TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia (2022), **10**, 75–84
doi:10.1017/trn.2021.5

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Perils of Reading Fiction: the Female Quixote and the Thai New Woman

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(Received 7 August 2020; revised 26 December 2020; accepted 17 March 2021)

Abstract
British literary history routinely associated women with reading fiction, especially the novel. This association seemingly threatened male hegemony and cultural authority. It led, therefore, to the portrayal of the woman reader as a female quixote who was prone to misreading and being misled by what she read. This representation became popular during the rise of the novel in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the New Woman's emergence at the fin-de-siècle. Similar developments took place in Siam/Thailand where the birth of fiction, the advent of the woman reader, and the New Woman's rise roughly coincided in the late 1910s and early 1920s. By examining San Thewarak's novel *Bandai haeng khwam rak* [Stairways to Love] (1932), this paper demonstrates the trope of the female quixote's invocation to describe the emerging Thai (New) Woman reader and the threat that she embodied that had to be managed and controlled.

Keywords: Early modern Thai literature; female quixote; New Woman; Woman reader

Introduction

Throughout world history, the seemingly innocuous act of reading has often appeared dangerous and subversive. Such was the case when the reader was from a marginalised group, and the reading material was fiction. So, in eighteenth-century Britain, when women became the principal consumers of the new genre of fiction (the novel), their reading became a subject of intense debate and heavy criticism. Both the press and novels themselves portrayed women not as discerning readers of fiction but as female quixotes, a term taken from the title of Charlotte Lennox's 1752 novel. They described these female quixotes as avid readers of fiction whose reading often led them astray. Moreover, they characterised them as unable to discern fact from fiction and so engrossed in their fiction-reading that they often imagined their lives as romance novels starring themselves as the heroines. This portrayal of the emerging woman reader was arguably a response to her perceived threat against male cultural authority. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the female quixote trope resurfaced at the fin-de-siècle to describe the British New Woman who challenged male hegemony by calling for gender equality.

The figures of the woman reader and the New Woman have virtually been unstudied within the Thai context. This paper shows, however, that their developments had much in common with their British counterparts. In Siam/Thailand, the rise of fiction and the increase in literacy among women roughly coincided in the late 1910s and early 1920s. This coincidence helped solidify the association between fiction and the emerging woman reader in the public's minds, which led to severe criticism of the woman reader and comparisons with a female quixote. Notably, male critics, whose cultural authority women readers threatened, and Thai New Women, who emerged in roughly the same period, made such comparisons. While these New Women described the emerging woman reader as female quixotes, they too represented a menace to male hegemony and were, consequently, portrayed as quixotic readers in leading male authors' novels. One fictional work that offers the most sustained engagement with the New Woman figure as a female quixote is San Thewarak's *Bandai haeng khwam rak* (1932). This paper

examines this hitherto understudied novel and shows how San portrays the New Woman heroine as a female quixote and attempts to use her quixotism to "cure" her threatening progressiveness.

The Invocation of the Female Quixote Trope in Britain

Eighteenth-century Britain saw a rapid expansion of its reading public. In his seminal work *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt notes, "many eighteenth-century observers thought that their age was one of remarkable and increasing popular interest in reading" (Watt 1965: 35), though he later cautions that this expansion was limited, especially compared to the modern-day. This interest manifested itself in the increased consumption of various genres of text, including religious works and periodical essays (Watt 1965: 49–52). However, the reading public clearly preferred fiction, specifically the novel (Taylor 2014: chap. 1 sec. 2). A writer for the *Monthly Review* alluded to the novel's popularity in 1791 by claiming that the growth in public taste for this new form of fiction "ha[d] not been less rapid than the extension of the use of tea" (Taylor 2014: chap. 1 sec. 2). Despite (or rather because of) the novel's popularity, it often suffered severe criticism. Critics and moralists of the period saw the novel as "the ultimate commercialisation of literature" (Brantlinger 1998: 4). They condemned its reading because it could be done anywhere[1] and by anybody. It did not require mental assertion, and it aimed to produce "pleasure or amusement rather than self-improvement" (Brantlinger 1998: 4). These and other criticisms of the novel were, however, not levelled at all readers equally. Instead, they directed them primarily at a particular group: female readers.

