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Abstract
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Keywords
Tabitha Tenney, Female Quixotism, women

Cover page footnote
Thanks to Karl Woelz, Judy Harris, and Dawn Vernooy-Epp for their inveterate attention, indulgence, and insights; to the anonymous *ECF*readers for their constructive advice; and to my students in early American studies, whose understandable impatience with Dorcasina's recalcitrance helped kindle this argument.

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W.C. Harris

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Without denying the conservatism of *Female Quixotism* on such themes as class and nationality, this essay attends to contradictory impulses in the text that work against retrenchment and mark this novel as relatively progressive on matters of gender. *Female Quixotism* can easily be read as an indictment of sentimental novels and their reputed deleterious effects on female readers or, in a more progressive vein, as a counter to that attack. Tenney addresses not simply the isolation of women who read sentimental fiction but that of all educated women. In this essay, I read Dorcasina as a comic figure who nonetheless registers sober truths about the affective and social options that women faced in late eighteenth-century America. Do the delusions of Tenney's heroine enable intentionality and permit some degree of control over one's story? A lack of such control is precisely what early American seduction novels obsessively and simultaneously mourned and exhorted to the (female) reading public.

"Women love to have their own way, and when their freaks hurt nobody it is well enough to indulge them."—Mr Sheldon, in *Female Quixotism*[1]

A NUMBER of critics describe *Female Quixotism* as a conservative text. This sort of reading seems driven partly by the apparent conservatism of Tabitha Gilman Tenney's husband, Samuel, who, as a Federalist senator during the Adams administration, opposed Jeffersonian policy at every opportunity and voted for

[1] Tabitha Gilman Tenney, *Female Quixotism: Exhibited in the Romantic Opinions and Extravagant Adventures of Dorcasina Sheldon*, ed. Jean Nienkamp and Andrea Collins, foreword Cathy N. Davidson (1801; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 214. References are to this edition. Thanks to Karl Woelz, Judy Harris, and Dawn Vernooy-Epp for their inveterate attention, indulgence, and insights; to the anonymous *ECF* readers for their constructive advice; and to my students in early American studies, whose understandable impatience with Dorcasina's recalcitrance helped kindle this argument.

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the extension of the controversial and unpopular Alien and Sedition Acts (the eighteenth-century equivalent of the 2001 Patriot Act), enacted in response to the French Terror. But it seems hasty to conclude that Tabitha Tenney shared her husband's opinions, as if she were no more than an extension of him. Without denying the novel's conservative vectoring along certain axes (class and nationality in particular), critics should not only keep in mind the contradictory impulses in the text that work against retrenchment (the "interplay" of "radical and conservative tendencies," as Cynthia J. Miecznikowski puts it),[2] but also attend to that which marks *Female Quixotism* as progressive on matters of gender, at least within the bounds of what can fairly be considered progressive in the early American context.

As Cathy N. Davidson points out in *Revolution and the Word*—a critical intervention that helped transform early American literary study by taking seriously those works earlier critics had dismissed on the basis of sentiment or didacticism—reading early American novels as critiques of repressive gender ideology is not necessarily (at least not always) a matter of wishful backward projection on the part of critics.[3] *Female Quixotism* can easily be read as an indictment of sentimental novels and their reputed deleterious effects on female readers (part of a common contemporary attack on the novel genre as a whole), or even, in a more progressive vein, as a counter to that attack (arguing for educational parity for women by illustrating, in comic exaggeration, how confinement to traditionally feminine interests disserves women).[4] However, such readings, even the more progressive ones, do not do full justice to *Female Quixotism*'s complexity, its invitation to subtler,

[2] Cynthia J. Miecznikowski, "The Parodic Mode and the Patriarchal Imperative: Reading the Female Reader(s) in Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism*," *Early American Literature* 25, no. 1 (1990): 34.

[3] Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (1986; expanded edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 35–37. It is thanks to Davidson's phenomenal recovery work, her inclusion of *Female Quixotism* in *Revolution and the Word*, and her work as editor for the Oxford University Press Early American Women Writers series that Tenney's novel is on the map at all today.

[4] The argument that women's intellectual abilities were inferior not by nature but because of imposed hindrances, such as restricted education, was a commonplace in late eighteenth-century proto-feminist arguments. See, for example, Judith Sargent Murray, *On the Equality of the Sexes* (1790), in *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray,* ed. Sharon M. Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3–14; and Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Miriam Brody (1792; New York: Penguin, 2004).

more ambiguous readings. Tenney is addressing not simply the isolation of women who read sentimental fiction but of educated women in toto. Many likely suitors, we are told, have been dissuaded from pursuing Dorcasina by the "inconveniences which would result from having a wife whose mind was fraught with ideas of life and manners so widely different from what they appear on trial" (14)—perhaps a pragmatic as well as a valuative judgment. Yet the narrator indicates a broader, more worrying inhibition: "It was sufficient to keep [men] at a distance, to know that she read at all. Those enemies to female improvement, thought a woman had no business with any book but the bible, or perhaps the art of cookery; believing that every thing beyond these served only to disqualify her for the duties of domestic life" (14). A sombrely dissonant break in a novel that spends most of its time ridiculing its heroine's "blindness and infatuation," this moment invites the reader to take Dorcasina more seriously, as a comic figure who nonetheless registers sober truths about the affective and social options women faced in late eighteenth-century America and, furthermore, registers a bid for expanded female agency, a Foucauldian reverse discourse[5] of fantasy that is not, following contemporary ideology, a debilitating, constitutive female weakness but rather an enabling apparatus of agency.

My primary critical move is to take seriously one of the novel's central comic thematic devices: reading Dorcasina's "blindness" to her suitors' true, malicious intentions as marking a general epistemological crisis, an interrogation of what it is that vouches for the correctness of anyone's perspective, not merely Dorcasina's. Although it might appear obvious that it is Dorcasina who fails to see the reality that every other character sees clearly, it is worth asking what she sees, or rather perceives, that her father, her maid, and her prospective lovers all fail to see. A good deal can be gained by entertaining the seemingly counterintuitive notion that, far from being the deluded victim of others' designs (suitors and novelist alike), Dorcasina's fantasies are—and also potentiate—acts of choice. Just as the novel is presented as a true story compiled by a narrator who gets the facts directly from Dorcasina herself, the delusions of Tenney's heroine should not be dismissed without at least asking whether

[5] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (1976; New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 101.

fantasy might not enable intentionality, whether it might not permit or at least strive towards some degree of control over one's story, that is, over one's life. A lack of such control—and a passive compliance in that lack—is precisely what the early American seduction novel as a whole obsessively as well as simultaneously mourns and exhorts to its (female) reading public. *Female Quixotism*, being inescapably of its time, is built on such commonplaces. Take the misogynistic postulate of female capriciousness, vanity, and impotence voiced by Dorcasina's father: "Women love to have their own way, and when their freaks [that is, whims] hurt nobody it is well enough to indulge them" (214). Tenney's ventriloquizing contains a subversive undercurrent, however, as Dorcasina illustrates that getting one's own way, though possibly the result of indulgence, can just as easily be the result of intention and control on the part of the indulged party. Caprice (or "freaks") may connote cogency rather than feebleness; instead of resulting from a lack of restraint, whims may induce control, bring those presuming to brandish agency to yield it up.

