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Romantic Transports

Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism* in Transatlantic Context

At the conclusion of Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism* (1801), her hapless heroine, Dorcasina Sheldon, finally awakens from "the romantic spell, by which she had been so many years bound" that has animated the plot and entangled her in a lifetime of ever-more humiliating scenarios (317). She confesses her chagrin to her maid: "my own conduct will not bear reflecting upon; I cannot look back without blushing for my follies" (322). Dorcasina's confession anticipates that of a far more famous British heroine, Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennett, who, after reading Fitzwilliam Darcy's letter explaining the deception George Wickham has imposed, rebukes herself: "How despicably have I acted!" She continues, "I, who have prided myself on my discernment! . . . How humiliating is this discovery!—Yet, how just a humiliation!" (136).

Perhaps the most salient difference between these two moments of awakening is that whereas the highly perceptive Elizabeth Bennett recognizes her initial misjudgment while she is still young, and while Mr. Darcy is still inclined to renew his suit, Dorcasina Sheldon requires four decades to awaken from the misprision of reality induced by her having read too many romances. After rejecting an eligible suitor in her youth, because he did not act according to her exaggerated notions of romantic heroism, Dorcasina is rendered increasingly an object of ridicule—for her readers as well as her friends and family—as she continues coquettishly, well into graying middle age, to encourage fortune-hunting suitors who deceive her through the strains of romance.

In situating Tenney's work in relation to a tradition of British female novelists, we depart somewhat from recent work on her novel, which interprets it primarily in relationship to early American sentimental novels,

including, most famously, Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797). Significantly, while Eliza, Foster's heroine, is certainly a victim of her delusional notions of female "liberty," and is characterized as capricious, naïve, foolhardy, and, of course, coquettish, she is never explicitly framed as "quixotic"; nor is Susannah Rowson's titular transatlantic heroine, Charlotte Temple.¹ Our intention is therefore to supplement existing nationalist readings of Tenney's novel by acknowledging and foregrounding the explicit allusion her title, *Female Quixotism*, makes to a British literary tradition emblemized by Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752), and thereby to recover the novel's debt to that tradition's emphasis on political and cultural specificity as the hallmark of its heroines' nuanced transformations from delusional girls to perspicacious women.

While Tenney's novel preceded Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) by about a decade, the two writers are clearly working within a novelistic tradition of deluded and delusional women readers that circulated throughout the British Atlantic in the eighteenth century. Whereas earlier British novelists had often depicted their heroines as either impeccably virtuous or tragically prone to yield to self-will or passion,² starting in about the 1750s, novelists increasingly moved to create heroines who, while fundamentally "virtuous" in character, had yet to learn to recognize youthful mistakes in judgment and to refine their behaviors accordingly. British author Eliza Haywood (c. 1693–1756) offers an early example of this plotline in *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751): Betsy is inherently virtuous but eponymously thoughtless in her initial inability to appreciate Mr. Truworth, despite his suggestive name. The work of Charlotte Lennox (c. 1730–1804), a British writer raised in the American colonies, further explores the flawed-yet-redeemable heroine in *The Female Quixote* (1752), whose title Tenney clearly references some half century later. Lennox's tale depicts the virtuous Arabella, whose cousin-suitor almost despairs of marrying her because of her "foible" of misreading the world through the prism of heroic romance. Haywood's *Betsy Thoughtless* and Lennox's *Female Quixote* were extremely popular novels, appearing in numerous English editions and foreign translations; in addition, both were anthologized in the canon-shaping *The Novelists' Magazine* (1780–89). They thus influenced many subsequent novels and moral tales, including Maria Edgeworth's *Angelina; or, l'Amie Inconnue*, published in London in 1801, the same year that Tenney's *Female Quixotism* was published in Boston.

Twenty-first-century readers often find the female Quixote irritatingly slow to recognize her own mistakes and therefore dismiss her as the merely allegorical product of a simpler age. In this essay, however, we suggest that the quixotic female figure—the genuinely nice girl whose mistakes, while absurd, are ultimately correctable and finally corrected—represents an underacknowledged branch of the emergence of more complex and nuanced novelistic heroines, like Austen’s, in the nineteenth century, particularly as each heroine, her delusional “misreading,” and her subsequent correction are deeply engaged with the particular political landscape she inhabits. In what follows, we argue that the innovative treatments of these explicitly quixotic female characters from the second half of the eighteenth century are not only significant as they transform the representations of womanhood to suggest a greater fluidity in notions of female identity but are noteworthy, as well, because they carefully situate each female figure in a world whose cultural and political complexity is central to the correction of her “mis”reading. In other words, these works, produced by female authors on both sides of the Atlantic, tell the story of an increasingly complicated woman who must learn, despite early missteps, to negotiate the complexities of her sociopolitical landscape. Rather than merely being expected to reproduce a simple distinction between what is and is not “virtuous,” these characters must navigate a cultural terrain that demands the ability to recuperate contradictory impulses of both a public and private nature, to recognize the differences, and to construct a provisional resolution in keeping with the sophistication of their critique.

