

"A LITTLE ACID IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY"

*Narrative as Coquette in Frances Brooke's
"The History of Emily Montague"*

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Can I play with the anxiety of a tender heart? Certainly, or I should not be what I am, a coquette of the first order. Setting aside the pleasure of the thing, and I know few pleasanter amusements, policy dictates this conduct; for there is no possibility of keeping any of you without throwing the charms of dear variety into one's treatment of you : nothing cloyes like continued sweets; a little acid is absolutely necessary.

Anne Wilmot in Frances Brooke's
The History of Julia Mandeville (1762), (119)

As "COQUETTE OF THE FIRST ORDER," Anne Wilmot in Frances Brooke's *The History of Julia Mandeville* (1762) prefigures the central female character in *The History of Emily Montague* (1769). Both characters recognize the emphasis placed on sensibility in the feminine nature; both, however, realize the necessity of manipulating this conventionally feminine attribute in order to empower the position of the female within male-ordered realms of their eighteenth-century societies. Although Brooke's later epistolary novel, *Emily Montague*, is set mainly in the New World of post-conquest Quebec, its central letter-writer, Arabella Fermor, like the earlier Anne Wilmot, is concerned with tempering the "sweets" of excessive emotion with the "acid" of moderating reason necessary not only for variety in conduct but also for the potentially dangerous position that attitudes towards sensibility held for the female in that society. As coquette, Arabella's voice in the epistolary narrative effects a degree of control parallel to that of the female who enjoys the hiatus of relative independence in subservience to father and to husband. This feminine space engenders the effect of a continuous present in which the coquette, who in the role of central letter writer, is also a

paradigm of the short-lived power accorded to females during courtship. In this first Canadian novel, the New World of Quebec represents an edenic space of possibilities of both female empowerment and balanced relations between women and men.

By both building on and departing from previous criticism on *The History of Emily Montague*,¹ this essay shows that Brooke's epistolary narrative itself functions as coquette in its treatment of "dear variety" in the sensibilities of its main characters. Under the guise of respectable independence, the narrative uses the coquette figure, the Old World cult of sensibility and the New World setting to empower the voice of the female position, or to use feminist theorist Margaret Homans' term, to "literalize" the feminine absent in patriarchal structures of eighteenth-century literature and society. As narrative coquette, epistolary form in *Emily Montague* effects protest against eighteenth-century codes of sensibility and conventions of courtship and marriage.

BROOKE'S NOVEL FOREGROUNDS what is absent in the patriarchal structures of eighteenth-century society — values based on female experience — and thus effects what Margaret Homans calls "bearing the word," a designation which articulates the "special relation to language" of women writers:

Articulations of myths of language, and specifically of their relation to the literal and literalization appear generally in the form of four recurrent literary practices, which I designate as "bearing the word." Each instance of bearing the word brings together the thematics of female experience and some aspect of women's special relation to language. (Homans 29)

According to Homans, in the same way that myths of culture identify the female subject with nature and matter, placing it on the negative side of the subject-object dyad of male and female, myths of language position the feminine negatively as that which is referred to, in other words, as the absent referent in the androcentric symbolic order. Reminding us that because "the literal meaning in a text is always elsewhere" (4), language is therefore figurative in its representation of the absent referent, that is, of the literal. And yet, paradoxically, the female thinks and the female writes within the structures of the symbolic order.² Homans' concept of the literalization of the feminine in language identifies a thematics of female experience especially problematic for women writers.

In her analysis of the thematics of female experience and women's special relation to language, the "four recurrent literary situations or practices" she posits as instances of "bearing the word" are: one, the "literalization," or translation into actual event of "overtly figurative language" ; two, the figure of a woman bearing a child who represents language; three, the theme of women bearing language itself, that is, women who perform linguistic translations, or "carry messages or

letters" (Homans 29-31). The fourth instance is relevant for the female-authored epistolary novel in general and Brooke's *Emily Montague* in particular:

Moments when the text itself performs any of these linguistic operations — translation, transmission, copying, and so on ... when the writer as woman replicates, in her own relation to literary language and literary history, what her women characters do with language within the thematic frame of the novel. (31)

With its thematic frame of courtship and marriage and its structure of the letter, Brooke's epistolary narrative provides an empowering vehicle for replication of what her coquette character, Arabella Fermor, does with the conventions of letter-writing. The corresponding voices are representations of valuations of female experience; while Emily's voice is nearly silent, Arabella speaks for what is made absent in conventional views of feminine sensibility. The epistolary form of the narrative achieves what its author and main character do with language, thus effecting literalization of the feminine while appearing to embrace the conventions of the novel of sensibility.³

While literalization refers to the empowerment of the feminine in forms which bear the word of female characters in a text, Janet Altman's term "epistolarity" similarly defines the "use of the letter's formal properties to create meaning" (Altman 4). According to Altman, the use of the letter form to create meaning establishes the epistolarity of a narrative by creating an "illusion of reality and authenticity" for the reader (Altman). The letter form, by this definition, is a representation signifying as much as thematic content does the ideological concerns of the narrative. The link between Homans' concept of making present the feminine absent and Altman's definition of epistolarity becomes apparent in the analysis of epistolary narratives by women, which, like Brooke's novel, manifest their feminist concerns. The epistolarity of *Emily Montague*, it then may be said, lies in the problematization of sensibility by its replication of the transactions of letter correspondence.