As Jacqueline Pearson observes in *Women's Reading in Britain 1750–1835: A Dangerous Recreation*, "One of the most striking phenomena of the eighteenth century is the growth of women's involvement in literary culture as writers and as readers" (Pearson 1999: 22). This development was likely the result of improving female education and the wealth of the middle class, which freed women from many of their domestic duties, thus allowing them to indulge in more recreational activities (Taylor 2014: chap. 3 sec. 1). The rise in female writers and readers naturally threatened male cultural authority, and the anxieties that this threat caused at least partially accounted for the onslaught of criticisms aimed at the novel and the often gender-specific nature of these criticisms (Golden 2003: 22). For instance, society criticised the genre for arousing their female consumers' sexual desire, distracting them from their maternal and domestic duties, undermining their self-control, and corrupting their mind (Golden 2003: 22). It accused the female reader, the primary consumer of the novel[2] of misreading, being unable to distinguish between fact and fiction, and acquiring from her reading "false expectations"[3] or unrealistic desires, especially regarding courtship and marriage.

These assessments of the novel and its female readers appeared in such non-fictional works as conduct books and periodical essays and were also often the subject of fiction itself. According to Pearson, "the endangering of the heroine by unwise reading — which may mean politically radical or religiously sceptical works, but will most often mean novels — became 'one of the most hackneyed situations in the novel of this period'" (1999: 8). One of the earliest and most popular novels featuring a heroine misled by fiction-reading was Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752). As the title indicates, the novel's heroine, Arabella, is modelled on the eponymous character from Miguel de Cervantes' *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* (1605, 1615). Like Don Quixote, Arabella believes what she has read in novels to be true and acts accordingly. Thus, when her cousin, Glanville, wants to marry her, she insists on the lengthy and deferential courtship typically found in romances. Her literal reading of romance novels also leads her to commit absurd errors such as "mistak[ing] prostitutes for fellow heroines, believ[ing] a servant is a disguised wooer, almost fall[ing] victim to an opportunistic suitor who can manipulate the language of romance for his own purposes, and [being] constantly in unnecessary terror of rape" (Pearson 1999: 201–202). In the end, Arabella is "cured" by a clergyman who makes her see the errors of her ways, thus finally allowing her to marry Glanville.

[1]According to John Tinnon Taylor, the very places where readers chose to read their novels became the subject of criticism and satire. For example, readers were ridiculed for reading novels in the hairdresser's shop or bed (2014: chap. 1, sec. 3).

[2]Jan Fergus has demonstrated, however, that the belief that eighteenth-century women wrote and read more novels than any other genres was, in fact, a myth. For more, see Fergus (2000).

[3]Anti-novel discourse repeatedly used this particular phrase (Pearson 1999: 83).

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After the publication of Lennox's novel, the figure of the female quixote became a popular trope in British fiction[4] and by the early nineteenth century, "the heroine misled by novel-reading" had become "a common plot-motif" (Pearson 1999: 198). As Scott Paul Gordon notes in *The Practice of Quixotism: Postmodern Theory and Eighteenth-Century Women's Writing*, the female quixote narrative often begins by describing a loss of the mother (2006: 42). This loss supposedly accounts for the heroine's unguided reading of novels, particularly romances. The heroine's literal reading or misreading of these romance novels subsequently leads her to "mistake unfit men as promising suitors, […] expect all suitors to behave in ways that few actually will, and […] refuse promising suitors as unfit" (Gordon 2006: 39). As we have seen in the case of Lennox's novel, most female quixote narratives resolve by having a male agent "cure" the heroine of her "misreading," which then allows her to marry the initially-scorned hero. Such an ending reaffirms not only male cultural authority but also the patriarchal notion that "marriage to a proper suitor [is] the natural *telos* for all young women" (Gordon 2006: 48).

As we have seen, the trope of the female quixote in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century British fiction was part of the larger body of criticism that emerged from the rise of female writers and readers, which patriarchal society perceived as a threat to male hegemony. Therefore, it is no surprise that critics invoked this particular figure again at the turn of the twentieth century when the New Woman emerged as a threat to male cultural authority. Fin-de-siècle Britain widely used and discussed the term New Woman, but it seemed to mean different things to different people. To some, the term referred to real-life women who campaigned for gender equality in areas such as education, occupation, sexuality, and politics. To others, the term meant characters in fiction written with the advancement of women in mind. These characters invariably refused to conform to the traditional feminine role of a subservient wife or a self-sacrificing mother. The "shocking" behaviour of these New Woman characters made them both appealing and appalling to readers of the period, which explained why, by the turn of the century, they featured in over a hundred novels (Richardson and Willis 2002: 1).