In our reading, we attempt therefore to maintain the dynamic tension between the generic, allegorical elements of these tales and the animating nuance of the particular. In general, scholarship on the novelistic female Quixote has tended to emphasize the broad strokes of the genre, eliding the particularity that motivates these novels’ characterizations. In the late twentieth century, for example, certain feminist critics anxious to redeem these woman-authored texts identified within the figure of the novelistic female Quixote a celebration of the ways in which romance ideology allowed women to resist patriarchy. In her introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition of *The Female Quixote*, for instance, Margaret Anne Doody asserts that the novel’s heroine “can command a space, assert a woman’s right of ‘a room of her own’ and take upon herself the power to control the movements and behaviour of others” (xxv). Scott

Paul Gordon has recently suggested in *The Practice of Quixotism* that such profeminist readings might themselves be somewhat delusional, since most eighteenth-century narratives of female quixotism insist on the heroine's inaccurate perception of reality; moreover, he argues, the act of freeing herself from the delusions of romance generally prepares the heroine to adapt herself appropriately to heterosexual marriage. Gordon points out that "[t]he 'reality' to which cured female quixotes return involves courtship, marriage, and a productive domestic life" (38). Our quarrel is not with the substance of either individual critic's work; instead, we wish to intervene in the unilateralism represented as much by the imposition of a singular progressivism as by the relegation of Tenney's novel, as well as those of her British literary progenitors, Maria Edgeworth and Charlotte Lennox, to the realm of what Gordon terms an "orthodox quixotism" that insists its readers differentiate their perspective from the delusional interpretations of the protagonist (6-7).

Such reductively transhistorical categorizations of the female Quixote underestimate the political meanings of these novels and overlook the relationship between those meanings and the increasing complexity of the novels' female protagonists. Gordon's reading, for example, ignores the importance of the novel's one significant revision to the generic conventions: Dorcasina's story is not resolved in marriage, nor while she is still young and attractive.³ By the time Dorcasina finally recognizes the pitfalls of heroic romance, she also demonstrates a maturity of political judgment that is not accounted for by either an anachronistic feminism or a simple division between political conservatism and progressivism. Finally realizing that the last of her long line of fortune-hunting suitors is not what he appears, Dorcasina turns to her loyal maid, Betty, who reports having "heard . . . how that he was one of the new fangled sort, an atheist, a jacobite, and an illumbenator" (315-16). Dorcasina disentangles Betty's linguistic representation without effort and signals her own adherence to the same set of general principles as she observes, "May heaven prevent the further progress of Jacobinism, atheism, and illuminatism; they all seem to be links of the same chain" (316). In expressing her distrust of the French revolution, atheism, and the doctrine of illuminatism (a religious view depicted in turn-of-the-century pamphlets as dangerously anarchic, but defended by proponents of rational Christianity), Dorcasina allies herself with conservative values. However, in politely (and silently) correct-

ing Betty's (or her informant's) conflation of Jacobitism with Jacobinism, Dorcasina indicates that her conservative politics need to be understood within their particular historical context.⁴

To understand the political nuance of Tenney's novel, we therefore need to resituate it in relation to the explicit tradition of British fiction to which her title gestures, uncovering the specific political contexts that shaped earlier novelistic representations of female Quixotes. Tenney's *Female Quixotism*, as it reworks the figure of the female Quixote from youth into middle age, stages its "conservative" indictment of the scoundrels and adventurers whom Federalist partisans predicted would soon dominate the political and social landscape of the new nation, but does so in ways that are mitigated by the novel's nostalgic portrayal of a more progressive socio-politics. In its ambivalent political vision, Tenney's novel strongly echoes a series of British novels in which a delusional heroine's remediation into appropriate "reading practice" demands not only a corrected political vision but one tempered by a more capacious and sympathetic understanding of the historical situation in which that vision is implicated. For example, Charlotte Lennox's *Arabella*, the heroine of *The Female Quixote*, stages an apparent renunciation of Jacobitism (the political movement supporting the return of the exiled and Catholic Stuart descendants of James II) in the wake of Charles Edward Stuart's defeat in the failed 1745 Rising. However, it does so with a poignancy that acknowledges the appeal of both the political cause and the heroine who embodies its romantic aristocratic ideology. Similarly, Maria Edgeworth's *Angelina*, published in the first year of the nineteenth century, offers a reactionary response to the excesses of sentiment associated with the French Revolution (specifically with its most bloody Jacobin movement), but does so through a heroine for whom the reader feels enough sympathy that the philosophical underpinnings of that revolution are not entirely dismissed.

BRITISH ANTECEDENTS: QUIXOTISM AND WHIG PRESCRIPTIVE REALISM

Although characters resembling Don Quixote were regularly deployed for political ends in eighteenth-century British satire,⁵ the figure of the female Quixote was understood by most twentieth-century critics as functioning primarily in the realm of romantic or emotional, rather than

political, morality. Ronald Paulson, for example, describes Lennox's *The Female Quixote* as a rather transparent critique of female "egoism or self-sufficiency," produced through a heroine's "refusal to recognize her feelings or desires" (275–76). Subsequent feminist readings of this figure have not necessarily returned her to the cultural and political contexts in which she was originally deployed.

Gordon describes Lennox's novel as upholding "the dominant sex-gender system" (62, emphasis added), the early-modern structure of patriarchy that he treats as both "conservative" and unchanging across history. From a twenty-first-century American perspective, this structure certainly appears conservative. However, neither Whig nor Jacobite ideology expressed progressive attitudes toward women; in terms of gender roles, the novel is thus not necessarily more "conservative" than most other eighteenth-century novels that end in marriage.⁶ Moreover, if we consider the actual political context in which Lennox was writing—in the aftermath of the failed 1745 Jacobite Rising—the potential political import of *Female Quixote* is much more complex. An anti-Jacobite stance in the 1750s could be construed as either conservative (opposing the revolutionary idea of overthrowing the house of Hanover) or progressive (in expressing a preference for the Hanoverian Whig status quo against a reactionary return to a previous Tory and Catholic lineage of Stuarts).