Reaching an apex of development in the eighteenth century,⁴ the epistolary form originates in earlier classical letter forms such as Ovid's *Heroides*, which positions the female in terms of victimization and suffering (Altman 3-4; Kauffmann 29-62)⁵ in a dyadic opposition of female/male and love/war. Eighteenth-century women writers of the epistolary novel such as Brooke used the conventions of the epistle form to represent female experience suppressed by most male writers of the form (Jackson 154-55) such as Choderlos de Laclos, whose *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782) silences an authentic female voice by the "consummate ventriloquism" of its author (Jackson 156). In her analysis of Laclos's self-proclaimed preference for the female voice, Jackson argues that his coveting of "feminine" writing is based in his desire for appropriation of the "precious sensibility" of the feminine which was viewed as an essential part of female nature (167). Feminine writing, according to Laclos, was a natural expression of female sensibility, and

therefore more authentic than masculine writing, which could only imitate it. However, Laclos's reverence for the essentiality of feminine sensibility idealizes it; in placing women's writing on the pedestal of a higher moral plane, he effectively figurizes it, silencing an authentic female voice (166-67) ⁶

Writers such as Brooke, on the other hand, use female characters to voice concerns about the power of the female to effect control of her experience within society, the position of the female regarding the problem of sensibility, and the act of writing as a self-reflexive means of action, of "doing" in a society whose vision of the female relegated her to the elevated realm of "feeling."⁷

BROOKE'S COQUETTE, Arabella Fermor, represents the "special relation to language" of women writers in Homans' theory of literalization. Arabella's self-reflexive references to writing address the possibilities of supplanting existing systems of "ethics" by inserting pragmatic versions of sensibility, which ironically still must depend on ideals of female virtue. She writes to Emily commenting on the latter's pending arranged marriage to the wealthy but uninteresting Sir George Clayton. Emily, according to Arabella, has a surfeit of sensibility and therefore would never be happy in an advantageous marriage which, however, lacked "ideal passion" :

To be happy in this world, it is necessary not to raise one's ideas too high. . . . 'Tis, I am afraid, my dear, your misfortune to have too much sensibility to be happy.

... I think all the moral writers, who have set off with promising to shew us the road to happiness, have obligingly ended with telling us there is no such thing; a conclusion extremely consoling, and which if they had drawn before they set pen to paper, would have saved both themselves and their readers an infinity of trouble. ... I wish people would either write to some purpose, or be so good as not to write at all.

I believe I shall set about writing a system of ethics myself.. .. rural, refined, and sentimental; rural by all means; for who does not know that virtue is a country gentlewoman? (EM Letter 15:46)

The same letter to Emily reveals Arabella's awareness of the inauthentic posture of the "rural, refined and sentimental" feminine ideal which she extends to her own role as coquette :

The men here, as I said before, are all dying for me; there are many handsomer women, but I flatter them, and the dear creatures cannot resist it. I am a very good girl to women, but naturally artful (if you will allow the expression) to the other sex; I can blush, look down, stifle a sigh, flutter my fan, and seem so agreeably confused — you have no notion, my dear, what fools men are. . . . Adieu, I am going to ramble in the woods, and pick berries, with a little smiling civil captain, who is enamoured of me: a pretty rural amusement for lovers, (EM 15:47)

Arabella's letter to Emily, with its references to her own "system of ethics" and its ironic references to artful female behaviour, points both to a deliberate play on conventions of feminine sensibility and subversion of them. Arabella's role as coquette resembles her view of writing : both must have serious purpose. And in Brooke's narrative, as in eighteenth-century society, the coquette's purpose is to extend the period of female empowerment as long as possible.

Accordingly, Arabella specifies that her central concern is not with the politics of imperial-colonial relations regarding the English presence in post-Conquest Quebec, but with female experience within this military and patriarchal order:

They are squabbling at Quebec, I hear, about I cannot tell what, therefore shall not attempt to explain : some dregs of old disputes, it seems, which have had not time to settle: . . . My father says, the politics of Canada are as complex and as difficult to understand as those of the Germanic system.

For my part, I think no politics worth attending to but those of the little commonwealth of woman : if I can maintain my empire over hearts, I leave the men to quarrel for everything else.

I observe a strict neutrality, that I may have a chance for admirers amongst both parties, (EM 45:98)

Despite Arabella's disdain of men's political "squabbling," the novel makes abundant geo-political commentary on Quebec, mainly in the letters of her father William Fermor, and her young friend Ed. Rivers, the admirer of Emily Montague. However, Arabella's letters voice a central position in the novel's main concern with affairs of the "commonwealth of woman," and female experience in the male world of politics. The "empire of hearts" Arabella posits lies outside the ideologies of male political and military structures. Indeed, non-alignment with these existing "parties" would appear necessary for this seemingly apolitical empire of the feminine to hold power. Notice, however, that the choice of metaphor here is a military and political one, the effect of which is a subversive challenge to the patriarchal order. Brooke's coquette implies that female power within a so-called neutral realm resides in non-alignment with the male world of "doing." Although the empire of hearts is posited as the territory of "feeling," the metaphor insinuates strategies of female non-alignment requiring not passive withdrawal from, but active resistance to, patriarchal ideological structures, and by extension, the literary forms with which the female coquette would appear to collude.

