

## Introduction

I recognized myself in her . . . I burned with tenderness for her. I wept over her death for hours . . . I resembled her and henceforth saw my isolation not as a mark of infamy but as a sign of my election. I did not see myself dying of it. Through her heroine, I identified myself with the author: one day an adolescent, another me, would bathe with their tears a novel in which I would tell my own sad story.<sup>1</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir, *Mémoires d'une fille rangée* (1958)

Simone de Beauvoir recalls her first literary encounter as a schoolgirl with the protagonist Maggie Tulliver of George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). The adolescent Beauvoir defines her experience of literary identification in terms of resemblance, so that she envisions the heroine, author, and a future reader respectively as reflections of herself. She also evokes effusive emotions so hyperbolic as to be conventional: sympathy that burns, drenching tears that last for hours. Instead of proving her individuality, she exemplifies certain negative clichés of identification as a feminine mode of reading response. Her twentieth-century self-portrait embodies stereotypes of women's reading as immature, sentimental, and narcissistic.

These stereotypes were established in Eliot's own Victorian era after recurring crises about women identifying with literature that began in the late eighteenth century. Explicit disapproval of women's supposed reading practices implicitly reinforced the idea of imitative, emotional, and egoistic identification as an essentially feminine tendency. The codification of gendered reading styles was part of a larger rigidifying of gender categories in the nineteenth century, bolstered by medical and scientific studies that denoted "opposite" characteristics as biologically intrinsic to the sexes rather than encultured.<sup>2</sup> In the Victorian period, a woman was "naturally" supposed "to find it far easier than a man would do to identify with characters and incidents from her reading material" (Flint, *The Woman*



Figure 1 Thackeray's illustration of Jones. From William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (1848.)

*Reader* 38). Female literary identification was then constantly represented as an inevitable problem of overidentification.

William Makepeace Thackeray's masterpiece *Vanity Fair* (1847–48) illustrates archetypal male and female Victorian readers: at one extreme, Thackeray depicts the superior, sneering Jones at his gentlemen's club underlining a book's "foolish twaddling" (see Figure 1) and at the other, the undiscerning Amelia Sedley crying "over the end of a novel were it ever so stupid" (*Vanity Fair* 6, 5). While Thackeray, who wrote *The Book of Snobs* (1848), is satirizing Jones's superciliousness along with Amelia's sentimentalism, Kate Flint contends that his narrative privileges the "masculine," detached reader that Jones represents over the irrational, emotional "feminine" reader ("Women, Men" 262). Between the two archetypes, the female reader is devalued because her lachrymose literary identification impairs her judgment.

Thackeray perpetuates stereotypes of female reading through Amelia; however, he also portrays female readers in *Vanity Fair* who defy the conventions of "feminine" identification. While Amelia weeps foolishly over foolish novels, the narrator of *Vanity Fair* quotes a decidedly unsympathetic female reader who refuses to identify with Amelia. Amelia "is *fade* and insipid," according to an "unknown correspondent with a pretty little handwriting and a pink seal to her note." Using the first-person plural, this "young lady" seems to speak for a larger audience of women readers when

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she baldly tells the narrator, “We don’t care a fig for her” (115). Amelia might represent the trope of the “female quixote” – emotionally susceptible to literature and somewhat delusional about reality – but these women readers resist acknowledging her as their representative, declaring their right not to “care” about her as it seemed they should according to their “pretty little handwriting” and other markers of femininity.

Even as gendered categories of reading crystallized in the nineteenth century, they were constantly being subverted by unpredictable women readers in fiction and actuality. Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss* stops herself from reading Germaine de Staël’s *Corinne* because she tends to align herself with doomed heroines of literature, “the dark unhappy ones” whose stories she wants to be rewritten (Eliot, *Mill on the Floss* 308).<sup>3</sup> Just as Maggie at times chooses to submit to her reading (following the “quiet hand” that annotated a copy of Thomas à Kempis) and at other times resists her identification, as with *Corinne*, women readers have been able to identify with Maggie and other characters selectively and even purposively (268). Laura Green argues that Eliot portrays identification with Maggie as a pitfall or obstacle to self-development, a “*mise-en-abîme* that ultimately forecloses paths to revision of her story” (“I Recognized” 60).<sup>4</sup> But, as Green also acknowledges, this revision is precisely what Beauvoir does: Beauvoir presents her identification as a kind of willful assertion through which she sees herself in Maggie the character, but does not drown with her, and ultimately chooses to emulate Eliot the author instead of her tragic heroine. In another divergent reading, the pioneering Cantabrigian classicist Jane Harrison recalled wryly that she identified neither with Maggie nor even with her more conventional counterpart Lucy in *The Mill on the Floss*, but rather with the ludicrous figure of Aunt Glegg. Harrison professed that despite her apparent sophistication, “I am Aunt Glegg . . . rigidly, irrationally conservative, fibrous with prejudice, deep-rooted in her native soil” (Harrison 11–12).

