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She built on a foundation of sand : female education in Tabitha Gilman Tenney's Female quixotism

Erika G. Niestroj-Frost
San Jose State University

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"SHE BUILT ON A FOUNDATION OF SAND": FEMALE EDUCATION IN
TABITHA GILMAN TENNEY'S FEMALE QUIXOTISM

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by

Erika G. Niestroj-Frost

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Dr. John Engell

Dr. Karen English

Dr. Donald Keese

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

M. Lou Lewandowski

ABSTRACT

"SHE BUILT ON A FOUNDATION OF SAND:" FEMALE EDUCATION IN TABITHA GILMAN TENNEY'S FEMALE QUIXOTISM

by Erika G. Niestroj-Frost

This thesis addresses the topic of female education in Tabitha Gilman Tenney's Female Quixotism (1801). It takes the view that Tenney's novel satirizes not only the actions of one foolish woman but also the state of female education in the United States which places too much emphasis on emotionalism and novel reading and not enough on reason and experiential knowledge.

To place this novel in a historical context, this thesis includes an overview of increasing literacy in the new republic, educational theories in the eighteenth century, and the newly emerging "sentimental novel." The focus of this thesis is the manner in which Tenney employs her satire to fulfill her didactic purpose, including a third person narrator, two commonsensical foils, and a heroine who begins as a reader of novels and ends as an educational reformer convinced of the detriments of novel reading.

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Introduction

During the eighteenth century when female education was, as Vivien Jones explains, being "fiercely debated" (98) by philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic, Tabitha Gilman Tenney wrote and published her only novel, Female Quixotism (1801). Similar in form to the evolving genre of the "sentimental" novel in its use of a motherless heroine, a commonsensical foil, deception scenes and on occasion the epistolary form, Tenney's novel addresses topics which were the source of much anxiety in the new American republic--growing literacy, female education, and the role novel-reading should play in both.¹ Tenney's tone, however, differs from the melodrama typical of "sentimental" novels; instead, she employs satire to explore the ridiculous antics of her heroine, Dorcas Sheldon, who because of her affinity for the fictional loves of the characters in her favorite novels not only changes her name to Dorcasina but also refuses to see life as it "really is," thus failing miserably in love. Many contemporary critics deem Tenney's novel an "anti-romance" because of this notable difference in tone.² But Tenney, who herself was an educated woman and according to Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft was "well-grounded

¹Tenney's characters and narrator mention novel reading approximately once every seven pages throughout the novel. See Appendix A. For more information about the novel's epistolary form see Appendix B.

²See Petter, Cowie, and Herbert Ross Brown for a full discussion of this novel as anti-romance.

in intellectual, artistic, and household accomplishments," comes to the same conclusion as many writers of sentimental novels about their heroines; all of Dorcasina's mistaken loves, near misses, gullible mistakes, and loneliness can be traced to her improperly directed education. Tenney's narration insists again and again that had Dorcasina been taught with an emphasis on reason rather than on the emotion espoused in novels, her "imprudence" might have been avoided. Through introductory and concluding letters which outline her vision for the education of future Americans, Tenney insists that only by learning to see life "as it really is . . . chequered with good and evil" (325) will women cease to see marriage as the final act in a sentimentalized drama between lovers, become less susceptible to the emotional ploys of men, and be able to make better life--and marriage--choices.

Like many reformers of her time, Tenney attacks novels as quasi-realistic but fictional stories which promote the emotionalism of women and prevent them from being properly educated. While contemporary critics agree that Tenney disapproves of novels as reading material for girls, they disagree on the kind of narrative Female Quixotism represents, deeming it parody, burlesque, or satire.³ Although Tenney certainly parodies the form of the

³Miecanikowski (42) and Cowie (27) define the narrative as a parody of sentimental novels. Matzke (88), Petter (46), and Brumm (166) classify it as burlesque. Loshe (19-20), Benson (193), Hoople (45), and Davidson (Revolution 187) call it a satire.

