

Research Article

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The Politics of Genre and Gender in Tabitha Gilman Tenney's *Female Quixotism*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2017-0043>

Received September 6, 2017; accepted December 9, 2017

Abstract: The present article focuses on transatlantic female quixotism, as enacted by Tabitha Tenney's heroine, Dorcasina Sheldon. I argue that quixotism can be read as an interface between the events of the story and the Federalist conservative discourse that underlies them. In doing so, I claim that, in terms of gender, the heroine's misreading of romances transforms her into a political tool whereby the ideals of female freedom and agency, social mobility, gender equality, racial equity and abolitionism—effective under Thomas Jefferson's administration—are satirically depicted and seen as delusory in post-Revolutionary America. In terms of generic categories, I will show how *Female Quixotism* blurs the epistemological boundaries between truth and fiction by juxtaposing novel and romance, used interchangeably, with history.

Keywords: early American novel, romance, the female quixote, misreading, Federalism

Introduction

Generally discussed by contemporary literary criticism in tandem with the canonical early American sentimental novels of Hannah Webster Foster (*The Coquette*, 1797) and Susannah Rowson (*Charlotte Temple*, 1791), Tabitha Gilman Tenney's *Female Quixotism: Exhibited in the Romantic Opinions and Extravagant Adventures of Dorcasina Sheldon* (1801) is a liminal text indebted, on the one hand, to the British fictional tradition which appropriated, imitated and reworked Cervantes's *Don Quixote* as part of the debates about the emergence of what we today call a novel and, on the other, to the novelistic tradition of British Atlantic women readers who mistake the world of romance for material reality. Tenney's novel echoes Charlotte Lennox's popular novel *The Female Quixote* (1752), the first to foreground an eighteenth-century British quixotic heroine who falls prey to the aristocratic idealism of French romances that empowers her, erroneously yet satirically, to critique the patriarchal society in which she lives. Unlike *The Female Quixote*, Tenney's novel participates in the articulation of a generic discourse that attempts to further the American novel tradition through a concern for prior European—and particularly English—models, which “created an irresistible temptation to adapt and to imitate and dampened the ambition to cultivate an original voice” (Gilmore 547). Concurrently, Tenney frames her transatlantic female quixote, Dorcasina, into the politics of gender inextricably linked to the social, cultural and political deprivations and anxieties experienced by women in the early American Republic. As Rachel Carnell and Alison Tracy Hale cogently argue, the quixotic female protagonist's misreading of romances and her final cure “are deeply engaged with the particular political landscape she inhabits,” the more so as since 1750, both in England and across the Atlantic, she has played a crucial role in transforming the representations of female identity “in a world whose cultural and political complexity is central to the correction of her ‘mis’reading” (519). In this light, I argue that, in terms of gender, American female quixotes like Dorcasina are employed as political tools or reformers