The problematic discussed by Homans regarding the special relation of women writers to language — writing within the figuralizing conventions of the symbolic order from a position which seeks to literalize the feminine absent from it — is evident not only in Brooke's coquette Arabella Fermor, who is conscious of the female position within the dominant "empire" of men, but also in her male hero, Ed. Rivers, who advocates the assimilation of feminine sensibility in male behaviour and the accommodation of female experience in society. In the guise of

commenting on Indian customs, for example, Ed. voices a feminist concern for the exclusion of women from public life in England :

The sex we have so unjustly exiled from power in Europe have a great share in the Huron government; the chief is chose by matrons from amongst the nearest male relations, by the female line, of him he is to succeed ;... They have a supreme council of ancients, into which every man enters of course at an age fixed, and another of assistants to the chief on common occasions, the members of which are like him elected by the matrons : I am pleased with this last regulation, as women are, beyond all doubt, the best judges of the merit of men ... I am sure the ladies would give their votes on much more generous principles than we do. In the true sense of the word, *we* are the savages, who so impolitely deprive you of the common rights of citizenship, and leave you no power but that of which we cannot deprive you, the resistless power of your charms, (EM 11 : 34)

Ed.'s view on women's superior judgement of merit are based on eighteenth-century cultural assumptions about feminine sensibility. According to Jane Spencer, in the eighteenth century the growing middle class of women in English society had become more dependent than ever on marriage for their "livelihood and dignity" (Spencer 15). In the rising "bourgeois ideology of femininity," female sensibility was suited to the private sphere of the "home of emotional values" (Spencer). Ideals of feminine sensibility stressed the equation of virtue and emotion which, although prized in female behaviour, necessitated the repression of female independence and activity outside the domestic sphere. Arabella's respectable independence and Ed.'s feminised sensibility both posit freer roles for women in eighteenth-century society.

On the other hand, the feminine sensibility voiced by Ed. Rivers is invariably more idealistic than that voiced by Arabella. He writes to his sister Lucy in England about Emily Montague, whom he has just met :

she has an exalted understanding, improved by all the knowledge which is becoming in your sex ; a soul awake to all the finer sensations of the heart, checked and adorned by the native gentleness of women : she is extremely handsome, but she would please every feeling heart if she was not; she has the soul of beauty; without feminine softness and delicate sensibility, no features can give gentleness; with them, very indifferent ones can charm: that sensibility, that softness, never were so lovely as in my Emily. (EM 42:93)

River's definition of feminine sensibility as an effect of "feeling" is a virtue he extends to himself. Later, he writes again to his sister, convinced "there is no happiness for me without this lovely woman" :

The same dear affections, the same tender sensibility, the most precious gift of Heaven, inform our minds, and make us peculiarly capable of exquisite happiness or misery, (EM 71:138)

Arabella, however, although also advocating the idea of feminine sensibility in

males, is careful to temper her views of sensibility in females with sense. She goes on to emphasize the difference between Emily's sensibility and hers :

A propos to women, the estimable part of us are divided into two classes only, the tender and the lively.

The former, at the head of which I place Emily, are infinitely more capable of happiness; but, to counter-balance this advantage, they are also capable of misery in the same degree. We of the other class, who feel less keenly, are perhaps upon the whole as happy, at least I would fain think so.

For example, if Emily and I marry our present lovers, she will certainly be more exquisitely happy than I shall ; but if they should change their minds, or any accident prevent our coming together, I am inclined to fancy my situation would be much the most agréable. (EM 114: 199)

The distinctions in sensibility between Arabella and Emily underline the epistolarity of Brooke's narrative. Arabella, as the central letter-writer, is in a position to not only effect control over the exchanges in which she plays a central part, but also to emphasize the pragmatic features of respectable independence in contrast to the idealized feminine sensibility represented by Emily. The effect of the female "double image," a device used in Brooke's other novels, Lorraine McMullen observes, is "an adroit manipulation of opposing yet complementary women characters, which provides the author with the opportunity both to endorse and to question the values of her age" ("Double Image" 357),⁸ Representative of "adroit manipulation," Arabella governs as the predominant voice while Emily as the figure of ideal feminine sensibility is relatively silent. The force of Brooke's coquette indicates that rather than yielding to an ambiguous stance on the issue of sensibility, the novel presents a vigorous challenge to an ideology potentially dangerous to the female position. As McMullen asserts, in *Emily Montague* as in all four of Brooke's novels, the female characters are contrasted in terms of the "conventional, sentimental, decorous eighteenth-century heroine, and the astute, witty, articulate feminist" (361) quite unlike the traditional moral opposition of female characters by male authors: "the blond and the dark, the good and the bad, virgin and seductress" (361). The text diverts these traditional moral oppositions which reflect Western culture's phallogocentric view of the female, and emphasizes instead a co-mingling of qualities of sensibility and feeling, sense and self-interest. By literalizing the female voice, Brooke's "double image" advances the representation of the feminine towards a realistic view that posits a necessary balance between "tender" feeling and "lively" action, and equity of this balance in both females and males.

In contrast to Rivers's idealized view of sensibility, Arabella criticizes the cultivation of softness in women and hardness in men, advocating the balance between the two extremes exhibited in Rivers. In a letter to his sister Lucy, now married to John Temple, the rakish friend of Rivers, Arabella writes :

Every possible means is used, even from infancy, to soften the minds of women, and to harden those of men ; the contrary endeavour might be of use, for the men creatures are unfeeling enough by nature, and we are born too tremblingly alive to love, and indeed to every soft affection.

Your brother is almost the only one of his sex I know, who has the tenderness of woman with the spirit and firmness of man. (EM I 14:198)

Arabella's comments on sensibility, like her thoughts on happiness, are grounded in female experiences in which the "firmness and spirit of a man" seem desirable qualities to cultivate in women, given the powerlessness of the female in patriarchal institution of marriage, where the "hardness" of men's minds is the dominant term. Ed.'s advice to his newly-married sister reiterates the ideal of equality between male and female sensibilities that he also expresses in his earlier letters. In this letter he differs with the advice of Mme de Maintenon on marriage, whose "letters were frequently published in the eighteenth century" (EM "Explanatory Notes" 424). Ed. quotes from de Maintenon:

[Men] are naturally tyrannical; they will have pleasures and liberty, yet insist that women renounce both : do not examine whether their rights are well founded ; let it suffice to you, that they are established ; they are masters, we have only to suffer and obey with a good grace, (EM 116:204)

Then he counters with his own advice :

Do not . . . my dear, be alarmed at the picture she has drawn of marriage; nor fancy with her, that women are only born to suffer and obey. . . .