"sentimental" novel and uses burlesque in many of the character descriptions and narrative situations in the novel, I believe that Dorcasina's "extravagant adventures" are primarily satiric in tone and subject, and that Tenney employs what Earnest Jackson Hall calls the American satire of "wit and adverse criticism" (5). Other critics who discuss the narrative as satire emphasize different points, often focusing on novels and novel reading, but not always on the relation of novel reading to female education. Lillie Deming Loshe remarks how Tenney satirizes the "effect of such romantic tales on the mind of a country girl" (19); Mary Sumner Benson notes Tenney's focus on "the ridiculous adventures of a women unbalanced by too great an addiction to novels" (193); Sally C. Hoople terms Tenney's work a satire of "human imperfection" (45); and Cathy N. Davidson claims that "Female Quixotism [is] more than a satire of one silly woman who reads too many equally silly books. The novel is a larger, different satire on a whole society in which a deficient educational system and dubious sexual politics render women devoid of judgment by deeming judgment, in a woman, a superfluous quality" (Revolution 187). Loshe, Benson, and Hoople are correct in their judgments; after all, Tenney's text refers at least forty-eight times to how dangerous novel reading can be for young females. But it is Davidson's statement that Female Quixotism is not just a satire about "silly women" (187), but one that encompasses a

social critique on a larger scale upon which I plan to expand. Tenney criticizes both the faulty education of women and the way in which marriages made eighteenth-century women totally dependent on their husbands, but she posits a solution to both of these problems through the example of Harriot Stanly Barry. Harriot, the novel's actual heroine, is educated with an emphasis on reason, thus refuting the belief of some conservative social philosophers of the time that "judgment in a woman is a superfluous quality." Harriot is the center from which the satire emanates; that is, she is the moral foil to Dorcasina's excesses. By using Harriot as a foil to Dorcasina, Tenney points out that education for women in America lacks an emphasis on reason; they therefore emulate the ladies so often portrayed in eighteenth-century fiction who were, according to J. Paul Hunter, "vacuous, flirtatious, narcissistic, and illiterate" (71).

In Satire and the Novel in the Eighteenth-Century, Ronald Paulson states, "The novel, as the name implies, represents new values, and satire, usually a conservative genre, represents old" (3). Thus, Tenney's satiric message works against the form of her text.⁴ Because she advocates a future education for women which resembles that of Harriot Barry's children, Tenney hopes that the future looks both more like the novel-free past than the novel-ridden present

⁴A discussion of how the form of the novel works against the message of the text is included in the conclusion of this paper.

and more like a world in which women's reason will be educated. To make her point about the dangers of novel reading on the mind of young girls, Tenney invests all with three distinct levels of her narrative--the voice of her narrator, the voices of her characters, and the descriptions of her characters and their social situations--with satire.⁵

In order to help the reader understand the importance of this novel as part not only of a literary genre but also an eighteenth-century societal debate, Section I of this paper includes a brief overview of three related topics which caused much anxiety in eighteenth-century America: increasing literacy, female education, and novel reading. In Section II of this thesis, I will present a short biography of Tenney. I will then analyze her use of a satirical narrative voice, focusing on the description of characters, various reactions to novel reading, and the effects of novel reading on the education of women. In Sections III and IV, I will present the voices of the individual characters emphasizing Betty and Harriot in Section III and Dorcasina in Section IV. In both of these sections, I will show how the voices of these characters strengthen the narrator's criticisms of novels and novel reading. Betty and Harriot act as mouthpieces for the narrator; although they take different approaches to convincing Dorcasina of the

⁵Hall emphasizes three elements of satire in his discussion (6-7).

detriments of novels--Betty employs her common sense, and Harriot her belief in the rational education of young women--each is unable to stop her from making foolish choices in love. In Section IV, I will explore Tenney's portrayal of Dorcasina as a ridiculous counterpoint to the reasonable views of Betty and Harriot. Then I will identify the epistemological and moral problems that keep Dorcasina from understanding her faults for most of the novel. And I will ask why in the final pages she finally recognizes her years of foolishness. In the conclusion of this paper, I will explore how a novelist can claim to oppose novel reading and discuss whether Female Quixotism deconstructs itself.

Female Quixotism is more than a novel about not reading novels; it is at once a profoundly conservative and oddly liberal narrative about the value of a "proper" female education. By eliminating novels from the reading lists of young women in America, conservative reformers, such as Tenney, insist that girls would become better able to absorb "books of real instruction and utility" (Tenney 324) which show the world as it is. Such a rational, utilitarian education would direct a girl to make the most important choice of her young life--the choice of marriage to a man who would control her property, finances, livelihood, and happiness--the choice of who would become her husband.