At the novel's close, Dorcasina acknowledges that she has "grown grey in chasing a shadow"—a contrite sentiment consistent with the general tone of her retirement from the marriage market and her devotion to public works, recounted in her letter to Harriot that ends the text. It would seem that Dorcasina is making the long overdue admission that forty-odd years of waiting for a suitor who speaks the language of novelistic romance have been in vain. And yet Dorcasina's actions are not entirely those of someone who has learned her lesson, if that lesson is that novel reading warps one's judgment. She continues to read the very novels that "pervert[ed her] judgment," that, according to her friend Mrs Stanly, "infect[ed her] mind" like "a poison" (323, 325, 16). Far from rationalizing her persistence in habits that the entire novel has supposedly (from the narrator's perspective, perhaps) been directed at chastising her for, Tenney's heroine is unrepentant in a critical sense: romantic novels "now amuse without the power of injuring me, for, in that respect, they have already done their utmost. I read them with the same relish, the same enthusiasm as ever; but, instead of expecting to realize scenes and situations so charmingly pourtrayed, I only regret that such unalloyed felicity is, in this life,

unattainable" (325). Of course, if one reads Tenney as critiquing particular ways of (mis)reading, then Dorcasina now reads novels as a different text than she does life; but that seems all the sadder and more incisive a critique: for Dorcasina now understands—or admits that she understands—the wide breach separating the circumstances and possibilities of women's lives in the early republic from romantic scenarios. And while the professed goal of the novel's didactic frame is to highlight the dissimilarity of fact and fiction,[6] that objective is partly countermanded by the fact that Dorcasina's delusions in a certain sense are her reality. Although she is finally disabused of her romantic ideas, and although none of the romantic plots she enters into pays off in terms of marriage, her fantasy life nonetheless exerts some sway over others. If only to humour her, or even in their attempts to disabuse her, those advocates for reality must enter at least partially into Dorcasina's constructions, playing roles she has designed for them.[7]

6 See Stephen Carl Arch, "'Falling into Fiction': Reading *Female Quixotism*," in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 14, no. 2 (2002): 177–98.

7 For a British equivalent of what is going on in my reading of *Female Quixotism*, Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (written ca. 1798 and published posthumously in 1818) might appear a sensible starting place. In comparing *Northanger Abbey* to *Female Quixotism,* the following issues arise: does the consistency of Catherine's delusion differ from Dorcasina's? Does Catherine's way of seeing/reading conjure a critique of other ways of seeing, as Dorcasina's does? My responses would be "yes" and "no," respectively. Catherine's ingenuousness and habitual misreading may constitute a form of social critique, but her fantasy is less persistent and totalizing than Dorcasina's. The Gothic romances she reads may cause her to misread social cues, but her fantasies turn dark and all-consuming only for five chapters rather late in the novel, and then partly at the suggestion of Henry Tilney, who plants the seed of delusion in Catherine's mind as they travel to the abbey. In Austen's novel, delusion seems ultimately less protective (if, the conservative reading would have it, also less damaging) to the reader/seer. Attempts to read agency into Austen's heroine are not as successful as they might be with a character like Dorcasina. Terry F. Robinson suggests that Catherine Morland might not be sincere when she capitulates to the majoritarian (non-romantic) way of reading. Robinson, "'A mere skeleton of history': Reading Relics in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*," *European Romantic Review* 17, no. 2 (2006): 222–23. However, in terms of a progressive reading, the unpleasant fact remains that she marries into a family where one woman (General Tilney's dead wife), though she has not been murdered as Catherine first imagines, has already been intimidated and erased. As Natalie Neill pinpoints, "it is Catherine's reading of Gothic fiction [not Henry's tutelage] that serves her best ... Austen is more intent on expressing her suspicion of received ideas and face value readings than in reforming Catherine, whose Gothic imaginings in fact express an intuitive response to General Tilney that is not altogether incorrect." Neill, "'The trash

Readings of the novel as traditionalist stem also from the influence of literary precedent and of context. In title, characterization, and structure, Tenney's novel is of course modelled on Miguel Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605; 1615). Other authors had previously taken Cervantes' comic hero as their inspiration—Henry Fielding in *Joseph Andrews* (1742), for example—and Charlotte Lennox feminized the picaresque in *The Female Quixote* (1752). Critics who read *Female Quixotism* as a politically and socially reactionary text include Scott Paul Gordon, Linda Frost, and Stephen Carl Arch.[8] Based on the limitations of eighteenth-century women's roles, Gordon wishes to counter the

> critical consensus [that] views female quixotism as a strategy to subvert patriarchal oppression, enabling heroines to act and speak in ways the dominant culture aims to suppress. This claim, however, registers our critical desires more than it attends to the contours of female quixotic narratives themselves. Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752) and Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism* (1801) are

with which the press now groans': *Northanger Abbey* and the Gothic Best Sellers of the 1790s," *Eighteenth-Century Novel* 4 (2004): 184–85. Gothically kindled fantasy may show her the General's character (even though she mistakes his exact deeds), but this insight is, I would argue, not enough to save her—from the fate that Dorcasina avoids, at least. Ironic deflation of Catherine's Gothic fantasies aside, such a precedent undercuts the promise of escape or triumph in Robinson's reading. Whereas reading and fantasy allow Catherine to see but not to escape the everyday horrors of female subjection and patriarchal triumph, reading and fantasy prevent Dorcasina's being utterly subsumed into patriarchy and convention by creating an alternative narrative. Even when Dorcasina abandons delusion, she does so not to marry or to refute or relinquish her former agency. Catherine does the latter, no matter how much irony Austen frames that refusal with. This single comparison, at least, paints *Female Quixotism* as fairly progressive for the period, particularly in its positive depiction of female reading, delusion, and agency. Perhaps not until Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1854) would American literature encounter a more progressive angle on these issues. On the woman question, *Female Quixotism* stands as a forerunner in the development of novels by and about women in the early nineteenth century.

8 Sharon M. Harris reads the novel as reactionary on questions of race, nation, and class, but progressive in regard to gender in "Lost Boundaries: The Use of the Carnivalesque in Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism*," in *Speaking the Other Self: American Women Writers,* ed. Jeanne Campbell Reesman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 216–26. Scott Paul Gordon provides an insightful overview of seventeenth-century quixotic texts with predominantly male protagonists as well as eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century texts about female quixotes. Gordon, *The Practice of Quixotism: Postmodern Theory and Eighteenth-Century Women's Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 27–41.

> *profoundly* conservative narratives that isolate imaginations that fail to conform to "common sense" as aberrant, in need of discipline: each narrative cures the Quixote so she can finally view the world as those around her have always viewed it. While these novels level a critique at the world that surrounds the quixote, neither portrays quixotism as a creative reformation or escape from that sordid reality; instead, these texts insist that quixotism disables women from understanding either their own nature or the world around them.[9]

Gordon goes on to refute the idea that Dorcasina "deliberately appropriates quixotism *in order to* elude the marriages prescribed for her."[10] My argument—regarding Tenney at least—thus runs counter to Gordon's: Dorcasina's adventures afford an alternate way of playing at narrative, postponing marriages that are unlikely to be as happy as her romanticized courtships, and thus rewriting the stories women are able to tell and the choices they are able to make. Contrary to Gordon, I regard Dorcasina's quixotism as a "creative reformation," a protest against the possibilities that American women faced in the late eighteenth century. While Gordon's essay covers both *The Female Quixote* and *Female Quixotism*, it is worth noting that the wishfully progressive readings to which he objects concern Lennox's novel, not Tenney's.[11]

9 Gordon, "Female Quixotism: Charlotte Lennox and Tabitha Tenney," in *Cervantes in The English-Speaking World*, ed. Darió Fernández-Morera and Michael Hanke (Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 2005), 127 (emphasis added).