Contrary to the predominant nineteenth-century narrative of passively misled or misguided female quixotes, I argue that both fictional and real Victorian women readers exercised identification as a flexible capacity instead of an emotional compulsion. The crisis narrative of female quixotism developed in concert with increasing accounts of women’s conscious and deliberate identification with literature: what I call “wayward reading.” I use the term “wayward,” meaning both “Conforming to no fixed rule or principle of conduct; capricious, unaccountable; erratic, unpredictable; uncontrollable” and “indicating or manifesting obstinate self-will,” to denote the simultaneously deliberate and unpredictably multi-directional

nature of this kind of identification.<sup>5</sup> Wayward readers are “uncontrollable” by others, but they can control their own approach to identification. This book demonstrates how wayward reading in the Victorian period could and did unite women in imaginative affiliations that they translated into creative, political, and professional action.

My framework of wayward reading is a parallel to feminist critic Sara Ahmed’s transhistoric analysis of “willful subjects,” which was in part inspired by the wayward character of Maggie Tulliver, whom she designates as “the object of considerable feminist desire and identification over time” (*Willful Subjects* 3).<sup>6</sup> According to Ahmed, willfulness is a label applied to those who use their will in a problematic fashion, not necessarily because of *what* they will but *who* is doing the willing: subjects who are not always regarded as fully human, “not being white, not being male, not being straight, not being able-bodied” (*Willful Subjects* 15). Like willfulness, wayward reading is a practice, not an inherent quality, even though it was judged as such by Victorian critics who found the idea of women readers exercising their will to be deviant in itself. Wayward reading is not always ostentatiously rebellious or radical in its objects of identification, then, but earns its epithet within the particular context of the long nineteenth century, in which the very idea of women choosing their identification diverged from the passive feminine norm.<sup>7</sup> In my project, I locate among these historical female readers the deliberate approaches to reading that are more often ascribed to modern critics and scholars. The nineteenth century thus not only provides an origin for persistent stereotypes of female reading, but also an archive of wayward women readers who refute those stereotypes.

From the female quixote to *Madame Bovary* and beyond, women’s literary identification was – and often continues to be – pilloried as egoistic escapism. While Kate Flint’s *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* and Catherine Golden’s *Images of the Woman Reader in Victorian British and American Fiction* provide what Golden calls a wide-ranging “collage of readers” (40) capturing the heterogeneity of female readers and their representations in the “long” nineteenth century, scholarship has primarily concentrated its analysis on the prevalent Victorian discourse of anxiety about female identification and how to manage it.<sup>8</sup> I, however, will illuminate accounts of wayward reading that have been comparatively overshadowed by the narrative of continual crises.<sup>9</sup>

Eliot herself contributed to this crisis narrative when she, while still in her religious youth, described her girlhood self as yet another female quixote, victimized by her reading:

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I venture to believe that the same causes which exist in my own breast to render novels and romances pernicious, have their counterpart in that of every fellow-creature. I am, I confess, not an impartial member of a jury in this case; for I owe the culprits a grudge for injuries inflicted on myself. [I shall carry to my grave the mental diseases with which they have contaminated me.]<sup>10</sup> When I was quite a little child, I could not be satisfied with the things around me: I was constantly living in a world of my own creation, and was quite contented to have no companions, that I might be left to my own musings, and imagine scenes in which I was chief actress. Conceive what a character novels would give to these Utopias. I was early supplied with them by those who kindly sought to gratify my appetite for reading, and of course I made use of the materials they supplied for building my castles in the air. (*George Eliot Letters* 1: 22)