Although the defeat of Charles Edward Stuart at the Battle of Culloden in April 1746 was decisive, the images and discourses of Jacobitism itself did not immediately disappear from the British cultural landscape. Jacobite sympathizers protested the brutality and barbarity of the Whig system of justice that was effecting punishments in the summer of 1746. By contrast, the detractors of Jacobitism continued to denigrate its adherents as supporters of "Popish Bigotry and French Tyranny."⁷ In his satirical *The Jacobite's Journal*, a weekly periodical published between 1747 and 1748, Henry Fielding regularly mocked the illogic of "a Popish Prince" as the "Defender of a Protestant Church" (106). Although by the late 1740s the possibility of another Jacobite military attack on Hanoverian Britain probably seemed slim to most Britons, ideological or nostalgic supporters of the Jacobite cause nevertheless indulged in what Daniel Szechi has described as "cosmic Jacobitism"—the belief that when God was ready, events would occur so as to return the exiled branch of Stuarts to rule Britain.⁸ This sort of nostalgic and romantic faith in the eventual triumph of

Jacobitism was often associated with the mode of romance in literature, as exemplified by Eliza Haywood's hagiographic account of the conduct and behavior of Charles Edward Stuart in exile: *A Letter from H—— G——g, Esq; One of the Gentlemen of the Bed Chamber to the Young Chevalier . . . to a Particular Friend*, published in late 1749. Haywood depicts Stuart as heroic and chivalrous, rescuing a young maid from a burning building yet demonstrating a "Constancy of Mind" and an "absolute Command . . . over all his Passions" (18).

Probably born in Gibraltar in 1730 and raised in the colony of New York, where her Scottish-born father, Captain James Ramsay, was stationed in the British army, Charlotte Lennox, and her family, may or may not have supported the Jacobite cause. There is no information about her father's political leanings; however, Alexander Lennox—whom Charlotte Ramsay married in 1747—claimed to be descended from an illegitimate son of the Scottish earls of Lennox, demonstrating a possible romantic nostalgia for the ancient Stuart kings of Scotland and their descendant, Charles Edward Stuart. The eponymous heroine of Charlotte Lennox's first novel, *The Life of Harriot Stuart, Written by Herself* (1750), who shares the family name of Charles Edward Stuart, returns to England from the colony of New York and marries Dumont, who converts from Catholicism to Protestantism in order to win her hand. In other words, *Harriot Stuart* appears to gesture toward a Protestant Jacobitism, a political position that would accept a return of the Stuart monarchy should the royal claimants convert to Protestantism. This latent sympathy for the Jacobite cause, however, appears to be repudiated by the conclusion to Lennox's *Female Quixote*, in which, guided by the influence of a "good Divine," Arabella accepts the falsity of romance and awakens to "the Force of Truth" (381).

The triumph of rationality in Lennox's *The Female Quixote* appears to represent what Margaret Anne Doody has described in *The True Story of the Novel* as Whig "Prescriptive Realism": an "all-or-nothing Realism" that "cuts out fantasy and experiment and severely limits certain forms of psychic and social questioning" (286, 294); that is, as a narrative structure that imposes the logic of reason, patriarchy, and the unilateralism of anti-Jacobite Whiggism. One of the key differences between the Whig realism of *The Female Quixote* and the quasi-Jacobite realism of Lennox's previous work, *Harriot Stuart*, lies in the author's attitude toward the plausibility (or "realism") of scenes of captivity. Whereas the heroine of *The Female*

Quixote frequently and mistakenly imagines herself to be at risk of capture by a range of potential abductors (including gardeners and haymakers whom she imagines are aristocrats in disguise), the eponymous heroine of *Harriot Stuart* is abducted by actual villains on several occasions: first near Albany, New York, by an army officer disguised as a Mohawk; second, by an attempted rapist when on board ship travelling to London; then by an English nobleman in London who takes her to a convent in Paris, from which she is abducted by a French count.⁹ Given the continued popularity of captivity narratives such as Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative* and Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, it is important to read Lennox's decision not to include any scenes of abduction or captivity in *The Female Quixote* as a response not only to the romanticism of Jacobitism but also to the sentimentalism of the captivity plot. Such sentimentalism, of course, had different political meanings in Britain and in the American colonies. In his novels, Richardson often seems to be making an overt plea for political moderation—as in Mr. B's critique of partisan politicking in the House of Commons and Sir Charles Grandison's scrupulous acts of cross-partisan and cross-cultural peacemaking.¹⁰

Although *The Female Quixote* would seem to counter the transgressive potential of Lennox's first novel and of Richardson's *Pamela*, the appeal of its heroine—as well as what Doody has described as her “necessary but not willing relinquishment” of her own “attraction to romance” (introduction xx)—also probably kept alive the sentimental tendencies of the genre of romance it apparently repudiated. Although Lennox's heroine ultimately acquiesces to what appears to be a narrow Whig vision of reality, the heroine herself—through her manner of interacting with other characters, especially other women toward whom she refuses to be catty or narrowly judgmental—offers a model of kindness, tolerance, and openness to other possibilities. Although modern readers may find Arabella surprisingly slow to understand her own misreading of the world around her, she nevertheless represents a stage in the development of a heroine more complex than the ever-virtuous and always rational Pamela. When Lennox's novel was subsequently reworked by Edgeworth, in Britain in the wake of the French Revolution, and by Tenney, in the United States in the aftermath of the American Revolution, the resulting works not only developed further the figure of a heroine who learns to recognize an initial mistake but also incorporated scenes of sentimental empathy that softened the uni-

lateralism of the anti-Jacobinism and the antidemocratic position implicit in their respective plots.