10 Gordon, "Female Quixotism," 130.

11 See Gordon, "Female Quixotism," 129n6. The readings of *The Female Quixote* viewed by Gordon as unduly liberal include George Haggerty, *Unnatural Affections: Women and Fiction in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 124, 127–28, 136; Laurie Langbauer, *Women and Romance: The Consolations of Gender in the English Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 84–85; Margaret Anne Doody, introduction to *The Female Quixote*, ed. Margaret Dalziel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), xxv; and David Marshall, "Writing Masters and 'Masculine Exercises' in *The Female Quixote*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 5, no. 2 (1993): 120. Although Gordon might object on similar grounds to Sharon Smith Palo's reading of *The Female Quixote* in "The Good Effects of a Whimsical Study: Romance and Women's Learning in Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 18, no. 2 (2006): 1–26, I find Palo's argument both convincing and persuasively applicable to *Female Quixotism*. Palo views Charlotte Lennox as "critiqu[ing] the ideal" of female education that encourages "self-denial and restraint" and "explor[ing] the potential of female education to completely reshape women's role within society, particularly within the public sphere" (2).

Interestingly, in Gordon's book *The Practice of Quixotism: Postmodern Theory and Eighteenth-Century Women's Writing* (2006)—which includes his analysis of *Female Quixotism*—he argues for a "liberal" brand of quixotism, a category in which he does not, however, include Tenney's novel. In this far-ranging analysis of quixotism, Gordon distinguishes "orthodox" quixotism from more radical types of quixotism. Novels characterized by orthodox quixotism feature heroes and heroines who are decidedly mad or deluded and "allow readers to reaffirm the stark distinctions between reality and delusion and to rest comfortably with—indeed to strengthen their confidence in—the validity of their own vision." By contrast, Gordon reserves the term "disrupt[ive]" quixotism for those novels that, instead of affirming readers' "epistemological superiority," "frustrate [their] desire to assume the mantle of objective vision with which they might comfortably observe a deluded quixote, and in so doing they seem to imply that we are all quixotes."[12] Some might concur with Gordon that Tenney does not confuse her readers as to the objectivity of their perspectives on the world compared to Dorcasina's. Novels about "disrupt[ive]" quixotes, writes Gordon, "trick readers into seeing things as the quixote does; instead of offering multiple perspectives on objects or events only to authorize one and ridicule others, they leave readers unable to choose between alternatives; instead of offering readers a vantage point from which they can confidently know the 'real,' they deny readers any reliable ground from which to gain clear sight."[13] Admittedly, *Female Quixotism* does not throw readers into epistemological confusion; we remain fairly certain that it is Dorcasina who is deluded and not her friends or family (in part because the narrator keeps reminding the reader that Dorcasina is the confused party). But while the novel does not "trick" us into "seeing things" as she does, it conveys sympathetically the desirability of doing so. While the novel hardly "leave[s us] unable to choose between alternatives," it exudes the pathos of being denied that alternative, or of being deprived of having any alternative. Agreeing with Gordon's general argument about quixotism's power to "disrupt" but not with his resistance to reading Dorcasina as a disruptive

[12] Gordon, *The Practice of Quixotism,* 6, 8.

[13] Gordon, *The Practice of Quixotism,* 6.

figure, it is my contention that *Female Quixotism* practises its own form of "disrupt[ive]" quixotism, whereby it accomplishes something equally potent: forcefully demonstrating the tenacity of imagination and desire, the ability—despite the likelihood or possibility of eventual defeat—to mould the world to one's own vision, and to do so not simply out of selfishness but as a refusal of what is manifestly undesirable and inequitable in the world as it exists. Although Dorcasina's life illustrates the failure of delusion to utterly win the day—to stave off defeat, to create an alternate reality—the novel ends with a confirmation of quixotism as an instrument not merely of exercising desire but also of surviving.

Among the few critics besides Gordon who discuss *Female Quixotism*, Frost and Arch find little that is radical in it.[14] Miecznikowski's reading is mixed (as noted above), although her focus is more on genre and narratology than gender. Davidson, Sharon M. Harris, and Sevda Çaliskan have read the novel more radically (that is, as proto-feminist) but have not read its heroine, as I do, as being consciously, wilfully deluded, and in a positive sense. While I do not dispute Tenney's conservatism on fronts such as race, nationality, and class, my sympathies in an argument about gender lie with the more progressive readings. Failing to read Dorcasina as a conscious rather than an unconscious figure, however, dilutes the progressiveness of these previous readings: whatever points a novelist like Tenney scores, her critiques would be more forceful if accomplished through a character's conscious actions, especially when that critique targets gender ideology and when the character in question is female. If Dorcasina were to succeed only in spite of herself, the loss of intentionality takes some of the bite out of an argument about female agency made by a female author.

Without question, as readers of *Female Quixotism* we must, as Davidson notes in *Revolution and the Word*, remain attentive to our difference and distance from Tenney's original audience. The

[14] See Linda Frost, "The Body Politics in Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism*," *Early American Literature* 32, no. 2 (1997): 113–30; Arch, 194, 197–98; and Miecznikowski, 34, 39, 41–42. Although Arch sets out to deliver a more "ambiguous" interpretation than either Frost (conservative) or Davidson and Sharon M. Harris (radical), in the end Arch's reading seems to veer more towards the conservative. More radical readings include those by Davidson (274–80) and Sharon M. Harris (213–28).

debate over novels' cultural valence (progressive or reactionary) is particularly tenacious in regard to early American seduction novels such as *Female Quixotism* or Hannah Foster Webster's *The Coquette*: questioning the modern desire for a more pleasing, less backward past that may lead us to read a feminism or progressivism into a text when it is simply not there, or not to the extent we wish it to be. My position is that, given the documented spectrum of thought on women's roles and capacities in the early republic, reading authors like Hannah Foster or Tabitha Tenney as progressive in certain areas does not constitute the sort of critical interpolation against which New Historicism cautions. Contextually speaking, ideas regarding women's duties, rights, and education were not uniformly conservative in the early republic.[15] It is true that our readings are inescapably ours, no matter how firmly we anchor them