Whether she was a real-life woman campaigning for gender equality or a fictional character challenging the traditional concept of femininity, the New Woman questioned male dominance and patriarchal norms. Therefore, she was often the subject of condemnation. Critics satirically represented her as "a bicycling, cigarette-smoking Amazon" (Richardson and Willis 2002: 12) who insisted on wearing short hair and practical dress. They construed her call for gender equality as an attempt to become men. Thus, they characterised her as "the old maid trying to be the young man," "one who has ceased to be a lady, and has not yet attained to be a gentleman," or "madam become Adam."[5] Another criticism often levelled at the New Woman was her "uncensored reading" of fiction and her susceptibility to that fiction's influence (Cunningham 1978: 47). In *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895), for example, bestselling author Marie Corelli features a protagonist who proclaims that the New Woman fiction has "corrupted" her. At one point, she says to her husband, "I ask you, do you think a girl can read the books that are now freely published […] and yet remain unspoilt and innocent? […] I have read all those books,—and what can you expect of me? Not innocence, surely!" (Corelli 2016: 179).

The New Woman's association with fiction-reading, coupled with the threat she posed against male cultural authority and the patriarchal norm, arguably led to the female quixote trope's invocation. In an oft-cited satire of the New Woman, *Punch* magazine's 1894 issue featured a cartoon and poem titled "Donna Quixote." The cartoon depicted a woman reading a book and holding up a large key.[6] Lying at her feet were books by Henrik Ibsen, Leo Tolstoy, and Mona Caird. The accompanying poem clarifies that the New Woman, like Don Quixote, went astray because of these and other authors' fictional works. Parts of it read:

[4]For example, one finds her in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794); Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800); Eaton Stannard Barrett's *The Heroine, or, Adventures of Cherubina* (1815); Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817); Maria Edgeworth's *Angelina; Or, L'Amie Inconnue* (1839), and William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847–48). See also Patrick Brantlinger (1998: 9) and Scott Paul Gordon (2006: 41).

[5]Female readers of the *Grantham Journal* gave these labels when asked to define the New Woman in 1894. For more details, see Vicente Edward Clemons (2016: 62–63).

[6]According to Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis, it referenced *Keynotes* (1893), a collection of short stories by the well-known New Woman writer George Egerton (pen name of Mary Chevelita Dunne). (2002: 20).

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> Dear Donna, like La Mancha's moonstruck knight,
> Whose fancy shaped the foes he turned to fight,
> Mere book-bred phantoms you for facts mistake;
> Your *Wanderjahr*[7] will vanish when you—wake!
> Yes, there you sit surrounded by wild hosts
> Of warring wonders which indeed are "Ghosts":[8]
> "Doll's-House" delirium sets your nerves a-thrill,
> "DODO"[9] hysteria misdirects your will. (Nelson 2001: 226)

As we can see, the New Woman, unlike the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century female quixotes, was not associated with romance novels. However, critics maligned her reading using much the same rhetoric. She was supposedly unable to distinguish between facts and fiction, led by the fiction to become dissatisfied with her life and, in the end, encouraged to embrace love and marriage as the natural goals in a woman's life.[10]

The Birth of Fiction, the Rise of the Woman Reader, and the Arrival of the New Woman in Siam/Thailand

As the preceding discussion has shown, patriarchal culture invoked the female quixote trope at two crucial moments in British history: the rise of the novel and the New Woman's emergence. In Siam/Thailand, the rise in fiction's popularity and the New Woman's birth occurred during the same period. Bangkok of the late 1910s and 1920s saw the literary market rapidly expand (Thanapol 2008: 107). For example, there were 99 privately-owned printing houses in 1924, but the number rose to 127 during the next three years (Copeland 1993: 54). This rapid expansion yielded more publications, most of which were in the form of prose fiction [ruang an len].[11] The majority of writers of this relatively new literary genre was male, but there was also an increasing number of female writers in this period.[12] However, readers embodied an even more significant type of female involvement in the literary sphere. As Scot Barmé notes in *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand*, education for the general public, especially for girls, expanded significantly during this time. He writes that "while 5,396 girls were reported to be receiving a formal education of one sort or another in 1915, this number had grown to some 235,465 by 1925" (Barmé 2002: 135). This development translated into many potential new readers for the relatively new literary form of prose fiction.