Equality is the soul of friendship : marriage, to give deight, must join two minds, not devote a slave to the will of an imperious lord; whatever conveys the idea of subjection necessarily destroys that of love, of which I am so convinced, that I have always wished the word OBEY expunged from the marriage ceremony.

(EM 116:205)

Significantly, these egalitarian ideas about marriage, radical in the eighteenth-century context, are placed by Brooke in the male consciousness of Rivers, and contrast with the "sense" of Arabella's female consciousness in not expecting too much happiness in male-female relations. The idea of equality in marriage represented by Rivers implies not only criticism of the existing relegation of sensibility to the female but also protest against gender roles of domination and submission in the institution of marriage.

However, as central letter-writer of the novel, Arabella effects a degree of control in the text similar to that of the relatively independent female who occupies the space of freedom between domination by father and by husband. Arabella resembles the "paradigm of the central female tradition in the eighteenth-century novel, the reformed heroine" (Spencer 141) who makes the most of her independence and position of power in courtship:

For a woman destined to be subject first to her father and then to her husband, the

period of courtship, when the man was supposed to be subordinate to her, was one of power . . . The coquette, often defying propriety, tried to extend the time of her power and postpone or avoid her subjection. (142)

THE COURTSHIP OF THREE COUPLES continues for most of the four volumes of *Emily Montague*, extending the female hiatus in the dominance of father and that of husband. This female space engenders a continuous present in the novel's structure, which reflects the control of the coquette, who in her role as central letter writer, manipulates the postponement of marriage as long as possible. The formal pairing of couples in conventional marriage not only resolves the coquette's intrigues of courtship but also concludes the narrative's delay of conventional closure, effecting, as Ruth Perry notes, a continuous present that letters, as "events of consciousness" construct in epistolary fiction:

One effect of telling stories about the consciousness of characters is that it gives a continuous sense of time even where there is no formal unity of time or place in this genre. The reader soon disregards the formal dislocations and paces himself instead to the inward rhythms of the epistolary characters who are always reacting to the present. (Perry 120)

Time as a formal consideration in Brooke's epistolary narrative is eclipsed by its continuous relation to the present. Moreover, the New World setting of Quebec is an edenic space in which the extended present of the female space of courtship presided over by the coquette Arabella Fermor, holds sway at remove from the patriarchal structures of the Old World.

The edenic parallel is established immediately with Rivers' opening letter, which identifies his sensitivity to the sublime in the natural environment of Quebec, particularly with the St. Lawrence River, one of the "noblest in the world":

On approaching the coast of America, I felt a kind of religious veneration, on seeing rocks that almost touched the clouds, cover'd with tall groves of pines that seemed coeval with the world itself: to which veneration the solemn silence not a little contributed; from Cape Rosières, up the river St. Lawrence, during a course of more than two hundred miles, there is not the least appearance of a human footstep ; no objects meet the eye but mountains, woods and numerous rivers, which seem to roll their waters in vain, (EM 2:6)

However, at the end of the courtship period in the novel, when the couples have married, and Ed. and Emily have returned to England, Arabella declares her intention to leave this edenic space behind :

I had no motive for wishing a settlement here, but to form a little society of friends, of which they made the principal part. . . . [If we had stayed] Emily and I should ... have formed the woods and rocks into the most pleasing meanders ; have brought into view the greatest number and variety of those lovely little falls of water with which this fairy land abounds; and shewed nature in the fairest form, (EM 151:26g)

Arabella's eighteenth-century vision of landscaping the natural "fairy land" of Quebec never materializes. With no personal motive of colonisation, and no cultural underpinning of "a little society," she and her choice of husband, Fitzgerald, also return to England to begin married life there, thus reifying the conventions of the Old World.⁹

W. H. New contends that problematic at the heart of the novel is the "tension established between nature and society that is never wholly resolved" ("Chequered Gardens" 25). On this view, Brooke's characters can no longer stay in Quebec because its environment challenges the conventional neo-classical view of nature as sublime, an unsullied eden.¹⁰ Indeed, attitudes in the novel towards natives and Canadians shift from admiration of their forms of government and inclusion of women in public life (EM 11) to repulsion at the mutual influence of the Canadians and the natives in alcohol consumption and savagery (EM 152:271-272). Rousseau's concept of the uncivilized noble savage has not been borne out in the experience of the coterie of the English in Brooke's novel. On the contrary, Arabella's father, William Fermor, asserts, "the most civilized Indian nations are the most virtuous; a fact which makes directly against Rousseau's ideal system" (EM 152:272). According to New, the inability to accommodate discrepancy between neo-classical ideals of the New World and its actuality necessitates the novel's ending with the return to England of the married couples. In effect, as New puts it, the incursion of "descriptive realism meant the death of paradise" (37).

Given the present study's focus on issues surrounding feminine sensibility as central to both constative and performative features of *Emily Montague*, the return to England may be read as a bringing home to Brooke's eighteenth-century readers the seriousness of these issues for the female position in society, issues which not only, as New acknowledges, involve questions of "women's freedom and moral virtue" (32), but also involve the restriction of women to gender positions by the attribution of idealized qualities that disadvantage them in their relations with men. The guise of coquette, as New points out, offers the opportunity for Arabella's realistic criticism of existing structures, conveying the novel's "strong sense of change and empirical truth which forces her into her ironic role and gives the novel its increased dimension" (38).