[15] On the co-existence of voices both questioning and touting contemporary ideals of femininity, see Davidson, 201–15. Is it possible for a text to be politically progressive in relation to gender and not in relation to everything else (class, race, and so on)? My initial response (one that requires further work to be refined in either direction) is "for the eighteenth century, yes." While this might seem a half-measure from the vantage of twentieth-century arguments for equality for women and racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities, New Historicism reminds us to beware that sort of slippage. We need not resort to temporal qualification, however—and not merely because pronouncing Tenney's politics "not bad for the eighteenth century" smacks of facile presentism and smug satisfaction with our latter-day triumph over the benighted ignorance of our predecessors. If it seems puzzling (and not merely discomfiting) that a text can be simultaneously and sincerely feminist and racist (or classist, or xenophobic), Eve Sedgwick points out that most subjects' loyalties are divided according to the conflicting identitarian alliances and communities that hail them: "the person who is disabled through one set of oppressions may *by the same positioning* be enabled through others ... [So] all oppressions are [not] congruent, but ... *differently* structured and so must intersect in complex embodiments." Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 33. Another issue worthy of further discussion, an issue evoked by our retrospective relation to Davidson's pioneering work, regards the vicissitudes of progressive and reactionary readings within feminist recovery work. See, for example, Debra Malina on the re-evaluation of the position of Lennox's *The Female Quixote* on "the power of romance" in "Rereading the Patriarchal Text: *The Female Quixote, Northanger Abbey,* and the Trace of the Absent Mother," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 8, no. 2 (1996): 277. To what extent, we might ask, were women's texts recovered during the 1980s read progressively, if unconsciously so, out of a desire to secure canonicity, and how might later critics consequently have felt freer to delve into the same works' flaws (meaning, their reactionary qualities)? My reading of *Female Quixotism* might serve, tangentially, to evoke a sense of how our reading of women's texts has changed over the two-and-a-half decades since Davidson's inaugural project.

to primary texts, contexts, and evidence. Yet *Female Quixotism* provides enough indications that dour didacticism, Federalist elitism, and French-Terror-inspired xenophobia were, though arguable influences for Tenney (see Miecznikowski and Frost), not her sole impetus. What does it say that this Federalist senator's wife, whether or not she shared her husband's political views, is promoting the beneficial effects of a wilful delusion? We may lack the requisite biographical information to answer such a question, but that lack fails to dull the subversive edge of Tenney's gambit, the narrative sublimation of psychological and political dissent—from behind the conservative mask she might have been expected to wear as a Federalist (or Federalist-by-marriage), from behind the normative visage she would have been presumed to wear as a woman, the values she and her readers were called on to agree with (even if they demurred or objected). Dorcasina's refusal to go quietly into courtship, marriage, and motherhood—or simply her empowerment through delusion—serves as more than a personal bid on Tenney's part against the chafing strictures of interpellation.

Dorcasina Sheldon's refusals to "see" the truth about the men who woo her or whom she pursues are likely to frustrate readers as much as they do those closest to her: her father, her maid Betty, and her closest friend in the latter portion of the novel, Harriot Stanly, who is the daughter of Dorcasina's childhood friend. To be fair, an inventory of her beaux reveals little that would seem dazzling, except to someone—as I argue—looking to be dazzled, someone not merely a victim of fantasy but its willing participant and perhaps active fabricator. After dismissing the suit of Lysander, the son of her father's friend, because the "coldness" of his proposal compares unfavourably with the "violent emotion" found in lovers' "letters in her favourite authors" ("nothing of angel or goddess, rapture or flames, in the whole letter," she complains) (13), Dorcasina becomes enamoured of the handsome but disreputable O'Connor, a recent Irish immigrant. O'Connor may be a card sharp with eyes for the Sheldon family fortune, but he is sufficiently au fait with the novelistic language of romance to thrill Dorcasina. The O'Connor episode lasts longer than any of her other courtships, and her stubbornness

in refusing to acknowledge the truth about his character makes this episode worth returning to for what it reveals about Tenney's problematization of sight, truth, and epistemology. From her twenties through her early fifties, Dorcasina has eight other suitors, some who pursue her and some whom she pursues: the itinerant schoolmaster Smith, who adopts the pseudonym Philander; Puff, a barber whom Philander goads into wooing Dorcasina; Captain Barry, a dashing military hero who recovers from an injury at the Sheldons' home and, although chased by Dorcasina, eventually marries Harriot Stanly; James, Captain Barry's servant, who courts Dorcasina while masquerading as his master; the wealthy merchant Mr Cumberland; John Brown, one of Dorcasina's own servants; Montague, who is really Harriot in male drag seeking to supplant Brown in Dorcasina's affections and thus prevent their marriage; and finally, Seymore, who turns out not just to be a political and religious dissident but to be already married.

More striking than any one suitor's characteristic is the consistency of what the narrator seems to frame as Dorcasina's epistemological obstinacy. *Female Quixotism* ascribes to the stock diagnosis for the genre: the quixote's delusions, which are the result of wrongheaded reading habits, are symptomatized primarily by disconnection. According to the narrator (also known as the Compiler), Dorcasina's problem is a "romantic imagination ... blinded to all sense of propriety, and regard to reputation. She was ... far gone with the novel-mania" (57). This might be overstating her derangement. Take the following description, couched in close third-person, of her father's view of the situation: "His daughter's blindness and infatuation, filled him with astonishment; and he regretted, now it was too late, his having indulged her in perusing those pernicious books, from which she had evidently imbibed the fatal poison, that seemed to have, beyond cure, disoriented every faculty of her mind" (50). Although these lines imply an almost total incapacitation, we are told elsewhere that Dorcasina is fairly level-headed when it comes to matters other than romance: "In every branch of her education, Miss Sheldon made great proficiency. She had received from nature a good understanding, a lively fancy, an amiable cheerful temper, and a kind and affectionate heart. What a number of valuable qualities were here blended! But it is a mortifying truth that perfection is not to be found in

human nature. With all these engaging endowments, she was unfortunately of a very romantic turn, and had a small degree of obstinacy, and a spice too much of vanity" (5). Thus a "romantic turn" is couched as one flaw amidst other admirable traits and competencies, not a pervasive shortcoming that undermines all her other faculties. Furthermore, this passage signals that Tenney has endowed her heroine perhaps with not so much an epistemological obstinacy as an obstinacy of will or desire, which implies a degree of agency neglected in most analyses of the novel.[16]

This is not to say that Tenney's heroine does not pursue illusory or ill-founded relationships, but rather that there is sufficient ambiguation, and thus room for argument, about the depth and extent of Dorcasina's "delusions." For example, at the novel's outset the narrator states Dorcasina's disconnection from reality as a given: "Her mind being so warped by the false and romantic ideas of love, which she had imbibed from her favourite authors, she never considered that the purest and most lasting affection is founded upon esteem and the amiable qualities of the mind, rather than on transitory personal attractions" (11). This is the reason given by the narrator for Dorcasina's refusal of her first marriage proposal (Lysander's). But the source of the tale we are reading, according to the prefatory letter addressed "TO ALL *Columbian Young Ladies, Who read* Novels *and* Romances" (3), is Dorcasina herself.[17] The Compiler, ostensibly, is the narrator, but we have no way to gauge how much of the tale—its detail, dialogue, and characterization—comes from Dorcasina herself or is the invention or embellishment of the Compiler. We might arguably read *Female Quixotism* as a fairly straight transcription of Dorcasina's tale as told by herself, making Dorcasina herself the Compiler. This hypothesis raises a whole set of issues about framing devices, attribution, and veracity (or claims to veracity)—all common characteristics of the early American novel and its native precursor, the captivity narrative.[18] (*Don*

16 One exception is Sevda Çaliskan's brief discussion in "The Coded Language of *Female Quixotism*," *Studies in American Humor* 3, no. 2 (1995): 30–31.