The threat of female literary consumption was arguably one factor that led the predominantly male social guardians and public moralists to condemn fiction for its corrupting influences on female readers. Like critics of the novel in eighteenth-century England, these guardians and moralists blamed fiction for introducing carnal knowledge to young women before they deemed them ready. In 1916, the newspaper *Chinno-sayamwarasap* published an article on "indecent fiction." The author argued that recent fiction was dangerous because it introduced young girls to "worldly wickedness [*khwam chua thang loki*]," which

[7]In her call for equal opportunities for personal development, New Women demanded "the freedom to come and go as they wished, a latchkey to enable them to do this, an end to the chaperone system, the experience of earning their own livelihood," and a period of Wanderjahre (Heilmann 2000: 38–39).

[8]An 1881 play by Henrik Ibsen.

[9]*Dodo, a Detail of the Day* (1893) is a popular and controversial novel by Edward Frederic Benson. It was supposedly an exposé of the New Woman. For more details, see Kevin Morrison (2018: 23).

[10]The last stanza of "Donna Quixote" reads "Fight not with Hymen, and war not with Cupid,/ Run not amuck 'gainst Mother Nature's plan" (Nelson 2001: 230).

[11]According to Thanapol Limapichart, the category of ruang an len included "translated or adapted works of Western fiction, stories based on silent films […], and Thai prose fiction" (2008: 102).

[12]Some of the first women who came onto the Thai literary scene in the latter half of the 1920s included Dokmaisod (M.L. Bubpha Nimmanhemin), Kulabkhao (Prom Samretprasong), No. Praphasathit (Nongyao Praphasathit), Khun Nu (Chariang Ladpli), Nara (pseudonym), and Sarot (pseudonym). For more on the last four, see Suchat Sawatsi (2010: 609–614, 679–683, 631–632, 657–659). In the 1930s, even more female writers joined them, including the well-known Ko. Surangkhanang and lesser-known ones such as Nangsao Sichan (pseudonym) and Loi lom (pseudonym). For more on the last two, see Scot Barmé (2002: 200, 224).

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apparently meant "matters of love, relationships, and erotic behaviors" (Thanapol 2008: 113). Knowledge of such matters somehow tied to one's ability as a citizen to contribute to the nation. Therefore, the author asked how young female readers of fiction could become good citizens [*phonlamuang di*] if they encountered carnal knowledge at such a young age (Thanapol 2008: 113).

The Thai New Woman figure arose within this atmosphere of the increased popularity of and concern over fiction. Although historians have traditionally associated the New Woman with fin-de-siècle Britain, recent research reveals that localised versions of this figure also emerged in other parts of the world, including Asia.[13] In Thailand, the phenomenon of the New Woman was less substantial than in many other countries. Nevertheless, in the 1920s, educated middle-class Thai women began to campaign for their rights, mostly in the pages of local newspapers and women's magazines. One of the most prominent women's magazines of the period, and probably one that came closest to being the Thai New Woman's voice, was *Satrithai*. In the magazine's regular column "Thang yik thang khuan" [Prodding and pinching], the author asserted women's equality by writing, "Men have ten fingers. Women have ten fingers as well […] Those who are jealous of or look down upon Thai women are still under the misconception that women are buffaloes and men are people,[14] which is no longer in keeping with the time"[15] (*Satrithai* 1926: 11). In *Suphapnari,* another well-known women's magazine, Cho. Asakit[16] echoed the assertion of women's equality that the author of "Thang yik thang khuan" made five years earlier. She argued that because women were equal to men, they "should be treated fairly and equally" (Cho. Asakit 1931: 2).

In addition to their calls for gender equality, Thai New Women campaigned for specific causes similar to demands from New Women around the world. These included occupational opportunities, sexual reform, and political participation.[17] However, they seemed to emphasise equal access to education. In the fourth issue of *Satrithai*, for example, the magazine's editors published a letter from one of its readers. The letter listed six main factors that made Thai women lag behind those in more civilised countries. The first was "lack of education" (*Satrithai* 1925: 41). In the next issue, the magazine included a column called "Burut kap satri" [Men and women]. In it, the author touched on unequal educational opportunities between men and women and asserted that "had women received the same education as men, they would be as capable as their male counterparts" (*Satrithai* 1925: 8). Six years later, women's access to education had improved, but the issue of education was still at the forefront of Thai New Women's minds. Thus, Cho. Asakit wrote in *Suphapnari*, "Nowadays women […] have the ambition to compete with men in terms of education. If men can do it, women can too" (Cho. Asakit 1931: 2).[18]

By calling for gender equality, Thai New Women effectively challenged patriarchal norms and values. Consequently, they came under censure. They found themselves portrayed not as oppressed women fighting for their rights but as masculinised or Westernised women whose behaviour was inappropriate for their sex or country. In a short story entitled "Romance son rueang ching" [Romance-like true story] (1930) by Dokmaisod,[19] one of the male characters says that the New Woman "wears chic clothes, plays sports, and races bicycles" (2002: 100). The nation traditionally associated sports and races with men, so critics interpreted New Women's engagement in these activities as encroachments on the male domain. Moreover, bicycle riding was also universally considered a masculine activity. British New Women were often portrayed as masculine and frequently satirised for their bicycling. In the Thai context, however, the activity had an added dimension because bicycles were a foreign import. Thus, by associating Thai New Women with bicycle riding, the male character in the short story essentially portrays them as both masculinised and Westernised.