FEMALE QUIXOTISM AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Once we understand *The Female Quixote* not merely as an example of some schematic transhistorical conservative patriarchy but as a specific act of engagement in the political debates about Jacobitism in the 1740s and 1750s, it is not surprising that the figure of the female Quixote would reappear as part of the novelistic response to the French Revolution—a political upheaval that resulted in numerous novels, both pro- and anti-Jacobin. Maria Edgeworth's *Angelina; or, l'Amie Inconnue*, a didactic novella for young readers, incorporates the figure of the female Quixote and even refers to Lennox's earlier novel. Scott Paul Gordon cites this reference as proof that eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century readers must have read Lennox's novel as "conservative" rather than transgressive since it appears in a scene in which Edgeworth's own heroine is being asked "to reject the practice of quixotism" (65). Certainly both novels demand that their heroines correct the mistakes their reading practices have led them into. However, classing Edgeworth's novel, with Lennox's, as an example of "orthodox quixotism" tells us very little about the actual politics of either novel or its engagements with the political debates of its day.

Maria Edgeworth, who came from the intellectual Protestant Anglo-Irish gentry, wrote *Angelina; or, l'Amie Inconnue* as part of a group of five tales designed for adolescents, published as *Moral Tales* (1801). Conceived of as a continuation of her moral tales for children in *The Parent's Assistant* (1796), these tales clearly were designed for the moral instruction of young persons. The eponymous heroine of *Angelina*, an orphan whose parents had, before they died, "cultivated her literary taste, but . . . neglected to cultivate her judgment" enters into an intensely sentimental epistolary correspondence with the author of a novel entitled *A Woman of Genius*. She goes to Wales to join this unknown female friend, without consulting her guardian or any other adult who might have advised her against such a decision. Rather than enjoying the pastoral purity of a rural cottage, Angelina is horrified to discover that her correspondent may write with sentimental purity, but in reality is crude and inelegant, with a taste for liquor.

Angelina provides several obvious moral instructions for adolescent

girls: first, do not embark on any journeys without consulting a wise adult; second, be wary of the sentimental language of novelists. Edgeworth's depiction of her heroine's delusion, however, is somewhat different than Lennox's. Edgeworth does not go so far as to render the threat of abduction implausible, but she scripts the threat of abduction as a seduction by sentiment: the sentimental language of Araminta's lengthy letters to Angelina persuades the latter to take a journey into Wales that is not without risk. Although Angelina is not abducted, or taken captive, she is unable to locate Araminta in the village where she was told she would find her, and in seeking Araminta in Bristol Angelina loses her purse containing all her money, potentially facing the risks that any penniless young woman would have faced in travel. Thus, even as Edgeworth articulates the dangers of the language of sentiment, she does not mock the heroine by insisting that the possibility of abduction or danger is not present. Instead, Edgeworth retains the possibility of a captivity plot as she articulates a political position that is anti-Jacobin but not entirely reactionary.

Many anti-Jacobin novels of the 1790s and early nineteenth century satirized the Rousseauvian theories of sentiment and individualism associated with the French Revolution. However, as Marilyn Butler explains, to read *Angelina* simply as a conservative reaction to the ideologies of the French Revolution would be to oversimplify Edgeworth's own political position. In Butler's terms, Edgeworth was not a supporter of the French Revolution but was nevertheless "the most thorough-going individualist writing outside the jacobin movement" (126). The eponymous heroine of *Angelina*, like her counterpart from *The Female Quixote*, is, significantly, an attractive and well-intentioned young woman whose main flaw seems to be lack of appropriate mentoring. As Butler points out, Angelina's "quest for something better" demonstrates "the innate rightness of her mind" (135), and contradicts Gordon's insistence on her need to be cured. Moreover, "[v]ice in the story is identified not with sentimentalism, but with cold-hearted worldliness, vanity, self-seeking, hypocrisy—the vices of the rich and their parasites" (136).

The character of Angelina represents a departure from Lennox's Arabella in that Angelina, like Austen's subsequent heroines, is not subjected to hundreds of pages of farcical behavior before she recognizes her mistaken judgment. She requires only a single trip into Wales, just as Elizabeth Bennett requires only the visit to Pemberly, to understand her ini-

tial misperception. In the conclusion of the novel Angelina's new mentor, Lady Frances, suggests that they together read *The Female Quixote* and that Angelina tell her "which, of all [her] acquaintance, the heroine resembles most" (296). There is no doubt that Edgeworth intends Arabella as a negative example for Angelina. However, the very fact that Lady Frances acknowledges Angelina's "love of romance" and suggests that she and Angelina should sit down and read Lennox's novel *together* suggests an important acknowledgment of the power of sympathy, a sentiment often represented as dangerous in the wake of the French Revolution, but one that Edgeworth refuses to repudiate. It further suggests the political possibilities of *fiction* as the site of shared reading practices and of an appropriate space for the political imaginary.

We may liken this deployment of interpersonal sympathy to the way that Lennox's sympathetic heroine softened the rigidity of a reactionary anti-Jacobite ideology in 1750. However, by categorizing these novels according to their thematic and political similarities, we risk tending toward a flattening transhistorical hermeneutics that obscures the distinctness of their commentaries on the political circumstances of their different eras and locales. One obvious difference between these novels, as we have already suggested, lies in their very different scenes of "awakening." In *The Female Quixote*, Arabella's "cure" is begun by a sympathetic countess, who is not given adequate time to mentor Arabella before the latter leaves Bath; ultimately Arabella endures a humiliating lecture by the "good Divine" who convinces her not only that romances are historically inaccurate but that they are morally suspect in that they "soften the Heart to Love, and harden it to Murder" (380). Arabella quickly accepts the clergyman's arguments and, in humiliation, acknowledges that her "Heart yields to the Force of Truth" (381). In Edgeworth's novel, Angelina is persuaded by the sympathetic Lady Frances, who teaches her not by a humiliating lecture but by a sympathetic joint reading of Lennox. The conversation that ensues results in Lady Frances pronouncing Angelina guilty of "being a simpleton of sixteen" but fully worthy as an "object of mercy," and by this mercy, Edgeworth informs us, "Angelina was more touched, than she could have been by the most severe reproaches" (297).