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able to critique or to get involved in redressing a morally corrupt society. In terms of genre, I claim that *Female Quixotism* contributes to buttressing the early American novel tradition that was extremely alert to “the problem of American ‘exceptionalism’” (McKeon, “Prose fiction: Great Britain” 239). Also, as regards the reception of *Don Quixote* in America, Ilan Stavans writes that “in the United States, *El Quijote* is read altogether differently: as a guidebook to exceptionalism” (145), as an ideal type whose mission is to uphold the belief that the United States must be “a bastion of tolerance and individualism” (146). By struggling for “tolerance and individualism” in a Federalist political background, Dorcasina poses as a marginal character, as “exception” (Hanlon 149), the most significant feature of quixotes in novels, where they act as “exceptionalists in and of their imitative and imaginative rejection of dominant social codes” (Hanlon 152). My argument is thus informed by Aaron R. Hanlon’s observations, which prove to be a serviceable instrument for delving into the politics of genre and gender unfolded by Tenney’s novel and her heroine. Whereas the quixote character appears as “exception,” as an eccentric individual who is “a combination of lofty idealism, the class privileges of education and leisure to read about the idealistic pursuit of justice, and the mimetic madness to substitute the imitated reality of idealistic fiction for the material reality of ordinary life” (Hanlon 153), the novel itself is labelled as “formal exceptionalism” (Hanlon 155) due to its generic features that mark it out as distinct from other previous fictional forms and conventions, most notably the epic and romance. The novel’s “claim to historicity” as well as the epistemological categorisation as “true history” (McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* 242) institutionalise the eighteenth-century novel as a different literary form. By imitating and acting in the name of an anachronistic code, Don Quixote is “both represented and representing” an alternative way of perceiving the world, which the novel ironically validates as *vertiente histórica*. In a nutshell, the juxtaposition of the exceptionalist nature of character with that of form enables quixotes “to facilitate the work the novel does in differentiating itself from prior ways of telling stories, just as Don Quixote’s fixation on romance is *Don Quixote*’s vehicle for distinguishing itself from romance” (Hanlon 155). Tenney’s Dorcasina is thus the early American embodiment of a “literary” and “ideological” quixote (Staves 195, 200) in that her reading of eccentric fiction and consequent mimetic behaviour are meant to inveigh against the pressing socio-political issues upheld by Federalism.

Romance Reading under Duress

Published in Boston in 1801, *Female Quixotism* is a post-Revolutionary American replica of Lennox’s *Female Quixote* and Maria Edgeworth’s *Angelina; or, l’Amie Inconnue* published in London in the same year. Dedicated to “the younger part of [Dorcasina’s] sex” (Tenney 3), the novel’s primary function is to instruct and to warn young ladies against the baneful effects of romance reading which, according to Henry Fielding’s review of Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* published in the *Covent-Garden Journal*, are by far more suitable for female rather than male Quixotes: “[t]o say Truth, I make no Doubt but that most young Women of the same Vivacity, and of the same innocent good Disposition, in the same Situation, and with the same Studies, would be able to make a large Progress in the same Follies” (Fielding 281). The novel’s epigraph, “Felix Quem Faciunt Aliena Pericula Cautum,” translated into “plain English as “[l]earn to be wise by others harm, / and you shall do full well” thus lays stress on the pedagogical dimension reinforced by the preface, which points to “a more subtle how-not-to-read-a-novel novel” (Davidson 186). Dorcasina thus serves as a case study, for her actions are nothing but a series of romantic transports meant to expose her to both the ridicule and, more importantly, to the deceit of her fortune-hunting suitors. A passive reader who fails to take a critical stand against what she reads, Dorcasina moves in a conservative *qua* Federalist cultural background that accounts for her intellectual and developmental *stasis* prompted by stereotypical views according to which women are legally and politically constrained by “the Constitutional silencing of women” (Davidson 152), confined to the private realm in which the reading of “the bible or perhaps the art of cookery” (Tenney 17) is the prerequisite for their domesticity, and devoid of judgement because they cannot benefit from proper education, let alone a classical education which needs to be translated into “plain English,” as the epigraph shows. While I agree that “Dorcasina is no Don Quixote, for the simple reason that even if he challenges only windmills, he still traverses the landscape he misreads and validates

that misreading by his various misadventures” (Davidson 188), I claim, unlike Davidson, that Docasina as a “picara,” a concept she uses to define the female picaresque tradition, is a parody of the basic meaning of the term “picaro,” since the heroine deserves this characterisation only by virtue of her mental travels prompted by the ideology of romance, rather than spatial mobility, which does not cover “more than thirty miles from her place of nativity” (Davidson 186).