Eliot at first seems to embody the negative stereotypes of feminine literary identification as both a serious vulnerability and a withdrawal into self-centered reverie. The “novels and romances” that caused such emotional effects within her at the time she read them still provoke an intense resentment for the “injuries inflicted.” Eliot’s imagery is highly equivocal, however, as she relates imaginary Utopias to irreparable psychic damage, and the satisfaction of her “appetite” to “mental diseases.” She attributes her discontent “with the things around me” to her contentment within fictional worlds, some of her own creation. Even in condemning novels, Eliot attributes to them the inspiration for her own imaginative constructions, which later proved to be the foundation for an illustrious career, not insubstantial “castles in the air.” She thus hints at the truly wayward possibility underlying the rhetoric of crisis: that women’s readerly identifications could not be confined to the realm of fantasy.

Eliot also complicates the idea of identification as entirely passive or narcissistic, or even feminine. She conveys her early experiences of identification in universal terms, to which every “fellow-creature” might be susceptible regardless of gender or even age:

men and women are but children of a larger growth: they are still imitative beings. We cannot (at least those who ever read to any purpose at all) – we cannot, I say, help being modified by the ideas that pass through our minds. We hardly wish to lay claim to such elasticity as retains no impress. We are active beings too. (*George Eliot Letters* 1: 22–23)

Eliot represents a dynamic process in which those who read for a “purpose” are “active beings” while being influenced by literature. Though at this point she was still uncomfortable with the ramifications of this influence, Eliot is describing wayward reading, in which identification is not a sentimental delusion, but rather a stimulus for action on one’s own behalf.

The wayward reader differs from both the stereotype of the passive female reader and her morally superior counterpart: the sympathetic reader.<sup>11</sup> Identification was thought to be redeemable only through conversion to sympathy as a reading response more amenable to domestic harmony.<sup>12</sup> Eliot would famously go on to champion the novel for its ability to augment sympathy and thereby improve human relations. While I do not deny the emotional and potentially ethical aspects of identification, I examine its uses beyond the “naturally” feminine realm of sympathy, which is and has been used to justify the exploitation of emotional and other uncompensated forms of labor from women.

My book redirects critical focus to the woman reader who identifies with literature not for the sake of others but rather for understanding and constructing herself. Identification as a selective exercise of imaginative autonomy and willing receptivity opened up possibilities for nineteenth-century women’s deliberate self-formation through literature, instead of unconscious subjection to it.<sup>13</sup> While Nancy Armstrong has famously made the argument in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* that the novel established subjectivity itself as feminine, private, and non-political, I contend that the expansiveness afforded by wayward reading allowed women a way out into the world as well as into a community of reading practices. However seemingly personal one’s identifications, interaction with texts constitutes engagement in a larger cultural dialogue and, for Victorian women, invocation of a potential counterpublic.<sup>14</sup>

### Identification Crises and Female Quixotes

I therefore presume to tell your ladyship, with great confidence, that your writers have instituted a world of their own, and that nothing is more different from a human being, than heroes or heroines.

Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote* (1752)

Identification has a bad reputation. It is a messy term with overlapping and contradictory meanings across multiple disciplines and fields: aesthetic and ethical philosophy, psychology, cognitive science, film and media studies, and literature. While the primary definition of identification is the straightforward, transitive act of recognition (“Can you identify the suspect?”), this book centers on the more problematic secondary definition, which is either explicitly or implicitly reflexive: the “state of being or feeling oneself to be closely associated with a person, group, etc., in emotions, interests, or actions; the process of becoming associated in this way” (“Identification”). I concentrate on identification with literary

characters and narrators, as ontologically distinct from actual people and groups, but even with that additional specification, the nature and mechanics of identification are sites of conflicting significance and obscurity.<sup>15</sup> Communication scholar Martin J. Barker argues that the concept of identification “benefits by remaining unclear,” and has done so in the past in order to reinforce the ideology of “audiences’ *vulnerability*” (354).<sup>16</sup> In order to clarify some of the specific historical and cultural reasoning behind the complex rhetoric of identification, I trace its persistent representation as a “crisis” of female reading practices in the long nineteenth century.

Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau originated the psychological, reflexive usage of identification (“s’identifier”) in his “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality” in 1754, to denote the spontaneous mental activity that produces a man’s pity for a suffering animal.<sup>17</sup> Identification, as first conceptualized by Rousseau, is a natural compassionate impulse that is mitigated, not cultivated, by reason, which instead engenders “l’amour-propre.” He illustrates his theory by describing the wise man who rationalizes so as to suppress his identification with someone being murdered outside his window, while the “canaille” (rabble) and “les femme des halles” (women of the market) are the ones who empathetically intervene in riots and keep people from killing each other (1: 116). The application of the term by Rousseau thus aligns it with benevolent but irrational emotionalism among the presumably less civilized: the lower classes and women.<sup>18</sup>

The indictment of women’s identification with literature would rest on the same essentialist ideas of feminine sensibility that Rousseau praised. Literary identification famously became a pathology in the early seventeenth century with Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, in which the self-styled Don loses his mind as a direct result of his obsessive reading of chivalric romances.<sup>19</sup> But while Don Quixote was himself a satiric fictional character, actual women were considered genuinely imperiled by reading fiction. Robert Uphaus traces such concerns back to the seventeenth century (336), when Anglican minister Richard Allestree’s 1675 *The Ladies Calling* warned that “reading Romances, which seems now to be thought the peculiar and only becoming study of young Ladies,” exposes them to “amorous Passions” that are “apt to insinuate themselves into their unwary Readers, and by an unhappy inversion, a copy shall produce an Original” (Allestree 164–65). Allestree describes the prototypical female quixotes as the passive, “unwary” prey of their emotions, manipulated into emulating literature through no will of their own.

From Plato onward, overabsorption, emotionalism, passivity, and narcissism had been feared as the effects of aesthetic identification. But, in the eighteenth century, writers began to consolidate these disparate effects under the label of “feminine” reading. The influence of literary identification was perceived as greater because of the rise of the novel and literature’s general progression from romance to realism.<sup>20</sup> The naïve woman seduced by reading – first romances, then novels – became a cliché. Ina Ferris argues that the recurring “trope” of the susceptible young female reader “came to function metonymically” for all new readers trying to access a new “culture of literacy” (20). Seemingly “there was hardly any crime, sin, or personalized catastrophe” that could not be attributed to imprudent reading (Pearson 8), but the focus of cultural anxiety began to shift from the universal perils of reading fiction to women as its most likely victims.

Arabella, the eponymous heroine of Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote*, unwittingly mimics her namesake of La Mancha in mistaking romances for reality, although Clara Reeve’s account of the book in *The Progress of Romance* (1785) and Henry Fielding’s contemporaneous review both observe that romances were already passé reading material. But despite the generic anachronism, Fielding believes *The Female Quixote* possessed greater verisimilitude than *Don Quixote* because of its female protagonist:

as we are to grant in both Performances, that the Head of a very sensible Person is entirely subverted by reading Romances, this Concession seems to me more easy to be granted in the Case of a young Lady than of an old Gentleman . . . To say Truth, I make no Doubt but that most young Women . . . in the same Situation, and with the same Studies, would be able to make a large Progress in the same Follies. (55)

Fielding interprets the book as specifically directed at women by Lennox, “to expose all those Vices and Follies in her Sex which are chiefly predominant in Our Days.” According to Fielding’s description of “most young Women,” delusive identification with fiction was less an amusing aberration than a general weakness of the female gender. While philosopher David Hume expressed faith in women’s perspicuity in reading, he excepted “books of gallantry and devotion” because, “as the fair sex have a great share of the tender and amorous disposition, it perverts their judgment on this occasion, and makes them be easily affected, even by what has no propriety in the expression or nature in the sentiment” (“Of Essay Writing” 4: 521–22). In reading romances, women might lose their ability to assess reality as their emotions would overpower their reason.