The patriarchalism of Lennox's conclusion would have been consistent in mid-eighteenth-century Britain with a Whig ideology of patriarchal constitutional monarchy.¹¹ However, such an ending could not have

sued Edgeworth's early nineteenth-century vision of individualistic anti-Jacobinism. Although the bloody regicidal reign of the Jacobins would have made the turn to a rational father or monarch figure appealing in 1801, Edgeworth nevertheless does not simply transport intact the patriarchal father-knows-best ending offered by Lennox's earlier work into her later novel, but ends her novel with a scene of shared female reading. Given the mental instability of George III and the restless extravagance of his son (the prince regent), as well as the disturbing rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, by 1801 Edgeworth would have had many reasons to craft an ending for *Angelina* that did not rely on a lecture by a wise and intimidating clergyman or marriage to the cousin her father and uncle had chosen for her. Edgeworth's conclusion to *Angelina*, located in a realm of rational female sympathy and friendship (in which Angelina refuses the false sympathy of an *unknown friend* for the real and proven sympathy of her true friends), offers a nonpatriarchal anti-Jacobinism that nevertheless redeems the sympathy and sentiment (and potential protofeminism) of the initial intellectual underpinnings of both the American and French Revolutions.

It is significant that this mode of sentimental empathy is enacted between two polite, modest women whose demure behavior distinguishes them from the caricatures of "masculine" behavior that fearmongers associated with more radical revolutionary sentiment and less nuanced political positions. The gin-drinking Araminta—who orders around her hapless fiancé as if he were a servant—provides the Other against which Angelina defines proper British (anti-Jacobin) femininity, just as Harriot Freke provides a cross-dressed, duel-fighting Other to the eponymous heroine of Edgeworth's best-selling *Belinda* (1801).¹² Angelina also represents a heroine who is, by comparison to Lennox's Arabella, quick to correct her mistakes, and so approaches Elizabeth Bennett in her sophisticated ability to critique her own judgment. When Edgeworth's moral tales were republished in Philadelphia in 1811, their depiction of rational sympathy and female friendship would have been familiar to American readers and consistent with the ideals of republican womanhood prized by the new American nation and articulated in such popular works as Susannah Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, published in America in 1794, and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797).¹³ Indeed, novelistic depictions of female rationality, as well as a tradition of practical female education advocated by such luminaries as Benjamin Rush and Noah Webster, stand alongside poi-

gnant representations of female peril in this era. Tenney's heroine, however, in this fraught post-Revolutionary moment in the early United States, takes a peculiar turn, becoming old and gray before she comes to know herself. The decades-long idiosyncrasy of Dorcasina, who finally develops into a politically wise woman of a certain age, challenges depictions of nation building as the exclusive province of the young and the male, or as a simple contest between conservative and radical post-Revolutionary factions.

ROMANTIC TRANSPORTS: THE FEMALE
QUIXOTE IN REPUBLICAN AMERICA

Female Quixotism, Tabitha Tenney's 1801 American adaptation of Lennox's *Female Quixote*, appeared in the same year as the British edition of Edgeworth's *Angelina*, and transports many of the standard plot features identifiable in Lennox's and Edgeworth's texts into post-Revolutionary America.¹⁴ Like her British precursors, Tenney's "transported" protagonist harbors romantic delusions that set her at odds with a Federalist Philadelphia beset with political and domestic tensions centered on questions of virtue, autonomy, social mobility, and matrimony. As with Lennox's and Edgeworth's work, the nuance of Tenney's tale is often lost in readings that emphasize its social conservatism at the expense of its gestures of a lingering sympathy with a more progressive realm of social and political possibility.¹⁵

Tenney's heroine, owing to the early death of her mother and her father's fond "indulgence" of his own reading habits, begins the story as an adolescent girl who, like Lennox's and Edgeworth's heroines, has read too many romances, a habit that inspired her to rechristen herself "Dorcasina" early on. Unlike her British "sisters," however, Dorcasina fails to awaken to her romantic delusions until she is well into middle age; she is not only *not* cured of her delusional reading in time to marry her only truly suitable suitor, Lysander, who courts her when she is twenty years old, but spends the next thirty years getting into ludicrous scrapes and encouraging a variety of fortune hunters and scoundrels, many of whom are considerably her junior, socially inferior, and even overtly criminal.

Enacted three years before the publication of Tenney's novel, the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 offer a convenient hallmark of the climate of

Federalist reactionism into which Tenney interjects her novel—a climate only exacerbated by the election of Thomas Jefferson in 1799.¹⁶ Directed at the potential for espionage, foreign influence, and domestic political destabilization feared in the wake of the French Revolution, the acts registered as well considerable anxiety about the social experiment unleashed by American democracy, and reflected the conservative retrenchment that characterized the first decade of national history. The acts and the domestic isolationism they expressed became key points of Federalist contrast to the democratic republicanism of Jefferson and his anti-Federalists, against whom charges of “Jacobinism” were common. Tenney imports into her cautionary tale the common popular targets of the acts: Dorcasina is wooed early on by a duplicitous Irishman, O’Connor, singled out for his “villainy” (16), while Seymore, Dorcasina’s final suitor, has conducted business in France, where he has “thoroughly imbibed all the demoralizing and atheistical principles of that corrupt people” (297) while losing his fortune. As Linda Frost observes, “the men who pursue Dorcasina are reminiscent of the same figures that threatened the Federalists’ stronghold on the American government; clearly self-interested, largely from the lower class, mostly servants or criminals”; that is, they form a veritable “catalog of class anxieties that particularly disturbed the Federalist constituency of the new republic” (114).