Nevertheless, an identification of the New World as an extended present in which the paradigm of coquette predominates is significant for Brooke's literalization of female experience in her novel. Back in England, within the patriarchal structures of the Old World, Arabella hears of Mme Des Roches, a French-Canadian widow admired by Rivers before his declaration of love for Emily. Arabella Fitzgerald writes :

I have had a letter from an old lover of mine at Quebec, who tells me, Madame Des Roches had just refused one of the best matches in the country, and vows she will live and die a batchelor.

'Tis a mighty foolish resolution, and yet I cannot help liking her the better for making it. (EM 227:405)

The identification of Quebec as a space of extended female power underlies Arabella's wistful comment on Mme Des Roche's determined independence. The edenic space of the New World in Brooke's text works to literalize and empower female experience, from which the now married and "reformed" coquette Arabella is absent.

Paradoxically, Arabella's sense and independent spirit persist after her marriage to the charming Capt. Fitzgerald. Back in England, the now-married couples — Ed. and Emily, Arabella and Fitzgerald, Lucy Rivers and John Temple—continue their correspondence with one another. Ed. maintains his ideals of love, sensibility and marriage :

Upon the whole, people who have the spirit to act as we have done, to dare to chuse their own companions for life will generally be happy.

The affections are the true sources of enjoyment : love, friendship, paternal tenderness, all the domestic attachments are sweet beyond words. (EM 228 408)

However, as Arabella confides to Emily that, in her view, marriage is not as sweet as are the "romantic adventures" of courtship:

Our romantic adventures being at an end, my dear; and we being all degenerated into sober people, who marry and *settle*; we seem to be in great danger of sinking into vegetation: on which subject I desire Rivers's opinion, being, I know, a most exquisite enquirer into the laws of nature.

Love is a pretty invention, but, I am told, is apt to *mellow* into friendship; a degree of perfection at which I by no means desire Fitzgerald's attachment for me to arrive on this side seventy.

What must we do, my dear, to vary our days? ... I am interrupted by a divine colonel of guards. Adieu! (EM 227:406)

Her marriage notwithstanding, Arabella's "romantic adventures," it seems, are not "at an end." Another divine colonel waits on the doorstep; the mellowness of friendship in marriage brings with it supplication to its conventions. As coquette, Arabella determines to extend her self-empowerment indefinitely. This refusal of resolution in the novel's central character reflects what MacArthur identifies as the non-closure of epistolary fiction, in which "epistolary characters describe events with no [narrator's] knowledge of the larger story in which these events may ultimately play a role" (8). The interpretation of events does not culminate at the end of the narrative, but occurs as it goes along, in a "series of enlightened present moments" (9). The final letter of *Emily Montague* does not in fact offer an interpretive culmination of its epistolary narrative as a whole, but instead offers its own "enlightened moment," leaving open the possibility of series:

The beneficent Author of nature, who gave us these affections for the wisest purposes —

"Cela est bien dit, mon cher Rivers; mais il faut cultiver notre jardin."

You are right, my dear Bell, and I am a prating coxcomb.

Lucy's post-coach is just setting off, to wait your commands.

I send this by Temple's servant. On Thursday I hope to see our dear groupe of friends re-united, and to have nothing to wish, but a continuance of our present happiness, (EM 288:408)

Brooke, who plays the self-reflexive role of "coquette of the first order," places the last letter of Emily Montague in the voice of Ed. Rivers. But he attributes the words to Arabella; furthermore, they are quoted from Voltaire (Edwards "Explanatory Notes" 439). The cultivation of the garden of the Old World conventions of feminine sensibility and companionate marriage does not speak to resolution of the problem set forth by Brooke's narrative, but to the non-closure of its continuance in an extended series of present moments.¹¹

Despite the feminised sensibility of Brooke's male hero, the epistolary events of his consciousness would appear to idealize male-female relations. Although Ed. advocates equality in marriage, the consciousness voiced in his letters configures the feminine with essentialist assumptions about the higher nature of female sensibility. Arabella, by contrast, continues to insist on the actuality of female experience — its empowerment in courtship, and its suppression in marriage. The consciousness of Brooke's coquette literalizes the absence of the feminine in conventions of marriage and the epistolary form, both of which continue to be constrained by patriarchal codes of social and literary decorum.

THE SOPHIA NARRATIVE, embedded in the latter section of Brooke's epistolary novel, constitutes an unexpected event, and, with its powerful theme of seduction and abandonment, puts into critical perspective both Arabella's New World idyll of female empowerment and Rivers' egalitarian vision of companionate marriage based on feminised sensibility shared between the sexes. The "melancholy events" (EM 207, 208:359-68) concern the story of a young woman and a child Ed. and Emily discover living in a cottage near their own unimposing but undoubtedly grander country house. The demeanour of the woman, Fanny Williams, bespeaks better breeding than her humble surroundings would indicate. Fanny discloses her circumstances in a letter to Emily, and Ed. encloses the letter in his own missive to Capt. Fitzgerald. The text of this letter about Sophia's seduction and abandonment, presumably too delicate a matter for Emily to relate, is thus embedded within the "event of consciousness" pertaining to the two males, Ed. and Fitzgerald. The reader thus receives the Sophia narrative through the controlling frame of male epistolary consciousness.

Fanny's letter discloses that the child in her care is the offspring of her deceased friend Sophia, who was seduced and abandoned by a "young baronet, whose form

was as lovely as his soul was dark" (EM 207:360). Fanny describes the young Sophia as "elegant and feminine, and she had an air of youth, of softness, of sensibility, of blushing innocence, which seemed intended to inspire delicate passions alone, and which would have disarmed any mind less depraved than that of the man, who only admired to destroy" (EM 207:360). Fanny stresses that Sophia's ruin was "brought on by a sensibility of which the best minds alone are susceptible, by that noble integrity of soul which made it impossible for her to suspect another" (EM 207:365).