Unlike Lennox’s and Edgeworth’s female quixotes, Tenney’s heroine, born in 1750 “on the beautiful banks of the Delaware, about thirty miles from Philadelphia” (Tenney 4), cannot forswear her romantic delusions until the age of fifty, when she sadly realizes that the futile fictions that have nurtured her mind are responsible for her miserable spinsterhood. Marriage, the social institution that in *The Female Quixote* and *Angelina* urges for social reformation and fulfilment as the *sine qua non* for comedy, whose happy ending elicits the “this should be” (Frye 167) response of the audience, is suspended as a result of a middle-aged woman who finally questions her own individualism modelled after what she reads and, on a more significant quixotic note, “refuses to grow into the republican ideals of womanhood available to her” (Wood 166). Bereft of her mother at a tender age, a leitmotif in most “orthodox quixotic narratives” (Gordon 42), Dorcasina’s instruction is doomed to failure, for “her mother’s rational education” would have purged her from “the airy delusions and visionary dreams of love and raptures, darts, fire and flames, with which the indiscreet writers of that fascinating kind of books, denominated Novels, fill the heads of artless young girls, to their great injury, and sometimes to their utter ruin” (Tenney 4-5). Raised by a father averse to living in the city, who has a penchant for studying history and reading novels, “a singular taste for a man” (Tenney 6), the heroine’s reading tastes and habits are distorted as a consequence of her father’s great affection for her and miseducation translated as ignorance of the noxious effects of novels on a young female’s mind. Thus, it is novels that “were her study, and history only her amusement,” since her father was not aware of “their [novels] dangerous tendency to a young inexperienced female mind . . . unacquainted with the ways of the world” (Tenney 6). In this context, female quixotism is on solid ground, being foreshadowed by the change of her “unfashionable and unromantic name” of Dorcas into Dorcasina, to which she gave “a romantic termination” (Tenney 6) agreed upon by her father. Dorcasina’s biography, the preface informs us, may be suspected to be “a mere romance, and Hogarthian caricatura, instead of a true picture of life” (Tenney 3). Nevertheless, by comparing it to Cervantes’s “authentic history of the celebrated hero of La Mancha,” the anonymous compiler, who tells us the story of Dorcasina given to him/her in written form by Harriot Stanly, her sympathetic friend in the novel, avers that “you will no longer doubt its being a true uncoloured history of a romantic country girl, whose head had been turned by the unrestrained perusal of Novels and Romances” (Tenney 3). The generic ambiguity triggered by the mingling of “authentic” versus “uncoloured history,” as well as by the interchangeable use of “novels” and “romances” needs further explanation, as long as Tenney’s irony blurs the epistemological boundaries between truth and fiction, between the credible, objective, *hic et nunc* world of the novel and the incredible, marvellous, *ibi et tunc* world of romance.

In his excellent analysis of the epistemological tropes that underlie Tenney’s novel, Stephen Carl Arch suggests that the heroine’s eccentric conduct is a form of “transgression” (184) which, implicitly, determines the reader to set it against the backdrop of romance or to view it as “a Hogarthian caricatura,” a satirical exaggeration of someone’s character which crosses the boundaries of real or natural appearance. Ironically, whereas the readers normally expect to read a fictional tale about an “exceptionalist” or extravagant character, the compiler makes clear that *Female Quixotism* is an “uncoloured,” therefore authentic, “history” that will not transcend the precepts of “formal realism” (Watt 32). For pedagogical purposes, young ladies must read real, “uncoloured” histories, not novels and romances, as is the case with Dorcasina, for otherwise “the narrative itself would be participating in the same seductive, dangerous genre which deludes Miss Sheldon all her life” (Arch 186). Her upbringing in seclusion, far from Philadelphia, means a deprivation of urban—and urbane—manners taught in the social and cultural milieu of the city where she can gain experience and get acquainted with the ways of the world. Also, her gradually “perverted” (Tenney 144) understanding of reality alludes to her romantic whims and coloured history, i.e. romance, which must be discarded by female readership. *Female Quixotism* contributes to the debate over

truth and fiction by separating out “uncoloured history” from “novels and romances,” which, seen as true histories by quixotes, are in fact fictional transgressions of real life.