Reading fiction was another activity closely associated with Thai New Women. On the one hand, these New Women were concerned that fiction would corrupt the emerging female reader. This concern was

[13]For more details, see Ann Heilmann and Margaret Beetham (2004).

[14]"Phuying pen khwai, Phuchai pen khon" was a common saying that reflected women's status as nothing more than objects that could be bought and sold by their fathers and husbands.

[15]All translations from Thai are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[16]It is most probably the pen name of Chan Asakit, the owner of the magazine.

[17]For more on the Thai New Woman, see Thosaeng Chaochuti (2020).

[18]The call for gender equality in the pages of women's magazines waned by the late 1930s (Suksun 1995: 175) and completely disappeared by the 1940s (Natanaree 2019: 145).

[19]The pen name of M.L. Buppha Nimmanhemin.

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evident in a reader's letter that *Satrithai* published in 1925. As mentioned earlier, the letter listed six factors that made Thai women lag behind those in more civilised countries. One factor was reading fiction. Wielding the same rhetoric used to describe the female quixote in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, the letter's author argued that fiction had been misleading female readers "by encouraging them to imagine themselves as the protagonists of the stories and to hope for the almost impossible" (*Satrithai* 1925: 41). The same rhetoric reappeared in a poem entitled "Epilogue by Miss Tham Raruaisong" (Padchimprapan khong nangsao Tham Raruaisong) that *Satrithai* published in 1927. The poem's author warns that reading fiction would make female readers want to become the stories' heroines, lead them astray from dharma, and make them burn with passion (9 May 1927: 7). In other words, it would turn them into female quixotes whose lives would end in ruin. While Thai New Women warned the typical female reader against the dangers of fiction reading, others often perceived and portrayed them as quixote figures who were also easily misled by fiction. One of the most notable portrayals of the Thai New Woman as a female quixote occurs in San Thewarak's *Bandai haeng khwam rak* [Stairways to love] (1932).

The Female Quixote in *Bandai haeng khwam rak*

San Thewarak (the pen name of Bunyuen Komonbut) emerged in the 1930s as a prominent figure within the Thai literary scene. He was well known as a writer of fiction, translator, and editor. His best-known literary work was a novel entitled *Bandai haeng khwam rak*. The novel, written in the form of a diary, tells the story of a young woman named Chuangchan who turns down a proposal by a young man called Thada. In the meantime, she finds a lost wallet with the initials Wo.Wo.Wo., which she speculates belongs to someone named Wara Worawit. After some time, Chuangchan receives a letter from Wara, and the two begin to correspond. The nature of their communication quickly turns romantic, with Chuangchan falling increasingly in love with a man she has never met. However, Chuangchan finds out in the end that Wara does not exist. A group of men created the person she has been corresponding with to help their friend, Thada, by endearing him to Chuangchan. They succeed by creating Wara in the likeness of Thada, thus making Chuangchan gradually fall in love with the latter without knowing it. Once she learns the truth, Chuangchan admits to being in love with Thada, and the story ends happily for all involved.

The plot of *Bandai haeng khwam rak* recalls the female quixote narrative that became popular in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain. We have a heroine who is orphaned of a mother.[20] When a sensible young man pursues her, she turns him down because he does not meet the expectations of a romantic courtship that she cultivated from her reading of fiction. Chuangchan is disappointed, for example, when Thada does not fawn over her with honeyed words. She writes in her diary: "Oh! What can I expect from the tight-lipped Thada?What use is it for me to hope for sweet words from him?" (San 1961: 2:130). After turning down a promising suitor, the heroine then makes a series of blunders involving an imaginary wooer. In the end, a male agent cures her of her romantic follies. In *Bandai haeng khwam rak*, this male agent takes the form of a group of male friends who successfully steer the heroine towards her original and most suitable wooer.