I. Eighteenth-Century America's Anxieties: Increasing Literacy, Female Education, and Novel Reading

In his Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction, J. Paul Hunter writes that "literacy in the English-speaking world grew rapidly between 1600 and 1800 so that by the latter date a vast majority of adult males could read and write, whereas two centuries earlier only a select minority could do so" (65). Cathy N. Davidson calls this phenomenon, which resulted in more new readers than ever before, a "reading revolution" (Reading in America 14). Although debate continues about why literacy increased at this particular time, technological advances in paper making and printing that made books cheaper and more accessible and improved transportation that expedited book distribution were certainly factors in this phenomenon (14). "Dame schools" in the mid-1600s where women taught girls and boys to read helped expand literacy among females (Monaghan 53-9); and the evolution of these schools to include other subjects early in the next century provided easier access to information and education for both sexes (Button and Provenzo 45).

However, whereas we in the twentieth century view literacy as a positive force for society, early Americans often found the prospect of increasing literacy frightening.

Literate children suddenly had access to an influx of printed information. The family Bible was supplanted by secular literature such as pamphlets, chapbooks, novels, and magazines; and the nature of reading changed--once a social act in which the one book in the household had to be shared and read aloud by its literate members, readers could now independently enjoy the texts of their choice. With a more literate population, parents could no longer control all of the information their children read. Each person could now read texts--religious, political, and recreational--and form a personal opinion about them, thereby shifting established power structures, especially in the family. Because of these potential shifts in order, power, and tradition, growing literacy brought with it growing anxiety about the future of society and its basic hierarchical units. Not the least of these fears was one concerning rising female literacy.

Discussion and debate about the need for and nature of female education began in Europe early in the eighteenth century. Most educational theorists and philosophers believed, as Tenney would later ironically espouse in her novel, that novels were not proper reading material for girls, but disagreed about what texts should substitute for them on a girl's reading list, if she were to have one at all. Generally, theorists believed that men were "naturally" more prone to reason and women "naturally" more prone to emotion. François de Salagnac de la Mothe-Fénelon argues

that the "natural" weak state of woman limits her capacity to learn certain subjects. In his Traité de l'Éducation des Filles (first published in 1687 and first translated into English in 1707), Fénelon states that the education of girls should not be neglected because "[t]he weaker they are the more important it is to strengthen them" (2); her subjects of study should be carefully chosen because "[a] woman's intellect is normally more feeble and her curiosity greater than those of a man; also it is undesirable to set her to studies which may turn her head" (2). According to Fénelon, girls should learn how to read, write, do mathematics and "be instructed in the duties of a lord of the manor" (85), should her social status require. Music, dance and design are also acceptable subjects for girls to learn, but "[w]omen should not govern the state or make war or enter the sacred ministry" (2). Instead, a woman should be educated to fulfill her domestic duties for "[i]s it not women who ruin or sustain their homes, who regulate every detail of domestic life and therefore decide what touches the human race most nearly?" (2).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's treatise on education, Émile (1762), also takes the view that the basis for a girl's training should be domestic:

A woman's education must therefore be planned in relation to man. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in

childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time, and this is what she should be taught when she is young. (328)

Like Fénelon, Rousseau believes that a girl may be taught to read and write but that these skills should aid her only in the domestic realm. As her primary function is to please and serve her mate, a woman need not expand her view beyond a superficial learning. As the first and most important teacher of her children, a woman must be capable of basic academic skills.⁶

Unlike the theories of her predecessors, Mary Astell's "A Serious Proposal to the Ladies" (1696) presents the idea that women's education should include more than domestic or superficial subjects. Her highly religious writing proposes that women should be educated in convent-like schools wherein they would learn not words but things (152). Because "ignorance and a narrow Education lay the foundation of vice, and Imitation and Custom rear it up" (147), Astell believes that a woman need learn:

no more Languages than are necessary to acquaint her with useful Authors. Nor need she trouble herself in turning over a great number of Books, but

⁶Savile's Advice to a Daughter reiterates the idea that women should be educated for the benefits of their male children.

take care to understand and digest a few well-chosen and good ones. Let her but obtain right ideas, and be truly acquainted with the nature of those Objects that present themselves to her mind, and then no matter whether or no she be able to tell what fanciful people have said about them . . . (152-3)

Like Tenney a century later, Astell argues that novel reading leads to ignorance (154) and that were women "rightly Educated . . . they would be proof against all those Batteries, see through and scorn those little silly Artifices which are us'd to ensnare and deceive them" (146).