Quixotism as Socio-political Ideology

The emblem of her “exceptionalist” behaviour and quixotic ideology, Dorcasina’s madness induced by romance reading turns her into a recalcitrant female protagonist that is at loggerheads with “a Federalist Philadelphia beset with political and domestic tensions centered on questions of virtue, autonomy, social mobility, and matrimony” (Carnell and Hale 520). Manifesting itself in a variety of forms, madness turns the female quixote’s behaviour absurd and ridiculous both in front of her sympathetic father, servants and friends like Harriot Stanley and in front of her alleged suitors, some of whom use the romance language as a code whereby they try to curry favour with Dorcasina. The only worthy suitor, Lysander, who woos her when she is in her twenties, and who would really be “destined by Heaven to become her husband” (Tenney 8), is rejected because she fails to experience “that violent emotion . . . which always accompanies genuine love” (Tenney 13) and also because she cannot put up with his lack of romance writing rules. Nonetheless, there is an important political element that might unite them in matrimony: like his father, the Virginian Lysander is a slave owner who would set them free out of his passionate love for her. As an anti-slavery supporter, Dorcasina knows very well, notwithstanding her delusions, that slavery is ultimately immoral and denounces it vehemently in the name of social justice and equality:

[s]he even extended her benevolent reveries beyond the plantation of her future husband, and, wrapt in the glow of enthusiasm, saw his neighbours imitating his example, and others imitating them, till 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. (Tenney 9)

Her fantasies about the abolition of slavery have a correspondent in actual reality and are voiced in an articulate and judicious manner. Apart from Lysander’s sheer incompatibility with romance values, it is this political subtext that precludes Dorcasina’s marriage to the Virginian. As she will have to live in Virginia, she will have to be “served by slaves, and be supported by the sweat, toil, and blood of that unfortunate and miserable part of humankind” (Tenney 8), which means that she does not empathise with Lysander, but with his slaves. Concurrently, she turns Lysander down because she subliminally finds herself in the position of “the subservient domestic helpmeet” (Davidson 188), which is itself a form of bondage. As Michael J. Drexler and Ed White have observed, the Lysander-Dorcasina episode is the trigger for “a series of phantasmatic engagements with different political formulations, in what is essentially a novelistic rendition of various ideological formations of the post-Revolutionary period” (85). As a *modus operandi* practised in order to resist the status quo, quixotism itself becomes, in this case, a political interface between Federalist conservatism and Dorcasina’s liberal view on the pressing social and political issue of slavery. By the same token, the heroine’s second suitor, the Irishman O’Connor, a robber, a gambler and a swindler who reaches Philadelphia from Europe passes for “the extravagant and sentimental European (in his demeanour) and the European underclass immigrant (in his motivation)” (Drexler and White 86). He emblematises the perils transgressing Europe and looming over the New World, which the narrative explicitly connects with perpetrators who caused “mischief that have been occasioned to this country by its being an asylum to European convicts, fugitives from justice, and other worthless characters” (Tenney 17). The deceitful O’Connor’s mastery of the language of romance stirs the violent love of Dorcasina, who perceives him “as a divine fellow, a perfect Sir Charles Grandison” (Tenney 28). The letter sent to her father by his friend Mr W. from Philadelphia attests to the villainy of the fortune hunter adored by the female protagonist who is ready to marry him regardless of his Catholic religion. “A most worthless and abandoned profligate” (Tenney 81), O’Connor is whipped and imprisoned in Philadelphia for having stolen silverware from an inn on his way to New York. This is the scene witnessed by Dorcasina in the presence of her father, which awakens her to romantic foibles related to her love for O’Connor. Politically, he echoes the Irish Rebellion of 1798. As Sarah Wood has rightly noted, following the unsuccessful rebellion, “many activists

sought sanctuary in the United States but found themselves distrusted and despised by a government that perceived them as agents for the French and enemies of the state” (Wood 191-92). Though adopted by post-Revolutionary America, O’Connor is a vile European who, according to the Federalist isolationist policy, is regarded with suspicion following the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, which aimed to combat any foreign influence—mainly viewed as immorality, imposture and deceit—and political crisis fuelled by the ideals of Revolutionary France. Tenney’s conservatism places Dorcasina in a setting that “allowed strangers to pass in a new world as what they were not and, thus, to marry into well well-established American families by imposing on naïve girls or on their socially ambitious parents” (Bannet 562).