17 Arch incorrectly names Harriot Barry (née Stanly) as the Compiler's source (184).

18 In his discussion of American captivity narratives, Christopher Castiglia analyzes these and other related issues, including competition between author-subject and editor over ideological control of the narrative. Castiglia, *Bound and Determined: Captivity, Culture-Crossing, and White Womanhood*

Quixote, the model for any quixotic text, consciously foregrounds identical issues.) In relation specifically to Tenney's novel, this line of questioning underscores the relation between narrative control and personal agency, a relation that, I would argue, is at the heart of *Female Quixotism.* If it makes little sense for a woman to speak of herself in such disparaging terms (which would seem to weigh against the conclusion that Dorcasina is the Compiler), it seems hasty and differently problematic to read passages where Dorcasina is ridiculed as unquestionably coming from the hand of a Compiler who is not the heroine. Likewise, we must ask whether it is wise—or merely wishful—to assume that the moments in which Dorcasina is not portrayed disparagingly are traces of her own voice. We might also ask why we assume (or do we?) that the Compiler is male. Perhaps that assumption stems from the precedent of the many male editors, ministers, and other authorities who previously delivered up exemplary female lives and voices for public consumption (as Increase Mather did with Mary Rowlandson, and as Cotton Mather did with Hannah Dustan). *Female Quixotism*'s repeated diagnoses of Dorcasina's condition as delusion may, of course, be construed to be the Compiler's interpolations, or Dorcasina's penitent reflections on the error of her ways (a point I will return to in the following section). Bracketing these possibilities, we might consider a third still: that Dorcasina maintains a dual life paralleling her fiction-driven disconnect, on the one hand retrospectively playing the penitent, mouthing the expected acknowledgements of her own foolishness as she recounts her tale to the Compiler, while on the other hand still relishing her protracted, stubborn, indulgent escapades. For, as infuriating as her repeated pursuit of romantic mirages may be to those who ostensibly "know better" (her father, her maid, Tenney's readers), those episodes are also quite enjoyable. They are patently enjoyed by the narrator, who employs them.[19]

The most remarkable trait of Dorcasina's romantic fantasies is their visceral persistence, and consequently the somatic trauma that being disabused of them often causes her. While the critical tendency has been to interpret the tenacity of her fantasies as an

from Mary Rowlandson to Patty Hearst (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 16–40.

19 On the recurrent dilemma of morally prescriptive novels using immorality to make their case, see Davidson, 215–21.

index of female passivity (fantasies that Tenney either exhorts or contests, depending on one's reading of the novel's overall politics), we might do well to entertain the alternative. I assert that the doggedness of this quixote's illusions marks, contrary to previous readings, the strength of her agency (or at least her bid for agency), that she clings to these scenarios because they are of her own choosing, rather than a misapprehension she cannot control or a mirage she cannot escape. The end of the O'Connor episode provides the most pronounced example of Dorcasina's imaginative obduracy and the trauma incurred when her fantasies are finally dispelled. Once Mr Sheldon warns off O'Connor, the latter flees to Philadelphia. Absence does little to lessen her passion for O'Connor, however, when the newly arrived Philander, picking up town gossip about Dorcasina's escapades with O'Connor, plays a number of tricks on her in order to convince her that O'Connor has not left town and is still pursuing her. Throughout Philander's series of romantic jokes at Dorcasina's expense, she declares herself still faithful to her beloved O'Connor; her father's repeated arguments against O'Connor's character do nothing to revise her opinion of him. After the episode with Philander (which includes a comic abduction of Dorcasina and Betty by Philander and his accomplice, Puff the barber), her father decides that the distraction of a trip for the both of them to nearby Philadelphia will do her good. While in Philadelphia, he learns that O'Connor has been arrested for theft and, hoping that the shock of palpable reality will do the trick, arranges for the carriage bearing him and his daughter to pass the location where O'Connor is being publicly whipped for his crimes. The effect the sight has on Dorcasina is instantaneous and visceral: "They gave him the first stroke and she went into an hysteric fit ... It was a long time before she recovered ... [When] the sluices of her eyes were immediately opened ... she wept most bitterly" (144–45). Whereas neither other characters' arguments against O'Connor nor his own suspicious behaviour raised a scintilla of doubt in her mind, the incontrovertible sight of his bound, whipped body shocks her into submission—or at least shocks her. Initially she seems not so much to accept an agreed-upon reality as to be generally numbed to perception and cognition: "She was at a loss to comprehend the meaning of what she had seen. O'Connor in so disgraceful a situation

was a mystery she could not unravel. The account of the captain, who brought him over [and attested to his villainy] crossed her mind; and for a moment, her faith in the integrity of her lover was shaken. But suspicion was so disagreeable and unwelcome a guest, that she soon banished it" (1454–46). It should not be surprising—given the power of Dorcasina's imagination and the novel's epistemological concerns—that visual evidence fails to contradict Dorcasina's vision of the world.

When Dorcasina insists on the fiction that the "persecut[ed]" O'Connor has been unjustly arrested, her father presents more testimony: an authentic letter from Mr W. denying that he knows O'Connor, who previously forged a letter of reference by this friend of Mr Sheldon's. Although verbal testimony has had little effect before now, words, following hard on the heels of physical evidence, seem to possess a renewed potency:

> Conviction, now for the first time, flashed in the mind of Dorcasina. She could no longer resist the concurring testimony of so many witnesses. "Alas! Sir," said she, "who could have thought there was so much deceit in mankind!" Mr. Sheldon, more rejoiced at this short sentence, than at any he had ever before heard her utter, as he was thereby convinced that her eyes were at length opened to the worthlessness of O'Connor, mildly replied, "I have before, my dear, had occasion to observe to you, that your retired manner of life, and almost total ignorance of the world, led you to judge other people by your own virtuous and unsuspecting heart. You have now learnt a lesson, which I hope you will ever remember, and in future put less confidence in external appearances and empty professions." Dorcasina, extremely hurt and mortified at having been the dupe of such an arrant impostor, answered not a word. (147–48)

It is worth pausing to consider whether what we are witnessing is a moment of simple capitulation, or something more than an affirmation of reactionary ideas about women, reading, and intellect. We might pause to ask whose "deceit" Dorcasina is referencing. O'Connor's, certainly. But her words can be taken as an indictment not only of one lover's mendacity but also of the extent to which human action in toto is subject to exposure as deceitful, illusory. That fictions can be contradicted, shown up, or proven false might seem obvious; protesting the fact, wilfully jejune. And yet this is Dorcasina's—and, I would assert, *Female Quixotism*'s—complaint. It is a complaint of sufficient

poignancy and importance for women in the early republic to render it far from trivial or naive.