Despite many similarities between the plot of *Bandai haeng khwam rak* and that of the female quixote narrative, one notable difference is that San Thewarak portrays Chuangchan, the heroine of the former, as a New Woman who believes in gender equality. In the first diary entry, she describes her long-time aspiration to "do good for the masses even though [she] is just a small and insignificant person" (San 1961: 1: 5). However, she complains that her aunt and uncle, who raised her since she lost her parents at a young age, prevented her from doing so. According to Chuangchan, her aunt disagreed with her when she wanted to enrol in nursing school, and her uncle objected when she wanted to teach at an all-girls school (San 1961: 1:5). So, unlike the real-life Thai New Women who were entering formal education and professional careers, Chuangchan must forego her aspiration and content herself with staying at home and doing nothing of importance.

[20]Notably, Chuangchan lost both of her parents, unlike the heroines in female quixote narratives of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Britain, who typically lost only a mother.

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Despite not being able to do more with her life, Chuangchan still maintains her conviction in gender equality. She writes, "At home, we are women. In politics, we are political scientists […] And on the battlefield, we are warriors. We can be everything that men can" (San 1961: 1: 242). As the literary critic Chusak Pattrakulvanit notes in his essay "*Bandai haeng khwam rak* thoe likit chiwit bon lumsop somburanayasitthirat" [*Bandai haeng khwam rak* penning herself on the death of absolute monarchy], Chuangchan's attitude aligns her with "the first-wave feminists. They were a group of upper and upper-middle-class women in the West who, in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, demanded women's rights such as suffrage, property rights, and rights to education" (2016: 127). In other words, her attitude makes her a New Woman.

Not only is Chuangchan portrayed as a New Woman, but she is also associated with reading fiction, like the British New Women almost half a century earlier. Chuangchan mentions her reading at the very beginning of the novel. She writes, "I know French quite well […] but have not had a chance to put it to good use aside from reading foreign fiction, catalogues, and sewing books" (San 1961: 1: 4). Throughout the novel, she mentions several authors and fictional works that she has read. She writes, for instance, that she "worship[s] Jean-Jacques Rousseau's motto: '[A] good reputation is the best memorial man can have'" (San 1961: 1: 4). Although Rousseau is best known today for his philosophical works, he also wrote fiction, so it remains unclear whether Chuangchan has read his fictional or non-fictional pieces. However, the other authors that she mentions are clearly writers of fiction. These authors include the canonical playwright William Shakespeare, the popular French author and playwright Alexandre Dumas fils, and an English writer named Gilbert, probably William Gilbert or his son W.S. Gilbert.

It is clear from Chuangchan's description that her reading profoundly influences her. As mentioned above, the heroine claims that she agrees with Rousseau's motto and wants to lead her life by it. However, most of the influence that fiction exerts on Chuangchan concerns matters of love. The passages that she quotes from Shakespeare, Dumas, and Gilbert are all about courtship, love, and marriage. For example, she recalls a passage from Dumas: "Of all the follies that man can unwittingly commit, I would like to advise him against one, marriage, for it is the only folly he can repeat every single day" (San 1961: 1: 71). After citing this quote, Chuangchan says that because marriage can be a folly, as Dumas has warned, she tries not to accept anyone's proposal before ensuring that she is truly in love with him. This particular example seems to show Chuangchan to be a discerning reader who chooses high-quality fiction to read and gleans sensible life lessons from it.

As a New Woman, Chuangchan is connected to reading novels. The fiction that she reads may not be the typical New Woman fiction that promotes women's advancement, but Chuangchan learns from it nevertheless. However, *Bandai haeng khwam rak* shares many plot elements with eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Britain's female quixote narratives, so Chuangchan is both a New Woman and a female quixote. Although she starts out as a discerning reader of fiction, she quickly becomes someone whose reading effortlessly sweeps her away. For example, Chuangchan tells another character in the novel that "the books that [she] like[s] to read are mostly fiction, but what [she] like[s] most of all are novels" (San 1961: 2: 205). Although she does not specify what type of novel she prefers, it becomes evident, as the story progresses, that Chuangchan particularly likes reading romances. She likes reading them so much that, in true female quixote fashion, she starts imagining her life as a piece of fiction and herself as the heroine in it.