Gender and the World of Federalist Carnival

The cross-dressing, masquerades and disguises that punctuate the novel raise not only the question of gender but also of class anxieties prevailing in a Federalist conservative context. Part of the carnivalesque tradition theorised by Mikhail Bakhtin as a space of resistance and contestation in which social ranks are brought together and life observes “the laws of its own freedom” (Bakhtin 7), the theatrics generated by Dorcasina’s madness are yet another form of transgression which, along with the ghosts and spirits that haunt the mind of her illiterate servant Betty, have the potential to respond imaginatively to her own fictions inspired by heroic romances. For instance, when Betty is asked to wear Dorcasina’s father’s clothes in order to impersonate O’Connor, Betty “made a more grotesque appearance” (Tenney 98) perceived as such by the others, except Dorcasina. Philander, a nineteen-year-old young scholar who keeps the village school, finds out about the heroine’s eccentricities and plays tricks on her romantic transports. He fools a barber into meeting her in the grove and writing romance-style billets to her. She is kidnapped by Philander, the barber and another cheerful friend, which, overwhelmingly, makes the female quixote feel surprised, not terrified: “There was something so charmingly romantic in thus being carried off by force, that while she thought only of herself, she was by no means displeased” (Tenney 131). The episode in which the pragmatic, reasonable and faithful black servant Scipio is mistaken by Dorcasina for O’Conner and Miss Violet, Scipio’s mistress, is mistaken for Dorcasina and embraced by O’Conner is living proof of a violation of sexual norms, as well as of racial and class stereotypes that would be dismantled in Jeffersonian America. The travesty scene in which Harriot Stanley, dressed in a military suit, impersonates her father in his youth by the name of Montague with the purpose of bringing Dorcasina back to her senses is yet another telling example. The reversal of gender roles adds to the comic situation attuned to the rules of romance. Harriot, the girl of Dorcasina’s father’s best friends, volunteers to cure the female quixote of her romantic fantasies by means of her “sprightly imagination” (Tenney 251) which, unlike Dorcasina’s, is not “coloured” by romantic fictions: “they are seldom natural; but colour everything much too highly, and represent characters and situations, which never have existed” (Tenney 221). Harriot, therefore, was taught the right lesson that Dorcasina did not have the chance to learn because of her mother’s death. By trying to combat fiction with fiction, Harriot uses her imagination to keep Dorcasina away from her new suitor, John Brown, whom she takes for Tobias Smollett’s Roderick Random, the eponymous hero of the novel she refused to read for more than twenty years. In spite of being a successful dissembler, for “seldom have mortal eyes beheld a more beautiful fellow than she appeared to be” (Tenney 260), Harriot fails in her attempt because Dorcasina is already in love with Brown, whom she considers a real gentleman. When the wedding banns are published for both lovers, Harriot’s father manages to put an end to a disastrous marriage. Dorcasina’s father’s plan to kidnap her and to take her to a secluded farmhouse where she could stay away from “the books which had corrupted her” and “from every person whom she could possibly mistake for a lover” (Tenney 298) proves to be equally unsuccessful. The kidnapping plot, like those hatched by the other characters in order to cure Dorcasina, represents a new adventure, for this is what happens to a romance heroine. It stands for what Hanlon calls “a quixotic-literary meme” (151), that is, an imitation of the quixotic hero’s imitation of romances through which they endeavour to put an end to the quixotic character’s delusions. In addition, the father’s plot is badly needed at this point because her forty-eight-year-old daughter’s addiction to romantic transports is still unremitting: “[h]er increased years, instead of destroying her early romantic prejudices,