Other notes in Tenney's rendition of this supposedly critical dramatic moment have a similarly false ring, as if to hint at a lack of full sympathetic investment in the "taming" of Dorcasina. The heroine's bucolic isolation and unfamiliarity with the proverbial ways of the world feel too unsubstantial as an explanation and cannot possibly carry the weight they are being asked to carry here, and are repeatedly asked to support throughout the novel. To read Dorcasina's downfall as stemming from wide-eyed ignorance is to rob her of intelligence, to evacuate any possibility for agency, for the volition that, in my reading, her fantasies, clandestine meetings, and abductions in fact represent and communicate. Dorcasina misreads men such as O'Connor, Philander, and Brown not so much (or not only) because she "judge[s them] by [her] own virtuous and unsuspecting heart"; rather, she does so because she reads both them and herself as if they were characters in a romance novel. It is rather odd that in a novel about female quixotism—a novel ostensibly about the dangers of novel reading and improper female education—a moment of climactic reversal like the one above should fail to blame novels, reading, or education as one of its causes. It is also odd that Mr Sheldon should lay the blame on character flaws rather than on behaviour. Perhaps, though, he is on the right track—if unwittingly and unintentionally so. Perhaps the blame lies not with Dorcasina but with other people, with deceptive "external appearances and empty professions"—appearances and professions that, to be fair, temporarily fooled even Mr Sheldon himself. The problem left unsolved by Mr Sheldon's pat response is how to tell "empty professions" from substantial ones, how to ferret out inward "appearances." The narrator's lapse into hackneyed romantic diction ("having been the dupe of such an arrant impostor") undercuts the impact of the lesson Dorcasina is supposedly learning. Why should Dorcasina accept the notion that one man's duplicity predicates the duplicity of others? Why does O'Connor's fraudulence make Philander's or James's or Brown's a foregone conclusion? Dorcasina's taciturn deportment in the scene above is also suggestive. Aside from her tears, after her comment about "deceit in mankind," she is silent ("answered not a word"). Silence from someone who usually has no trouble

talking is arresting, and surely stems from a more significant reason than being "hurt and mortified at having been the dupe of such an arrant impostor." If the imposture were so arrant, so flagrant, then her failing to detect it might imply that she did not want to detect it. Certainly, her believing the lie comports with the narrative she has constructed for herself. It is one that gives her pleasure. When control of her narrative, or her ability to tell it convincingly, is forcibly seized by others (in this case, her father), the lie is conspicuous. What silences Dorcasina may include chagrin at her own credulity but, I contend, it also proceeds from a more saddening insight: that her life, like this fantasy, is not hers to control. In a way that evokes the vexed status of female agency on social as well as narrative terms, her story is not her own.

In retrospect, the O'Connor whipping scene provokes what is likely to become over the course of the novel an implicit, recurring question for reader and narrator alike: why does Dorcasina not learn from this first, visceral disillusion? Or rather, why, having learned once, having "seen the light," does she forget? Why does she repeatedly think the best of men who usually turn out to be the worst? Stupidity? Dimness? Or choice? The argument for choice gains strength from the numerous "lucid intervals" Dorcasina experiences, periods of several years at a time between adventures when she does not inhabit romantic baroque reveries, does not read the world around her as a romantic text.[20] Given that Dorcasina is "cured" more than once, it is difficult to characterize her condition as wholly involuntary or permanent. One might object that Dorcasina's lucid stretches correspond to those periods when no men are available to cast in her romantic storylines. Actually, that is very much to the point. The failure to imagine elaborate love stories when the basic raw materials are lacking vouches for her overall mental competence. If her mind had truly been "warped" by novel reading (11), isolation would be a minor obstacle.

We are left, then, with two useful approaches to the novel's epistemological crisis. The first is to take it seriously: to ask, "How *can* Dorcasina trust her sight, how can she verify one account of the world over another?" Read thus, *Female Quixotism* mirrors the conflict faced by many early American heroines (such as Hannah Foster's Eliza Wharton) torn between

[20] For representative passages, see Tenney, 200–4, 229, and 297–98.

women's cultural and political vantage and the social consensus that dismissed their bids for voice and agency. Like Eliza and Dorcasina, many such women were confronted by a chorus of voices that made them feel marginalized and outcast, or dismissed them as immature, wilful, even insane. The second approach is to pass beyond the symptom to the underlying cause. Call it what we will—obstinacy, an epistemological disconnect, mere foolishness—it is worth considering the extent to which delusion can be as much voluntary as involuntary, in short, the extent to which agency and not epistemology is the novel's crux. A telling clue to that crux resides in a remark Mrs Stanly makes about Dorcasina during the John Brown episode. Mrs Stanly, like her husband and daughter (Harriot), is alarmed at Dorcasina's declared intention to marry Brown, a servant she alleges to be a gentleman in disguise. Betty and Scipio, Dorcasina's servants, are equally alarmed, and much of this part of the novel details the coordinated efforts of members of the serving and upper classes to prevent a marriage that they object to as much for its class-crossing as its basis in Dorcasina's fantasy life. Expressing her bewilderment at Dorcasina's gentleman-in-disguise narrative, Mrs Stanly observes, "It is strange that people should see so differently" (254). Her remark can be taken two quite different ways: as an objection to marriage between a lady of property and a "common labourer," or as a frustrated statement of fact. Dorcasina insists on seeing differently, and there is damned little others can do about it. Her plans to marry or elope can be thwarted; her envisioning of such plans, apparently not so. I propose that we relinquish the question "Does Dorcasina see or not?" and ask, rather, "Does she *want* to see or not?" These are two very different questions, each embodying a distinct attitude. The first question, on which critics have mainly focused, prejudges Dorcasina's perspective as faulty and relies on a somewhat literal reading of the quixotic genre. But if we experimentally consider Dorcasina to possess some degree of volition, it suddenly seems plausible that fantasy might be employed in the service of diversion, if not self-defence. After considering in more detail some concrete as well as abstract motivations for Dorcasina's choosing to be deluded, the next section further examines the evidence and rationale that the novel provides for a voluntaristic model of (feminine) delusion.

Dorcasina's strongest incentive for fantasy—what compels and justifies her bid for agency through voluntaristic delusion—comes in the person of her suitors. Most of them are not what they seem, but some *are* what they seem to Dorcasina, and quite unpleasantly so. It is repeatedly established by the narrator that, given her lack of beauty, men who pursue Dorcasina are interested either in her money or, like Philander, in humiliating her. Early on, Betty makes a sobering observation: "she had sagacity enough to [see] that her mistress, already past the prime of youth, and having never been remarkable for beauty, was now less an object of love than at the age of eighteen" (34). Only thirty-four years old, Dorcasina is judged to be already too old in terms of the marriage market. Since it is likely, given contemporary life expectancy rates and cultural assumptions about marriageability, that the same thought has occurred to Dorcasina, her wanting to avoid facing that sobering reality is fully credible. The Cumberland episode, for instance, ends up validating Dorcasina's resistance to the sort of sensible match recommended by her father (and by other social authorities at the time). Dorcasina complains to her father, "He has come here to make a bargain, as he calls it, just as if he had come here to purchase an estate, without feeling for me any of that tender passion which makes the delight of married life, or inspiring me with the least of it for him" (206). Her vision unclouded by romance, she quickly susses him out as a "man, who, in a love affair, goes on in the same cold, regular, and systematic manner, in which he transacts all his other business" (204). Cumberland is exactly what Dorcasina has been avoiding, the mercenary reality that is her market value. In a real sense, he has come to purchase an estate: the dowry or settlement that marriage into the wealthy Sheldon family is likely to involve. As an extreme case against the standard didactic-novel argument for reason "not emotion" as the basis for marriage, Cumberland's brutally pragmatic motive (financial endogamy rather than affection) marks the urgency for writers such as Tenney of interrogating conservative Federalist-era ideas about women's agency and their status as property, domestically if not more broadly.