As Chusak observes in his essay, "When recounting her refusal of Thada's proposal, [Chuangchan] portrays herself as a woeful heroine because the man who proposes to her does so not because he loves her but rather because he has been rejected by a better and more beautiful woman" (Chusak 2016: 129). The same is true of Chuangchan's representation of her relationship with the mysterious Wara. After she finds the lost wallet, Chuangchan writes in her diary, "Everything has begun well. A young lady from a good family has found a wallet with the initials Wo.Wo.Wo., which probably refers to the name of a handsome young man who passed her on her morning walk." "Fate will bring the two together" (San 1961: 1: 55), Chuangchan fantasises. "They will get to know each other," she continues. "They will become close, closeness will turn into friendship, and friendship will turn into—" (San 1961: 1: 54–55). It is clear from Chuangchan's diary entry that she imagines her relationship with Wara as an episode straight out of a romance novel. She even makes this connection explicit after receiving one of Wara's letters and writing, "All this—all that is the first chapter of a romance in which I have been invited to act as the heroine" (San 1961: 1: 135).

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As mentioned earlier, a reader of the journal *Satrithai* claimed that reading fiction contributed to the backwardness of Thai women. *Bandai haeng khwam rak* unintentionally corroborates this claim by showing how her reading of fiction distracts Chuangchan from her New Woman aspirations. At the novel's beginning, the protagonist espouses the idea of gender equality. She believes that women can accomplish anything that men can, and she yearns to do more with her own life. However, as the novel progresses and Chuangchan becomes more and more immersed in her romantic fantasy, she seems to neglect all her ideals. Chuangchan's reaction towards the 1932 revolution demonstrates that she is interested only in her budding romance with Wara.[21] The revolution that promised to bring democracy to the country had implications for everyone fighting for equality, including women. Yet, Chuangchan displays far more interest in Wara's letter to her than in the monumental incident that has just taken place. She writes, "Enough with the gossips and the opinions about the change in the system of government. It may be interesting but probably not more so than his letter" (San 1961: 1: 131). In describing her letter to him, Chuangchan writes that most of it is an account of the revolution, "which [she is] too lazy to copy down in [the] diary" (San 1961: 1: 136). The only passage she does copy from her letter to Wara indirectly tells him that she believes they are meant for each other. Chuangchan's choice in what she reproduces in her diary evinces that her New Woman ideals have firmly taken a backseat to her romance.

Knowing the effect that fiction has on Chuangchan, the male characters decide to exploit it to drive her even further away from her New Woman ideals. Towards the end of the novel, both Chuangchan and the reader discover that Wara does not exist but is the creation of Thada's friends. One such friend composed all of his letters to Chuangchan, namely Pricha Phatthanarangsi, a professional fiction writer. Thus, it seems as though Thada's friends wrote a piece of fiction for Chuangchan to read and imagine herself as the heroine therein. Its ostensible aim is to make Chuangchan gradually fall in love with Wara, whom the friends created in Thada's likeness. However, the near-end of the novel clarifies that these male characters also use the opportunity to convert Chuangchan from a New Woman into a traditional one. They do so by having Wara voice the same criticisms against the New Woman that circulated in the press when San Thewarak wrote *Bandai haeng khwam rak*.

In one of his later letters to Chuangchan, Wara paints a critical picture of contemporary Thai women. He tells her, "Most women today are only physically female […] Their manners […] have been corrupted by modern civilisation so that they are different from those of real women" (San 1961: 2: 180). He later expands on this idea of "modern civilisation" by writing, "We are adopting the strange and new ways of the West. We are just like someone who is starting on absinth and are drunk on the sweetness of the green liquid" (San 1961: 2: 181). When absinth's poisonous effects start to manifest themselves, it is already too late to abstain from its consumption. According to Wara, the same is true of the way Thai women adopted Western traditions. They would soon discover their harmful effects, but it would already be too late. Echoing the prevailing derision of the New Woman, Wara portrays her as a Westernised and masculinised woman. He tells Chuangchan in the same letter that "in this day and age, we will see women take up many of men's jobs, demand their rights […], and, if possible, take the reins on world domination" (San 1961: 2: 182). Very few remain "real women" who confine themselves within the bounds of tradition, "within the household, and within the kitchen" (San 1961: 2: 182). Wara makes it obvious, however, that he desires this rare breed of traditional womanhood.