Interestingly, although Arabella's letters have advised against sentimental excess throughout the novel in favour of "sense," her voice is silent here about the issue of male authority raised by the Sophia narrative and the dangers in female experience of a cult of feminine sensibility. Fanny's letter, embedded in Rivers's consciousness, is responded to by Fitzgerald's voice which similarly encloses Arabella's reaction to the matter :

The story you have told me has equally shocked and astonished me : my sweet Bell has dropped a pitying tear on poor Sophia's grave. (EM 208:368)

Previous critical comment on the Sophia narrative in *Emily Montague* has passed it off as a "light untroubled little tale, an amusing period piece [bearing] as much resemblance to life as a flower pressed within its pages two hundred years ago would bear to the real article today" (MacKenzie 74). While Ann Messenger treats the Sophia narrative as an object lesson in the overabundance of sensibility in females (169), her emphasis minimizes the role of the male in the seduction. Blaming the "heartlessness" of the "fashionable world" as the milieu of the dark seducer, Messenger's criticism overlooks the patriarchal social structures which paradoxically both condemn and perpetuate libertine behaviour. Lorraine McMullen hurries over the episode, faulting it for slowing "the rhythm of the novel and contributing "little to the advancement of the plot" (*Odd Attempt* 102).

The melancholy event of the Sophia narrative links with the libertinism implied in the rakish Temple, before his reforming marriage to Lucy, and to the issue of forced marriage through which patriarchal economic and social structures were maintained. Brooke's text masks its protest against the position of the female vis a vis these issues of permissive male authority and arranged marriage.

According to Jane Spencer, in eighteenth-century fiction,

Established marriage customs were most persistently questioned in novels of seduction. The seduction theme, the story of the woman whose forbidden feelings overrode her chaste duty, with unusually tragic effects, fascinated eighteenth-century readers, and seduction or its threat figured largely in the novel. (Spencer 112)

Placed near the end of Brooke's novel, the seduction tale is an embedded signal of feminist protest against the idealization of the feminine voiced in Rivers' views of sensibility and marriage. Ironically, in a slightly earlier letter to Rivers, Arabella's

voice foreshadows the Sophia narrative's critique of male appropriation of the female experience:

You men are horrid rapacious animals, with your spirit of enterprise, and your nonsense : ever wanting more land than you can cultivate, and more money than you can spend. . . .

I should not, however, make so free with the sex, if you and my *cam sposo* were not exceptions.

You two really have something of the generosity and sensibility of women.

(EM 202:347)

The exceptions made of Rivers and Fitzgerald make an ironic bow to convention, a gesture of politesse to mask the text's strong observations on the "rapacious" nature of men. Arabella's voice here gives a veiled introduction to the embedded seduction tale to come and signals that the edenic space of courtship and female empowerment is enclosed by patriarchal structures of marriage and male authority. The Sophia narrative and its implications are reflected also in Brooke's naming of her coquette: "Arabella Fermor" alludes to Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1714) published a half-century earlier.¹² The mock-heroic poem both exaggerates and trivializes the importance of the personal violation of the actual "Mrs. Arabella Fermor" (Tillotson 567) in which a lock of hair was stolen by a suitor. Figuralised as "Belinda," the coquette in Pope's poem is exhorted to forget about the incident. Offence taken at the appropriation of the lock of hair, which itself has disappeared, is a consideration of the merely physical. The real nature of virtue is in the female "soul" :

Unless good Sense preserve what Beauty gains :

Beauties in vain their pretty eyes may roll ; Charms
strike the sight, but Merit wins the Soul.

(Tillotson 576)

The eighteenth-century equation of merit and soul with "good sense" also is expressed in Brooke's use of the cult of sensibility in *Emily Montague*. However, while Brooke's Arabella voices the independence of thought which tends to literalize female experience, Pope's Belinda tropes the experience of the "rape" and trivializes the important issue of female honour.¹³ The conceit that female virtue is an abstraction and therefore that both the rape and the violation of Mrs. Arabella Fermor are invalid ensures a double troping of female experience. Protesting against this process, the Sophia narrative in Brooke's text literalizes the danger of following too closely the patriarchal equation of "Virtue" and feeling. Sophia's sensibility, her "noble integrity of soul," renders her defenceless against the male authority of the dark-souled baronet, who "only admired to destroy."

The juxtaposition of the seduction tale with that of the reformed coquette in Brooke's *Emily Montague* reveals the seam of protest underlying its conventional

surface elegance. Framed by the same epistolary narrative, the themes of the reformed coquette and the seduced maid seem to contradict one another. As Spencer points out,

A novel written about the reformation of a coquette, who learns to give up her power and become a dutiful wife, has very different ideological implications from the story of the seduced and abandoned heroine, with its usual message of protest against the treatment of women. (143)

Although Arabella dutifully marries, her consciousness in the epistolary narrative does not reform; she asserts her coquettishness within the confines of marriage. In Letter 227, she states her refusal to "settle," signifying her intention to maintain her independent spirit: there is another "divine colonel" waiting on her doorstep. Moreover, in the same letter — the last except for Rivers' closing one — Arabella reveals to Emily her knowledge from the first of "her father's proposal to Rivers," and her role in manipulating Emily's marriage to him. Brooke's coquette, it seems, resembles the role of the writer herself in engineering the epistolary form of the text. Brooke, empowered by her "special relation to language," replicates with conventional epistolary form what her coquette does within the thematic frame of *Emily Montague*.