If *Female Quixotism* gives a rationale for voluntaristic delusion, it also furnishes examples of its implementation. Dorcasina's plots contain the marks of female volition. Female volition here stands

out as not only inducing an intended action but also withstanding and often subverting attempts to thwart it. The strongest sign of agency, however, is the success with which Dorcasina variously petitions, inveigles, and coerces others into playing along with her fantasies—even as they are trying to disabuse her of them. Repeatedly, Betty and Harriot find themselves drawn into her romantic vignettes as actors, sometimes as victims of comic violence. Memorably, Dorcasina coaxes Betty into dressing up in Mr Sheldon's clothes, pretending to be O'Connor and wooing her. Elsewhere, Dorcasina abruptly awakes from her fantasy about James (Captain Barry's servant who is pretending to be his master) once the suitor reveals his true identity; the fact that confrontations with "the truth" have not always worked to break the spell, or not so suddenly (consider the protracted exorcism in the O'Connor section), points to her delusion as at least partially, if not fully, voluntary in origin and duration. Further evidence of voluntarism comes from the Cumberland episode. If she is truly unable to control her imagination, why does she not cast this acquisitive merchant as one of her beaux? Involuntary delusion would brook no obstacles. That she falls only for certain men and not others, and succumbs only at particular times, marks agency as the generative principle, the motive force behind her imaginary love affairs. Reading novels may be simply a catalyst.

Furthermore, these moments of agency reveal an instructive parallel between Dorcasina and Philander, who manipulates the barber Puff into assisting him in Dorcasina's fake abduction, undermining the line supposedly dividing agents from victims. Dorcasina exerts her will in the same way that Philander, O'Connor, and her other suitors do. Similarly, to distract Dorcasina from her plan to marry Brown, Harriot engages in an elaborate scheme replete with cross-dressing, abduction, and swordplay. Reliance on elements of novelistic artifice deserves special emphasis in a novel that purportedly aligns itself with the rote conservative lecture of the period denouncing the lure of fiction. Furthermore, the plot devices that Harriot employs as Montague might come directly from the novels that her mother, taking Dorcasina as a negative example, has never let Harriot read. Interestingly, the second, more elaborate piece of novel-like plotting by the Stanlys—Dorcasina's staged abduction and confinement at a secluded house owned by Mr Stanly—fails to

protect her: her final nefarious suitor, Seymore, comes upon her at the house where she has been sequestered, supposedly out of harm's way. Sevda Çaliskan notes the connection between Dorcasina's plots and the Stanlys' counterplots, and does so in a way that links delusion with agency:

> By deliberately refraining from making her protagonist a conscious figure who recognizes and rebels against the seclusion and the limitations of a woman's life in her society, Tenney is able to make a stronger statement about the frustrations of women than [previous novelists]. This strategy of employing a completely foolish character who is totally blind to the situation allows [Tenney] to put a stronger emphasis on the objections to [Dorcasina's] behavior and expose them in a much brighter light. The people who try to "save" Dorcasina appear just as, if not more, foolish than Dorcasina herself. Harriot's disguise as Montague and courting of Dorcasina, and Mr. Stanly's abduction and forced imprisonment of her to prevent her from marrying Brown are no less extravagant or ridiculous than Dorcasina's own actions. In fact, what these "friends" are trying to protect are Dorcasina's family name and family fortune—things that do not really belong to her. While they recognize and fight against several rogues who are after Dorcasina's money, they fail to understand the essential injustice of a system that makes a woman dependent on male authority.[21]

Although I take issue with Çaliskan's reading of Dorcasina as unconscious, I agree with her otherwise. Viewing Dorcasina as choosing delusion, and as having some control over her engagement with it, does nothing to diminish—and, arguably, might enhance—the strength of the novel's gender polemic. If Dorcasina wilfully embraces fantasy, this also enhances the punch of Tenney's attack on the distinction between Dorcasina and everyone else, between the sane and the "mad," between those who wield domestic and cultural authority and those who seek to evade their machinations, if not to fabricate the rudiments of their own authorizing praxis. Çaliskan's final point is likewise well taken, particularly for its yoking of fantasy to Tenney's critique of economic and political inequity.[22]

21 Çaliskan, 32.

22 The argument for agency through delusion gains additional strength from contemporary debates about novel-reading by women and about the imagination in general. Regarding contemporary anxieties about women reading novels, see Davidson, 45–49, 110–25, and, regarding Dorcasina specifically, 188–89; and Jan Fergus, "Women Readers: A Case Study," in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1700–1800,* ed. Vivian Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 173. For discussions of the "creative,"

Dorcasina's plight—but also her life and her survival as a single, independent woman—evidences (female) voluntarism as a central concern of early American fiction and, in this case, the possibility of exercising it, in whatever medium or venue possible.

Although Tenney is obviously satirizing romance novels, it is not clear that she is trying to dissuade young women from reading them. While such novels fail to give Dorcasina a realistic education about men and marriage, that seems as much to the point as the fact that, along with educational parity, patriarchal culture denies her autonomy in yet other ways. Even with different reading habits and an aversion to fantasy, she would face the same unsatisfactory choices, the same suitors (mostly after her money). Furthermore—in a strikingly mixed message—the novels Dorcasina reads, the novels that get her into all sorts of trouble, also give her immense pleasure. As well, they empower her with an agency that appears inaccessible to her in other venues. Within the context both of eighteenth-century theories of imagination as a positive force, and paranoia about its inept or deforming exercise by women, the polemic force of a character like Dorcasina becomes clearer. If, according to anti-novel rhetoric, it was not safe for women to read novels because of their supposedly weaker intellectual constitutions, it follows in the same line that women starting to imagine their own plots would be equally dangerous. In the face of the claim that delusion was somehow more endemic to women, *Female Quixotism* provides an example—a mapping out—of Foucauldian discursive co-optation,[23] an attempt to inhabit fantasy and steer it towards being a form of reverse discourse, a remapping of the possibilities and potencies of women's minds and lives. Defying recurrent proscriptions of imagination as too dangerous for the female mind, Tenney delivers—although dressed in the anti-fiction drag compulsory for the time—a legitimating fantasy about fantasy. Thus when

"generative potential" that Adam Smith and certain Scottish Enlightenment thinkers attributed to imagination (rather than viewing it as a negative delusory faculty), see Harvey Mitchell, "'The Mysterious Veil of Self-Delusion' in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 20, no. 4 (1987): 405–21; and Catherine Packham, "Feigning Fictions: Imagination, Hypothesis, and Philosophical Writing in the Scottish Enlightenment," *Eighteenth-Century: Theory and Interpretation* 48, no. 2 (2007): 149–71.

23 Foucault, 100–1.

the novel's narrator invokes imagination—"Her [Dorcasina's] imagination was immediately at work in conjecturing who this fine stranger [O'Connor] might be" (19)—we might well consider imagination not merely as a force that undermines one's connection to reality but as a tool for recalibrating agency, for re-envisioning the world and the ways one is connected to and fixed within it. Despite the backlash occurring in gender ideology in the late Federalist period (following a period of serious debate, if not substantial progress, on women's rights), in 1801 Tenney is still able to offer an alternative track on which to read not only the texture of women's lives but also the texts they were at once so fond of and so vocally criticized for reading.