Thada's friends succeed in their goal to convert Chuangchan from a New Woman into a traditional one, as we see from Chuangchan's remarks. After reading Wara's letter, she writes, "My dear Wara! You have taught me to think and to understand so many things" (San 1961: 2: 188). Later in the diary entry, Chuangchan expands on what she means. She notes, "Wara wants a housewife who is a real woman, a mother who will take care of his children, a spice in the kitchen, the honor of the house, and the darling of his heart" (San 1961: 2: 191). Knowing what Wara looks for in a woman, Chuangchan "starts to understand why her aunt and uncle have tried to deter […] her from every single one of [her] ambitions, why they have groomed [her] into someone who stays at home and who loves housework (San 1961: 2: 191). At the novel's beginning, Chuangchan was, as we may recall, upset with her aunt and uncle for preventing her from achieving her New Woman ideals. Her correspondence with Wara has, however, ultimately

[21]In June 1932, a group of civilians and soldiers who called themselves "Khana Ratsadon" (The People's Party) overthrew King Rama VII's government and effectively changed the system of government from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

turned her around and made her appreciate their efforts. In other words, the fiction that Thada's friends supplied successfully converted Chuangchan from a New Woman into a traditional one.

Conclusion

British literary history routinely associated women with fiction, especially with the novel. It often perceived this correlation as a threat to male cultural authority and subsequently led to the female quixote trope's invocation. This theme became popular during the rise of the novel in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries and the New Woman's arrival at the fin-de-siècle. In Siam/Thailand, the birth of fiction and the woman reader's emergence coincided in the 1920s and led to the latter's description as a female quixote, as in Britain. This depiction of the woman reader lies at the heart of San Thewarak's *Bandai haeng khwam rak*, which tells the story of Chuangchan, a female quixote who is finally cured by a male agent. As we have seen, the cure takes the form of fiction that a group of men writes for the heroine to read. However, Chuangchan is not just a regular girl but a New Woman who believes in and strives for gender equality. Thus, her fiction reading not only steers her away from her intended match but also distracts her from her loftier goals.

San and other critics of the New Woman might have viewed this distraction positively because it facilitated a conversion of the heroine from a New Woman into a traditional one. For the same reason, those who supported women's causes saw it as a potential danger. The editors of the New Woman journal *Satrithai* did, on more than one occasion, publish warnings about the potentially detrimental effects of fiction reading on women's advancement. However, as a journal that depended on sales revenue, it could not afford to keep a genre as popular as fiction out of its pages for long. As a solution, the editors proposed the publication of what they called "true fiction" [niyai khwam ching]. In their 1927 call for submission of this "true fiction," these editors described how regular fiction was not based on truth and was mainly entertainment. In contrast, "true fiction" was based on real events and aimed to impart moral values to the readers (*Satrithai* 1927: 14–15).

In a "true fiction" piece called "Somrot Anat" [Wretched Marriage], the author describes how a young woman with "a habit of reading the new fiction" falls in love quickly with a young man (Siyatsadon 1927: 15). Like Chuangchan and other female quixotes, the young woman imagines that this man "would be the hero of her romance novel" (Siyatsadon 1927: 15). Instead of telling us about the obstacles that the pair has to overcome before finding lasting happiness, as regular fiction might have done, however, this piece of "true fiction" paints a grim picture of their union and describes it as doomed from the start. The author then ends the story by urging the reader to see it as a warning that "getting married in haste without having made careful considerations would always bring one great suffering" (Siyatsadon 1927: 16).

So, as we have seen, the coincidence of the rising popularity of fiction and the emergence of the woman reader in the 1920s caused widespread anxieties in Thai society. Defenders of male cultural authority viewed this reader as a threat and attempted to exert control over her by depicting her as a female quixote whose fiction reading easily led her astray. Thai New Women, such as the editors of *Satrithai,* saw fiction reading as a potential threat to their cause, so they too described the emerging woman reader as a female quixote. However, their business's sustainability depended on the publication of fiction, so the *Satrithai* editors had to reconcile fiction's popularity with its potentially detrimental effects on women readers. This reconciliation took the form of didactic fiction that clarified to the reader how it should be read and interpreted. Publication of this type of fiction allowed the editors of *Satrithai* to take advantage of fiction's popularity with women readers and exert control over them by managing what they read and how they read it. Thus, even though early-twentieth-century Siam/Thailand saw marked improvements in many areas of women's lives, there seems to have been a consensus concerning fiction reading between the more conservative and progressive sectors of the society. They concluded that the average Thai woman was not yet ready for full freedom and autonomy and that her reading had to be tightly managed and controlled.

Acknowledgements. This article is part of a research project funded by the Thailand Research Fund (now Thailand Science Research and Innovation) and Chulalongkorn University (RSA6080083). The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Thailand Research Fund or Chulalongkorn University.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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Cite this article: Chaochuti T (2022). The Perils of Reading Fiction: the Female Quixote and the Thai New Woman. *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* **10**, 75–84. https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.5