Although Arabella's voice does not comment on the seduction tale of the Sophia narrative, its otherwise ubiquitous presence in Brooke's novel exerts the pressure of literalization of female experience within the symbolic order exemplified in Rivers' idealisation of feminine sensibility. Homans' theory of literalization, based on the Lacanian entry of the male child into the symbolic order of language, may be extended to regard the position of the female in relation to participation within the symbolic order as one which follows the paradigm of seduction and abandonment. In this position, the female is seduced by the symbolic order, and then abandoned for asserting her presence within it.¹⁴ Brooke's enclosure of the seduction tale within male consciousness may be seen both as a protest against male authority in eighteenth-century society and as a paradigm of the appropriative seduction of the feminine literal in the androcentric conventions of language and literature.

The conventional epistolary form of Frances Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague* conceals a protest against the female experience of eighteenth-century conventions of sensibility, courtship, and marriage. The novel's New World setting creates an extended present of the coquette where female empowerment holds sway. In effect, Brooke's text literalizes the absence of female power in social and literary conventions and in the symbolic order of language. While Brooke's coquette literalizes feminine absence, her male hero tropes it. His consciousness, though "femininised," contains the feminine within a patriarchal cult of sensibility. This restraint of the female literal is further implied in the embedding of the Sophia narrative in the male "event of consciousness" of Rivers and Fitzgerald, and may

be viewed simultaneously as Frances Brooke's criticism of male authority and her advocacy of male responsibility in the dangerous matter of seduction in female experience. Eschewing the propagation of conventions in the New World eden, Brooke's epistolary narrative challenges patriarchal literary and social structures with its closing criticism that "il faut cultiver notre jardin" of the Old World symbolic order.

NOTES

¹ Frances Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague* (1769) has received critical attention to its nature description, political and social comment, and feminist concerns in post-Conquest Quebec. Pacey places Brooke's epistolary novel within an eighteenth-century literary tradition of a "cult of sensibility" (Pacey 145). New, on the other hand, stresses the novel's unresolved tension between nature and society in the inability of its characters to accommodate European neo-classical ideals of decorum to New World experience, an epistemological gap which parallels the shift towards nineteenth-century scientific positivism and literary realism (New, "Gardens," 37-38). McMullen's body of criticism on the novel includes both a focus on Brooke's use of a "double image" of her female characters to voice her feminist views, and a view of the novel as an important stage in the direction of the realism of Jane Austen's balance between sense and sensibility ("Double Image," *Brooke and Her Works* np). According to both McMullen and Messenger, *Emily Montague* also looks back to *The Rape of the Lock* for the literary antecedent of Arabella Fermor, the model for Pope's Belinda (McMullen, *Odd Attempt* 108; Messenger 167). As the first Canadian novel *Emily Montague* not only marks a relevant step in feminist writing and in the direction of the eighteenth-century epistolary novel towards realism but also anticipates the thematic concern with the juxtaposition of society and nature salient in Canadian literature.

² Homans' theory is based on the Lacanian concept that entry into the symbolic order (to which the world of words belongs) occurs when the infant realizes it is not integral with the mother. The "wordless" bond with the feminine is thus broken. However, as Homans is careful to point out in her attempt to draw on both French and Anglo-American feminist views of language, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory assumes that the infant, in this model of the formation of the human subject, is male. The primary reason the infant breaks from the wordless bond with the mother and enters the symbolic order is that he realizes that, like his father, he has a penis. Since he cannot compete for the mother against the father, he enters the world of the father through the symbolic order of language. Homans argues, however, that although they too must sever the wordless bond with the mother, females do not contend with the penis in the same way as do males and thus will not break association with the feminine, that is, with the absence of the feminine in the symbolic order.

For explication of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the formation of the subject and excerpts of his writings and seminars see Mitchell and Rose.

³ The term "sensibility" might be problematic for the contemporary reader. In the eighteenth century, according to Walter Francis Wright, "Between the time of Richardson and 1780, sensibility was to most authors susceptibility to the gentler affections, pity, sympathy, and the other humanitarian feelings." (44) Novels dominated by feelings were diverse "among themselves," but "utterly unlike those of the realists" (45). Furthermore, novels of sensibility were considered to be of feminine character, that is, the predominance of feeling indicated the influence of the instinctual and the ideal rather than the intellectual and the ideal.