Once cured, Dorcasina finds herself alone. To some readers, the gloom of the ending might seem to overpower any stock pieties about lessons learned and errors regretted. Yet even though by the end of the novel Dorcasina sees more clearly than before, she still does not view the world quite "as those around her have always viewed it."[24] I propose a different perspective on the potential depth of the epistemological crisis apparently ascribed to Dorcasina alone: regarding Dorcasina as not deluded—or as deluded by choice, with her moments of delusion occuring at will for her own amusement and sustenance, if not survival. Far from being deluded, far from being "credulous" in the sense of being unable to see the world as it is through the fog of romance, Dorcasina does not read incorrectly or fail to see. Rather, she refuses to see the world as, at the novel's end, she is finally forced to see it. Wealthy enough to live independently on her inheritance, unencumbered with a husband or children, and still able to enjoy the novels that have misled her so, Dorcasina fares better than Harriot Stanly: despite being kept by her mother from reading novels, Harriot ends up a married but gloomy figure. What Dorcasina is forced to see in the end is the drab reality of life for those who wish to be viewed as marriageable not merely for one's property or physical attributes in the ways that marriage entails. Making it clear from the start that Dorcasina is no great beauty and detailing the ravages of time on her body may seem cruel on Tenney's part, but such steps are argumentatively essential. Without beauty, she is valuable to all but one of her suitors as property and nothing else; these men cannot mask the chauvinist

[24] Gordon, "Female Quixotism," 127.

materialism of their devotion to Dorcasina with claims of physical or aesthetic enchantment.

Rather than seeing Tenney as punishing Dorcasina by exiling her to spinsterhood for having too long played at romance, I suggest that, especially compared with other early American novels, *Female Quixotism* rewards its quixote. Dorcasina escapes the most common of fictional female endings: she does not die, she is not seduced or impregnated, and she does not marry. Escaping any form of social (en)closure would seem to undermine the novel's status as "profoundly conservative."[25] As Miecznikowski admits,

> The ending ... seems ... to attribute some value to reading, even novel reading, at the same time it criticizes, or cautions, the would-be reader. For in the end, although Dorcasina has learned to separate art from life, she continues to retreat to the visionary world of the romance novel, a world which she knows now does not exist, not even for Harriot whose marriage to Captain Barry suffers early from the death of her mother and soon after from the [death] of the Barrys' first child. The elimination of the novel's only chance for the conventionally "happy" ending reinforces Dorcasina's altered perspective and resituates the role of fiction in the world.[26]

Critics in general have failed to read Dorcasina as wilfully resisting the restrictions incumbent on seeing the world as it is, actively seeking the play and freedom that she obtains through "credulity" and delusion. Were she to see the world realistically, uncoloured by romance, she might well end up like Harriot. After all, marriage to Captain Barry seemed to promise a happy future for Harriot. And it is not that Captain Barry turned out to be a scoundrel like O'Connor or Seymore. It is that even with a loving husband—even with Lysander, the only suitor not attracted by her wealth or status—Dorcasina would be less independent and, if we are to judge by Harriot's example, not measurably happier.

While Dorcasina heads into her fifties still unmarried, Harriot ends up with a larger share of misery than one might expect in a strictly didactic novel. Soon after Harriot marries Captain Barry—the reward, it would seem, for her not reading novels, for being undeluded—Harriot's life becomes a catalogue of tragedies.

[25] Gordon, "Female Quixotism," 127.

[26] Miecznikowski, 42.

Her mother dies, her newborn son dies in his first month, she and her husband both become ill, her husband suffers a "considerable loss of property at sea," and one of the servants disappears after stealing "several articles of considerable value" (321, 320). The added irony is that Harriot's litany of domestic woes comes in response to Dorcasina's "conversion," her explanation to Harriot of how after all these years she sees the error of her ways: "I find that, in my ideas of matrimony," she tells her married friend, "I have been totally wrong. I imagined that, in a happy union, all was transport, joy, and felicity; but in you I find a demonstration that the most agreeable connection is not unattended with cares and anxieties" (320). The last clause is unexpected. Harriot is happily married, but she is surprised at the suffering she experiences. It would be foolish to imply that she suffers because she marries the Captain. But according to the didactic and satiric logics of the sentimental and quixotic genres, both the circumstances of Harriot's marriage (to an upstanding man, not a rogue like most of Dorcasina's suitors) and the circumstances of her life (not filling her head with romantic daydreams) would seem directed at validating Harriot's choices and discrediting Dorcasina's. And yet, the seriousness of Dorcasina's admission that she has been "totally wrong" is punctured by showing that Harriot (like Mrs Stanly, and every character who has opposed Dorcasina's fantasies) has not been totally right. Simply put, Harriot is not rewarded—at least not as one expects—just as Dorcasina, unexpectedly in a sentimental novel, does not marry. Both events compromise *Female Quixotism*'s ostensibly didactic message (repudiating novel reading and inequities in female education) and foreground Tenney's more substantial, radical import.

I take the trials of Harriot's married life as Tenney's muted assertion that, even in a loving marriage, a woman remains *femme covert* (under the laws of coverture, an American without being a citizen in important senses): "During [Harriot's] address Dorcasina was silent; and marveled much to see the sprightly Harriot Stanly, metamorphosed, by one year's matrimony, into a serious moralizer" (321). The Harriot whom Dorcasina knew has been obscured, not just legally but culturally, eclipsed by the normative values which may permeate society at large but which marriage enshrines and sacralizes: "Strange to tell,"

Harriot declares, "I have suffered more, that I ever did before, in the whole course of my life ... but I do not repine. The great disposer of all events knows what is best for us to suffer; and I was taught, by dear mama, not to look for uninterrupted felicity in this transitory world" (321). While Dorcasina has no promise of uninterrupted felicity, it is undeniable that Tenney—author as "great disposer"—has largely spared Dorcasina suffering. Other than her father's death, she has enjoyed her life, her "extravagant adventures," and the agency her delusion has allowed her. Under her father's lax guardianship, she mostly gets her own way. Although by remaining under her father's roof she is not truly independent (at least while he is alive), she thus avoids a worse possibility: submitting herself to one of the dissolute, abusive men with whom sentimental heroines so often end up. Postponing marriage through fantasy attains two goals: it averts the grim realities of solitude undiluted by imaginary romance, and it avoids the unfulfilling marriages she sees other women make. Instead of being victimized by her fantasies, Dorcasina achieves—both along the way and by the end of the novel, that is, cumulatively—a degree of empowerment. Dorcasina's solitary and fairly satisfied stance at the end sets the novel apart in still another way. Older, unmarried women typically function in early American literature as not just figures of fun but reminders to young female readers of the false alternatives undergirding heteronormativity: marriage and happiness, or spinsterhood and misery. By avoiding both outcomes, Dorcasina explodes the lie of this excluded middle.

This brings us back to the epigraph and title of this article, and its instructive, ultimately promising ambiguity. "Women love to have their own way," Mr Sheldon says of his daughter, "and when their freaks hurt nobody it is well enough to indulge them" (214). For Dorcasina, being indulged is precisely having her own way, even though the sense of the line seems to be that of indulging women without endowing them with any significant power. At the same time, real barriers remain, paralleled by the novel's reactionary strands in terms of race, class, and nation. While the quotation also applies in a negative sense, indexing female impotence, it gestures, like the novel as a whole, towards feminine agency. It might feel as if the novel is suggesting that

it is only in love, only in romantic illusion, that women can "have their own way." But, given women's real and symbolic strictures in the early republic, Dorcasina's successful avoidance of conventional endings for sentimental heroines (marriage or death) suggests that exerting agency through delusion is no mean feat and generates no small force. Dorcasina may not get exactly what she wants, but she accomplishes what few early American heroines were able to. She lives. She literally survives to tell her tale to an editor who may or may not be a figure of her own construction and, if not, whose oversight fails to quiet her vocal bid for self-possession, for being at least partially the instigator of one's fate.

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