, 1992.

<sup>33</sup> In her article about narrative strategies in *A Room of One's Own*, Jane Marcus "locates lesbianism in the reader" (1990, 175) and discovers a "sapphistory" in Woolf's allusions, one of which honors Mary Hamilton, the "female husband" of Henry Fielding's scurrilous attack.

have challenged and inspired my work. This article has been a collaborative venture. My desire now is to connect with you. I hope that I/we have inspired your own desires for connection with some of the writers who appear here.

As I think about leaving this writing, I come back to Nicole Brossard's idea about reinventing the word/world. In order to reinvent the world, "Mr. Erskine," Sarah Scott, and Sarah Fielding and Jane Collier needed to reinvent the word. As Kay Thurston puts it, in imagining different ways of organizing reality, eighteenth-century women writers often broke with traditional form, in acts that symbolized "their own break with the white male world view" (Thurston 1992, 4). The white male world view I'd like most to reinvent is the world of academic hierarchy, a world that demands critical autonomy and discourages community. In this article, I have—as one reader noted—mixed "theoretical readings, a counter traditional reading of the main text . . . and a personal philosophy."<sup>34</sup> I doubt that I could have written this as a "straight" essay. I want to move away from discursive hierarchy. I want to move toward author/ity in community. I want to talk with you.<sup>35</sup> Out of our conversation, and others like it, we may succeed in inscribing lesbian desire as a "natural" and, in fact, celebratory attribute of specific identities.

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<sup>34</sup> Anonymous comment from one of the associate editors of *Signs*.

<sup>35</sup> Essays by Anzaldúa 1987 and Miller 1991 offer examples of writing that welcomes the reader as a participant in the construction of meaning.

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