By juxtaposing Dorcasina’s foolishness with the genuine depravity of the scoundrels who court her, the novel foregrounds not only the danger of women’s romantic delusions but also the very real threats of imposture, forgery, or deceit to which any American—man or woman—might fall prey in the post-Revolutionary chaos.¹⁷ Unlike Lennox’s *Arabella*, whose extended family, Doody suggests, provides an external check on her delusions and protects her from the most egregious deceptions, Dorcasina lives in a new nation whose unstable political and social institutions “allowed strangers to pass in the new world as what they were not and, thus, to marry into well-established American families by imposing on naïve girls or on their socially ambitious parents” (Bannet 562). The risks of Dorcasina’s romantic delusions must therefore be understood within the political and social flux of post-Revolutionary America. In this context, Tenney’s novel contradicts explicitly Gordon’s insistence that female quixotism is primarily “a strategy to dismiss differing experience” or that the genre is inherently “defensive” or “compensatory” (24).

Instead, *Female Quixotism* upholds the basic tenets of social conservatism but also expresses the appeal of a more egalitarian sociopolitical order. Rather than simply discrediting Dorcasina's desires, the novel invokes progressive visions of social and personal relationships that are never fully exercised by its voices of insistent pragmatism. As Linda Frost has noted, for example, Dorcasina's unusual social and economic independence hints at the "provocative . . . suggestion that a woman could successfully manage and even benefit from the self-government Dorcasina has attained" (129), an intimation that resists tidy recuperation by the novel's conservative moralizing.¹⁸ Dorcasina clearly understands her fantasies in the freighted political terms of "liberty"; for example, she couches her attraction to the illiterate rustic John Brown, whom she has convinced herself is a nobleman in disguise, in terms redolent of political liberation: "I must be the best judge of what will promote my own happiness," she insists (254).

Before she even meets Lysander, her first suitor and a Virginian, Dorcasina conflates the political and romantic realms through "the agreeable, humane, but *romantic* idea, that, being the wife of Lysander, she should become the benefactress of his slaves" (9, emphasis added). Dorcasina's reluctance to "be served by slaves, and be supported by the sweat, toil and blood of that unfortunate and miserable part of mankind," combined with her active imagination, leads her to envision a future in which, inspired by her example, "the spirit of justice and humanity should extend to the utmost limits of the United States, and all the blacks be emancipated from bondage, from New Hampshire even to Georgia" (8, 9). Although the progressive capacity of Dorcasina's political statement is undercut by its grandiosity and impracticality, signaled by its characterization through the weighted term *romantic*, the novel's invocation of a more benevolent racial order lingers—like the suggestion of social mobility that underlies John Brown's potential aspirations, and the promise of feminine agency that could ensure it—around the novel's edges like the ghost of an alternative universe.

Despite its overt concern with policing the boundaries of fiction, *Female Quixotism* is nonetheless suffused with the discourses of all manners of pretense. The novel's deployment of not only literary fictions but also masquerades and other theatrics, of figments, ghosts, specters, and apparitions, resonates with the larger political discourses of the era, and the sheer number and variety of imaginative constructs it depicts amplify its com-

plex claims about the role of the imagination in one's personal, social, and political life. By distributing these manifestations of the imagination across characters of different social class, race, and sex, Tenney resists a purely reactionary ideology, and insists instead on both the fluid forms that imagination manifests and the importance of specific context in determining its efficacy and reasonableness. Betty's naïve susceptibility to what Dorcasina calls "ridiculous notions of ghosts and spirits" (110), for example, is depicted not only in terms of its ironic resemblance to Dorcasina's own romantic fantasies but also in contradistinction to the competence, pragmatism, and deft handling of worldly affairs exhibited by the Sheldons' loyal black servant Scipio, who himself contrasts poignantly with the fond but ineffective presence of his master, Mr. Sheldon. Regardless of their very different social identities and individual capacities, however, all three find themselves engaged in farcical play acting at Dorcasina's behest or on her behalf. Tenney thus individuates her characters' relation to the imaginative realm while portraying a shared capacity for "fiction" that extends far beyond Dorcasina's own delusions—a capacity whose value is determined not by rank or status, but by the particular motives and situation in which it occurs.

What emerges from the novel's pages, then, is less a unified indictment of the perils of the imagination than an accreted sense of the importance of the genuine affection—or lack thereof—in which it is manifested. Ultimately, it matters less that Betty is foolish, and Scipio clever, than that both partake in a variety of fictional roles and situations, often at their own peril, out of their abiding affection for their fond but ridiculous mistress. Even sensible Harriot Stanly, the novel's clearest model for how Dorcasina should conduct herself, engages in a ludicrous masquerade, attempting to woo Dorcasina away from John Brown by presenting herself as the dashing Captain Montague. Significantly, Harriot's plan, while unsuccessful, unites fancy with cool reason: her masquerade emerges from her "sprightly imagination," but is also "calculated" for its likely effect on Dorcasina (251); it thereby emphasizes that for Harriot, and for Tenney, the two dimensions need not be mutually exclusive, but are better understood as complementary, especially as they are mediated by genuine, if sometimes exasperated, affection.

This is not to deny that in its repeated staging of disguises, masquerades, apparitions, and other fictions, the novel expresses anxiety toward

the Federalist “specter” of social mobility. When Betty encounters John Brown dressed in the late Mr. Sheldon’s clothing, she mistakes him for Sheldon’s ghost (241); her mistake underscores the extent to which Dorcasina’s misattribution of his status and Brown’s assumption of Sheldon’s garments raise the anxious possibility of a parallel political impostor infiltrating the disordered and patriarchally bereft house of the new nation. But Tenney forestalls a purely reactionary reading of this scene by countering Brown’s spectral threat with the deliberate haunting he himself receives at the hands of loyal Scipio, whose appearance before him, “wrapped in a sheet, with a white handkerchief,” sends Brown running “as fast as his legs could carry him” (271). The general significance of the act of imposture is mediated by the specific context in which it occurs, and contingent on the emotional motivation of its perpetrator: if Brown’s masquerade (and Dorcasina’s eager facilitation thereof) represents a threat to the social order, those staged by Scipio and Harriot attempt to protect Dorcasina from that threat’s worst effects.