only served to strengthen and confirm them” (Tenney 230). Similar to Don Quixote, who destroys Master Peter’s pasteboard puppets because of his inability to grasp the reflexive nature of reading, Dorcasina is a relentless misreader who is completely untouched by the other characters’ fabricated stories that are likely to destroy the fictional world she inhabits. Read from her own perspective, the novel’s carnivalesque dimension is “a social and political protest through its damning indictment of the American’s of the American Republic’s falsified representations of reality” (Harris 219).

Dorcasina’s last suitor, Mr Seymore is a vicious and corrupt schoolteacher who has “imbibed all the demoralizing and atheistical principles of the corrupt people” (Tenney 297) in France. Followed by his creditors in Charleston, South Carolina, he meets Dorcasina in the remote farmhouse where she lives with other tenants. Unmasked by Williamson, one of his creditors, Seymore makes no bones about revealing his loathsome intentions in front of Dorcasina: “[i]t was your money, and my necessities that induced me to deceive you; and you, credulous old fool, so greedily swallowed the grossest flattery, that it would have been difficult to avoid imposing on you” (Tenney 315). The female quixote’s response to such a straightforward statement represents her much expected awakening:

[t]he danger she had so recently escaped, the imposition which had been practised, and the disagreeable truths she had heard from Seymore, has upon her a surprising effect. Her eyes seemed to be opened, and the romantic spell, by which she had been so many years bound, all at once broken. She reflected, with extreme disgust, upon many parts of her past life, and wondered how she could have been so blind to the merits of Lysander; how she could have been so deceived by O’Connor, Philander and James; and how she could have doated, with such extravagant fondness, upon so vulgar a fellow as Brown. (Tenney 317)

The Waning Power of Quixotic Reading

Remorseful and dejected, the middle-aged Dorcasina’s self-realization of her failure is partly related to her misreading of romances, partly to her life as a woman citizen of the early American Republic. Though she finally becomes a sensible reader who is apt to understand the pernicious effects of uninstructed romance reading, she continues to read her favourite books “with the same enthusiasm as ever” (Tenney 325). This time, however, Dorcasina has learnt the lesson of failure and loss, and also that virtue must be “neither angelical, nor above probability” (Johnson 26). An unmarried woman, in the end, she witnesses a disenchanting reality, one where “the most exemplary virtue will not secure its possessors from the common calamities of life” (Tenney 325). These are Dorcasina’s last words written in a letter to her dear friend Harriot married to Captain Barry, a Revolutionary War veteran, who informs the former female quixote of the tragic loss of her mother and child. It appears, therefore, that Harriot’s *burla*, i.e. cross-dressing, performed in her youth is highly suggestive of the unrestrained world of the imagination/carnival which is the exclusive preserve of “novels and romances.” Analogous to Dorcasina’s disillusionment and suffering, the “calamities” undergone by Harriot are part of ordinary existence, of the “uncoloured history” of man’s life, during which “unallayed felicity is ... unattainable” (Tenney 325). Like Don Quixote’s confession before his death, the female quixote’s acknowledgement of her folly prompts us, readers, to believe 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” (Carnell and Hale 534). Apart from being a satire on romance reading, *Female Quixotism* is a satire of the Federalist socio-political discourse that turns the liberal notions of female freedom and agency, social mobility, gender equality, racial equity and abolitionism into mere quixotic fictions. Nonetheless, by making the year 1800 the end of Dorcasina’s story, Tenney romanticises the democratic creed of Jefferson’s administration, foreseeing “what the Jeffersonian revolution might reawaken” (Carnell and Hale 534). This is what Dorcasina’s transatlantic quixotism can envisage by harking back to the early revolutionary ideals heralded by the Declaration of Independence.

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