- ⁴ According to Altman, the past decade has seen a revived critical and creative interest in the epistolary form (3). Since the eighteenth century, the letter form, along with other serial forms such as the travel sketch and the journal have continued to occupy lower echelons on the taxonomic ladder of genre hierarchy. Recent theoretical interest in the deconstruction of taxonomic structures of genre classification (for example, Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre") is reiterated in reassessments of both written and visual representation. For example, the art theorist Norman Bryson makes a point about still life that is similar to Altaian's observations of the letter genre. According to Bryson, because of its preoccupation with creaturality, that is, the realm of the domestic, of appetite, of bodily function, still life has been relegated to the lower taxonomic orders of visual art. In his collection of essays on still life, *Looking At the Overlooked*, Bryson argues that the devaluation of still life parallels the devaluation of feminine space in painting. Both realms of creaturality and of the feminine have been constructed by and submerged in the representation of "higher" social, political and masculine material forms. Bryson contends that the still life is not an isolated "domestic" performance but is highly inflected and inflecting, that is, part of a series, repeating since classical times similar forms of creaturality and the domestic.
- ⁵ Linda Kauffman sees a female tradition of desire in epistolary fiction extending from Ovid's debt to Sappho in his valorization of the feminine in the classical opposition of love and war, thus challenging the values of "Augustan Rome by rejecting the officially endorsed genre of epic, experimenting instead with one that is by definition transgressive, for to write like a woman is to challenge conventional notions of tradition, of origins, of fathers, of paternity, of authority, of identity" (61). Nevertheless, Ovid's transgression of the epic genre with the *Heroides* maintains the position of the female 'done wrong,' victimized by the sweep of male epic action.
- ⁶ Jackson's analysis of Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons* as a master epistolary narrative points to the Preface of its 1857 edition, which contains an exchange of letters between the author and Mme Riccoboni, whose epistolary novel *Letters from Juliet, Lady Catesby, to Her Friend, Lady Henrietta Campley* Frances Brooke translated and published in 1764 (see McMullen, "Early Fiction"). Jackson's analysis emphasizes that the eighteenth-century view of sensibility of women writers saw it as essentially different than that of male writers. Feminine sensibility issued from nature, from the inner soul of the woman, while masculine sensibility resided the intellect, and was difficult to cultivate. This distinction aligns with the male/female, subject/object, culture/nature hierarchical opposition which has privileged the positive term, and positioned the negative term so that it has been both exalted and exploited by the agency of the dominant term. As the negative term in the eighteenth-century opposition of thought and feeling, sensibility is particularized as the feminine sphere.
- ⁷ In her article on Jane Austen's nineteenth-century epistolary novel, *Lady Susan* (1805), Spacks argues that "by playing with epistolary convention.... Austen placed herself in a female tradition, then demonstrated the subversive possibilities of a form that in previous use by Englishwomen had reinforced literary and social restrictions on female enterprise" (64). Although Spacks asserts that earlier epistolary novels accept the restricted female position as necessary, existing criticism on Brooke and the present discussion show that in the hands of Brooke, the letter form is a ground-breaking self-reflexive vehicle for challenging attitudes towards female experience and feminine sensibility.
- ⁸ In her article on Brooke's *Old Maid*, McMullen notes that, in this innovative weekly periodical, which Brooke published from 15 November 1755 to 4 July 1756,

"two facets of her personality are apparent" : that of her "strong sense of morality and decorum, "and the provocative voice of her persona, Mary Singleton, which adds an underlying feminist tone" (670). With the *Old Maid* as her vehicle, Brooke introduced "progressive ideas through letters from mythical correspondents" (670). The subversive possibilities of the letter form taken advantage of by Brooke in her periodical were, as McMullen demonstrates, incorporated both technically and thematically in her succeeding novels.

For additional material on Brooke's feminism, see Berland, Rogers, McMullen (*Odd Attempt*), Boutelle, and New ("The Old Maid").

- ⁹ See Murphy, who asserts that Brooke's *Emily Montague* anticipates Canadian anglophone fiction of the nineteenth century in the expectations of its characters regarding the New World, and in its "preoccupation with marriage" (18). Choices of partners, Murphy asserts, stand for attitudes towards and relations between anglophone, francophone and native in nineteenth-century English and French Canada.

^D See also McMullen, *Odd Attempt* 96-99.

- ^{II} Interestingly, Bryson's thesis of the ideological construction of the still life as a feminine space finds cross-disciplinary support in Janet MacArthur's analysis of the eighteenth-century epistolary form as metonymic rather than metaphoric in its creation of meaning, or, in Altaian's terms, its epistolarity. The letters are a series, inflected by and inflecting the exchange they succeed and precede, effecting a discontinuous non-plot controlled not by a narrative voice but by the many voices which stand for, metonymically, rather than symbolize, metaphorically (8-9). MacArthur asserts that, as a feminine form, the epistolary novel consists of non-closure (metaphor creates meaning by assuming a closure or resolution of disparate ideas into a single meaning or ending). The epistolary novel consists of non-closure in that it is a series of "touchings" of metonymical exchanges, rather than a metaphorical move ment towards the consummation of closure as in the traditional realist "narrated" novel (31).

A concept of the epistolary form as effecting representation metonymically through series, that is, through inflected and inflecting short linked narrative performances is relevant not only for the present reassessment of "epistolarity" of Brooke's *Emily Montague*, but also for my doctoral dissertation on short linked narratives by Canadian women writers in English, which considers that the seriality of letters, sketches, and stories by representative women writers *ré*cuses, that is, challenges, protests, or subverts structures of gender and genre.

- ^E Messenger's comparison of Pope's mock-heroic poem and Brooke's epistolary novel insists that the latter's *Arabella* "shows us what could have lain behind the glittering surface that Pope and others chose to depict. She shows us real character and real intelligence in a woman playing the role of a coquette" (170). McMullen also points to the self-possession of Belinda, noting her adroitness at cards in male company (*Odd Attempt* 108-09). Both readings of the poem do not consider the issue of female honour. See note 13 below.

- ^B Charles Barber's meticulously documented study shows that female honour became increasingly associated with the preservation of the reputation of chastity rather than with chastity itself (48). The literature evidences that "a man's proper virtue is courage, and a woman's is chastity; they are the things principally demanded of the two sexes by honour" (50). Barber speculates that "one reason for the different treatment of men and women is perhaps the fact that the daughters of rich citizens are regarded as good matches for needy gentlemen" (28), but at the same time male honour is lost through the unchastity of a wife, fiancée or female relative" (45).

The relatives of the victim of the "real" rape, Mrs. Arabella Fermor, would have had good cause to be outraged at the assault on her person and resulting loss of honour all around, especially if it meant her devaluation in the marriage market.

- ¹⁴ My extension of Homans' theory of literalization aligns with Spencer's discussion of the novel of seduction by eighteenth-century women writers.

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THE RUINS OF PHYLAKOPI

David Solway

stretch before us :
 strewn plinths in the shattered hewn Megâron,
 chopped-up marble herms,
 intricate reticulations
 of lopped stone
 uttered by the cutting Word

— no traction
 on these peeled surfaces
 to cling to,
 these runic shales and chalks. The
 wind brawls untranslatably among
 the lettered pediments.