The novel’s conclusion reinforces its emphasis on the mediating function of sentiment; it tempers Dorcasina’s exaggerated fantasies of romance, abolition, or social mobility with a more conventional sympathy for the everyday sufferings of her peers. In fact, Dorcasina’s “awakening” is expressed less in terms of the ultimate disappointment of her own romantic fantasies than through her sympathetic friendship with Harriot Stanly, now Barry, whose genuinely happy union is marred by the death of her mother and infant son. Clearly, the cruelty of her final suitor, Seymore, sets up Dorcasina’s epiphany: “‘It was your money, and my necessities that induced me to deceive you; and you, credulous old fool, so greedily swallowed the grossest flattery, vanity, at your age, with those grey locks, to set out to make conquests!’” he tells her (315). However, it is the corrective evidence provided by the Barrys’ marriage that truly “cures” Dorcasina of her most pervasive misconceptions, leaving her to resume a life appropriate to her social reality. Confronted by Harriot’s familial trials, Dorcasina finally admits her folly: “‘I find that, in my ideas of matrimony, 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).¹⁹ As with her British predecessors, Dorcasina finds her greatest wisdom not merely through a corrected political perception or an absolute rejection of fiction but through

her sympathetic relationships with other women—Harriot Stanly and the long-suffering Betty—which help her to reframe but not eliminate her relationship to romance.

Despite the conservative direction of Dorcasina's conversion, the nuance of Tenney's political vision lies largely in acknowledging the appeal novels still hold for Dorcasina, and for her readers. Even in her recovered state, Dorcasina is unable to "dispense with" the fictions that have functioned for so long as her reality, although she realizes that her "imprudent indulgence" has led her to pass life by "chasing a shadow . . . , in pursuit of an imaginary happiness, which, in this life, can never be realized" (323). In choosing to stage her novel's rejection of fancy through a fictional character whose foibles hold captive the attention and the sentiments of the reader, Tenney subtly tempers the relentless conservatism of which her novel is so often accused, and echoes but does not replicate her British predecessors' reconciliations of political realism and emotional connection. In taking Dorcasina's follies (and her repentance) to heart, the reader "realizes" her existence, demonstrating that even fancy has real effects, and, moreover, that the lines between the "real" and the "imaginary" are not nearly so absolute as the novel's moral might otherwise appear to suggest. Like the various specters that recur throughout the novel, Dorcasina's fictional presence accomplishes real, if contradictory, work; on the one hand, she confirms the perils of novel reading and reinforces social conservatism. On the other, however, her tale suggests the lure of the kind of progressive possibilities that, for residents of the new nation, are increasingly rendered as merely imaginary, if not downright delusional: female autonomy, social mobility, and racial justice. As a national allegory, then, Dorcasina's cautionary tale reinforces the Federalist message of social conservatism; at the same time, it conveys nostalgia for the imaginative possibilities—political and romantic—the new nation originally inspired, and perhaps voices an ambivalent anticipation of what the Jeffersonian revolution might reawaken.

Lennox allows her zealously romantic Arabella to be "cured" while still young and pretty enough to become a model of a demure feminine Whig lady, in contrast to the caricature of Jacobitism against which mid-eighteenth-century Britishness was being defined. Edgeworth likewise distinguishes the recuperated Angelina from the coarser and more masculine Araminta, who represents the unfeminine Jacobinism against which more

traditionally gendered British selfhood defined itself at the end of the eighteenth century. Tenney, however, by preventing her heroine from being cured while still young and pretty—thereby incorporating the demonized female Other into the belatedly cured heroine herself—defines an image of post-Revolutionary Americanism that may be conservative but is not entirely exclusionary. Although no longer young, Dorcasina is wise and empathetic by the end of the novel, and fully comfortable with herself, as well as sympathetic to her loyal servants. Moreover, she is knowledgeable enough about politics to know the difference between Jacobitism and Jacobinism and to understand the subtleties of Illuminatism. *Female Quixotism*, in other words, gestures toward the possibility that women could be sensible, savvy, and politicized without being represented as delusional Quixotes or masculinized zealots. In the broadest sense, then, Tenney deploys the figure of the female Quixote to an ultimate effect similar to those of Lennox and Edgeworth: her heroine's delusions allow her to incorporate nuance and complexity into an otherwise conservative political position. However, unlike her models, Tenney continues to subject Dorcasina to ridicule into middle age: neither Angelina nor Angelica becomes a ludicrous gray-haired figure suffering the humiliation of losing her wig in the mud. Whereas we might at first see Tenney as having less respect for her heroine than her novelistic predecessors do for theirs, we must realize that she has, in another sense, drawn a stronger figure—one who can endure four decades of increasingly farcical behavior and still achieve the reader's respect and affection at the end, even though she never succeeds in the usual requirement for a successful heroine—securing a respectable husband.