Women's emotions were considered especially liable to aestheticization, or enjoyment of feeling for feeling's sake – a propensity that literature supposedly encouraged at the expense of other people.<sup>21</sup> The ubiquity of this assumption is reflected in the ominous claim of Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth in their guide *Practical Education* (1798): “We know, from common experience, the effects which are produced upon the female mind by immoderate novel reading” (213). Female quixotism was beginning to be viewed as a “common” problem of “the female mind.” The Edgeworths condemned “sentimental stories and books of mere entertainment” that cultivated an ostensibly feminine preference for fictional over human objects: “the imagination, which has been accustomed to this delicacy in fictitious narrations, revolts from the disgusting circumstances which attend real poverty, disease and misery; the emotions of pity, and the exertions of benevolence, are consequently repressed precisely at the time when they are necessary to humanity” (213). This kind of disjunction between aesthetic and interpersonal emotions was used as evidence of female narcissism. As Catherine Gallagher argues in *Nobody's Story*, drawing on Hume's theory of sympathy in *A Treatise of Human Nature* as the conversion of others' feelings into one's own, fictional characters – “nobodies” – were “uniquely suitable objects of compassion. Because they were conjectural, suppositional identities *belonging* to no one, they could be universally appropriated. A story about nobody was nobody's story and hence could be entered, occupied, identified with by anybody” (168). Actual people obstruct our sympathies with their infinite particularity and resist absorption into ourselves, whereas fictional characters seemingly can be stretched or tailored to fit our own dimensions.<sup>22</sup> Following Hume's logic, “naïve identification” with literature is then “ultimately egotistical”; that is, sympathy with “nobodies” is really sympathy with ourselves in lieu of actual “somebodies” (Gallagher, *Nobody's Story* 193).

Thus, even though the nineteenth-century discourse of crisis frequently positioned women as hapless captives of literary absorption, the truly alarming result of identification was the inflation of women's self-importance beyond what Hume would call “propriety.” According to Laurie Langbauer, female quixotes were most offensive to contemporary critics for their “pride, which prompted disobedience to fathers and imperiousness with lovers” (47).<sup>23</sup> The doctor who “cures” Arabella in *The Female Quixote* worries that she might have provoked men to violence by following the romantic example of a “haughty beauty, who sits a calm spectatress of the ruin and desolation, bloodshed and misery, incited by herself” (Lennox 266). He then warns her, “It is impossible to read these

tales without lessening part of that humility, which, by preserving in us a sense of our alliance with all human nature, keeps us awake to tenderness and sympathy, or without impairing that compassion which is implanted in us as an incentive of acts of kindness” (266). The doctor sounds the familiar notes of admonition that female literary identification stunts “compassion,” yet this true “kindness” manifests itself in Arabella’s case not as charitable action but as recognition of and submission to male desire.

Whereas Don Quixote mentally transformed reality into the stuff of fantasy, female quixotism was thought to promote awareness of and unhappiness with the distinctions between fiction and life. Hortensius in Reeve’s *The Progress of Romance* complains that “A young woman is taught to expect adventures and intrigues . . . If a plain man addresses her in rational terms and pays her the greatest of compliments, – that of desiring to spend his life with her, – that is not sufficient, her vanity is disappointed, she expects to meet a Hero in Romance” (Reeve 78). The greatest folly of the female quixote is not tilting at windmills but rejecting suitable marriage partners.

The solution, however, was not for women’s emotional identification to be quashed entirely, but rather channeled according to an externally derived standard of decorum. The Edgeworths advised, “peculiar caution is necessary to manage female sensibility” in girls’ education (191). The new novelists claimed the responsibility of that management, providing salutary examples for moral identification and thereby recasting authors themselves from villains to heroes for helpless female readers in distress. In *The Progress of Romance*, when Hortensius bemoans the fact that women are writing copious letters in imitation of Samuel Richardson’s epistolary heroines, Euphrasia replies, “Let the young girls bear the faults of the letters they write, let them copy Richardson, as often as they please, and it will be owing to the defects of their understandings, or judgments, if they do not improve by him. We could not say as much of the reading Ladies of the last age” who perused romances (Reeve 138).<sup>24</sup> Euphrasia argues that Richardson’s new species of sentimental novel could steer female identification in the right direction, after romances had led ladies astray. Curated literary identification with novels of courtship, instead of romances, could even prepare women for the affective investments of marriage rather than doom them to dissatisfaction.<sup>25</sup> Richardson and other eighteenth-century novelists thus set a pattern of “encourag[ing] new forms of identification that would annul the consequences of past overidentification” in order to establish their authorial legitimacy (Gallagher, *Nobody’s Story* xvii–xviii).