By the time Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen take hold of her, the female Quixote has metamorphosed from the heroine of Arabella's long-winded "foible" into the quick-witted, perceptive, self-critical Elizabeth Bennett, shifting the reader's attention from her political situation to her interior experience: the British Quixote yields gradually to the socially astute, occasionally ambivalent, psychologically rich female character of the nineteenth century. A different fate, however, awaits her American cousin. In transporting the figure of the female Quixote into middle age, and thence into nineteenth-century American culture, Tenney begins to rewrite the role of women as less the objects than the agents of political intervention. Dorcasina's deferred vindication lies in the fact that within

the next half century, the abolitionist movement would appeal directly to women and mothers to rally against the institution of slavery on both political and sentimental grounds. Fifty years after Dorcasina's belated awakening, Harriet Beecher Stowe, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), will mock Mr. Shelby for dismissing as "a piece of Quixotism" (221) his wife's valiant offer to raise money by giving music lessons. Stowe's depiction of the nobility and virtue of Mrs. Shelby's suggestion—motivated by her sympathy for the slave Tom's humanity, in clear contradiction to the antebellum status quo represented by her husband's callous economic pragmatism—assumes the existence of the kind of female political stance tempered with human sympathy that her "quixotic" predecessors had worked so hard to learn. The notion of women as "quixotic" or delusional would appear, by then, as something that only a fiscally imprudent and morally bereft man might imagine.

NOTES

1. With thanks to Jeanne Stevens for editorial help and for research assistance on this point.
2. For example, Eliza Haywood's heroines from the 1720s can be divided along these lines (Carnell 138–40), and Richardson's Pamela emblemizes the impeccably virtuous heroine.
3. Gordon, of course, mentions Tenney's "choice to follow Dorcas (still unmarried) into middle age," but argues that this, the novel's "most startling innovation . . . implies that women who read romances may be permanently disabled from participating productively in their communities" (49). Instead, we mark the significance of Dorcasina's hard-won "benevolence and charity," which have produced in her the cheerfulness and resignation in which "she yet continues"—alone, yes, but productive and beloved—at the novel's end.
4. Betty's unremarked confusion of "Jacobite" and "Jacobin" is reproduced by the editors of Tenney, who themselves mistakenly define the former as the latter: 331n316.2.
5. As Staves documents in her research on the reception of *Don Quixote* in eighteenth-century England, neoclassical writers generally appreciated the power of Cervantes's satire and often deployed a Quixote figure for political and social ends of their own. In *Don Quixote in England* (1734), a work of comic drama, Henry Fielding rips into corrupt electioneering; in *The Spiritual Quixote* (1773), Richard Graves attacks Methodists following the model of earlier anti-Puritan satires; at the end of the century, a male Quixote was used to demonize

the excesses of the French Revolution in works such as Charles Lucas's *The Infernal Quixote* (1800).

6. See Carnell 31–37.
7. Arbuthnot 273. These key words demonstrate Arbuthnot's Hanoverian loyalty in a text that is more sympathetic to the figure of the Jacobite military hero Jenny Cameron than many other propagandistic treatments of her (see Carnell 38–43).
8. Szechi used the term “cosmic” at a conference session at the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies in Milwaukee, April 1999. See also his *The Jacobites* (137).
9. Although the circumstances are very different, Lennox's heroine's abduction by the soldiers disguised as and accompanied by Mohawks may suggest a familiarity with Mary Rowlandson's best-selling captivity narrative, which Lennox may well have read or known of during her early years in the American colonies. Armstrong and Tennenhouse provide an exhaustive account of Rowlandson's popularity in *The Imaginary Puritan* (203–04), but omit Lennox's deployment of the captivity trope in their study.
10. See Carnell 105–27.
11. For a discussion of the development of patriarchalism in early to mid-eighteenth-century Whig propaganda, see Carnell 33–37.
12. Although some critics initially saw Harriot Freke as a caricature of Mary Wollstonecraft herself, Kirkpatrick recognizes that Wollstonecraft and Edgeworth similarly portray this type of “masculine woman as a bogey, an imaginary terror that employs fear to keep women from improving their condition” (xx–xxi).
13. *Charlotte Temple* was first published in Britain in 1791.
14. Little is known about Tenney's biography or her reading history; however, as Arch has noted, *Female Quixotism* “is coded with the plots, figures, assumptions, and problems of a cluster of mid-eighteenth-century British novels” including those by Lennox, Fielding, Richardson, and Haywood (180). For an overview of Tenney's life and work, see also Fichtelberg and the introduction to Nienkamp and Collins's edition of *Female Quixotism*.
15. Scholars have largely relegated Tenney's work to what Sarah Emily Newton has called the realm of “conduct fiction,” works whose didactic intentions compromise their aesthetic or cultural complexity (see, e.g., 140). Davidson, for example, suggests that *Female Quixotism* is somewhat irrelevant when she contends, “Dorcasina's excursions in her quixotic mental world do not trouble the status quo” (278). More recently, scholars like Frost and Brown have begun to explore the general—as opposed to *gendered*—political implications of Tenney's novel.
16. Brown astutely reminds us not to confuse the federalism of John Jay, Alexander Hamilton, and John Madison with the American Federalist Party, a socially conservative movement dedicated to preserving American class interests; this latter is the Federalist Party that Tenney's husband represented during his terms as senator (266n26).

17. Other novels from the period, such as Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798), *Ormond* (1799), and *Arthur Mervyn* (1799), famously dramatize social and political duplicity, the instability of identity, and the threat of "seduction" not merely as a sexual threat to women but also as a pervasive problem among men who fall prey to forgers, embezzlers, and ventriloquists. See also Bannet 561–64.
18. In Frost's reading, the radical potential of such female autonomy is undermined by the "class elitism" of the novel's conclusion, in which the moral of Dorcasina's story is directed to her readers; that is, to "those *just like herself*, members of the same social and economic class" (129).
19. In Arch's reading, Dorcasina's plight "represents the seductive, pliable, fantastic, free world of the imagination, which must according to the logic of the history/novel in the end be constrained by the normative world of man's suffering, of history as it is actually experienced" (191).

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