Contradicting these ideas with her Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft believes that "[w]ere boys and girls permitted to pursue the same studies together, those graceful decencies might early be inculcated which produce modesty without those sexual distinctions that taint the mind" (165). Men's selfishness and women's vanity might be remedied, believes Wollstonecraft, by boys and girls dressing alike, playing together and studying the same subjects--reading, writing, arithmetic, natural history and natural philosophy--in elementary school. Later, allowing those children of both sexes of "superior abilities" (168) to learn "the dead and living languages, the elements of science, and continue the study of history and politics, on a more extensive scale, which would not exclude polite

literature" (168) would help to solidify their sense of equality. Her plan, which rebuts previous theories that boys and girls should be raised and educated differently, added fire to an already intense debate.

Although the roots of this controversy about female education were formed in Europe, its fruit grew in the United States as well. In early colonial times, the Puritan influence on education in the New-England colonies dictated that instruction was necessary to "subject all children to 'the creed of the Puritan sect'" (Button and Provenzo 15) and to prepare ministers for service in the church.⁷ By the eighteenth century, educational opportunities for boys had increased dramatically, especially for those New England youth living in cities whose parents could afford to send them to school. For boys, various subjects and practical apprenticeships were offered in fields ranging from mercantilism to medicine, though, as was typical in the early eighteenth century, university education was reserved for the training of ministers. The restricted educational opportunities excluded women from most professions outside the home and completely from those requiring a university education because, as Thomas Woody explains in his A History of Women's Education in the United States, "since women could not enter the profession [ministry], there was not the

⁷For a more detailed description of the Puritan influence on education, see Button and Provenzo (26-45).

slightest reason for their contemplating such a step" (93). Though access to colleges was limited largely to the wealthiest and most well-educated boys, H. Warren Button and Eugene F. Provenzo remind us:

For girls there were fewer possibilities even in the big cities, but many of the private schoolmasters and schoolmistresses, 'school dames,' accepted them at beginning schools. There were schools that would accept girls who were to study English, or Latin, or feminine and lady-like accomplishments--as examples, needlework, singing, or playing the harpsichord or spinet. (31)

Such schools which offered only certain subjects to "young ladies" supported those late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century European views presented earlier in this section. Woody remarks that:

During the first century and a half of our existence on the American continent, little attention was given to the education of women, either in theory or in practice. . . . [T]he prevailing conception of their intelligence, and the belief that women were destined for the hearth, effectually quenched any latent ambition for higher education. Such education as was afforded, if it had any definite goal in their

life, looked towards a satisfactory marriage.

(107)

Because Tenney, like many other writers and thinkers of her day, is aware of the limited educational opportunities for girls, she designs her novel to address the major educational goal of females--marriage. A good match was especially important to early American women because according to eighteenth-century laws of coverture "after marriage, [a woman] became for all practical purposes totally dependent on her husband" (Davidson, Revolution 113). If the marriage proved unhappy, it was, according to Benson, "difficult for women to free themselves from complicated marital situations" (234). Because marriage and divorce laws made the choice of a husband so important to a young eighteenth-century American woman, Tenney shows in her didactic novel how great a role reason must play in the young woman's decision.

After the Revolution, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and other leaders discussed the need for education in order to establish a body of knowledgeable citizens. In this discussion, however, they largely excluded women.⁸ Benjamin Rush in his "Thoughts on Female Education" (1787) saw a way to include women in a new American culture: educate them differently from their European counterparts. Do not force them to wear clothing made for the cooler

⁸See Smith's Theories of Education in Early America.

English climate or teach them to speak a foreign language which they may never have the opportunity to use (17). But as different as Rush believed the American woman to be from her English sister, he based many of his theories of female education on European ideas. He, too, believed that women should be educated primarily as mothers to help in the instruction of their sons. "It becomes us therefore to prepare them [girls] by a suitable education, for the discharge of this most important duty of mothers," (6) writes Rush. Although in a speech at the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia he recommends a wide variety of subjects for girls including reading, writing and bookkeeping, dancing, vocal music and religion, Rush presents this acquisition of knowledge as a way to make a woman "an agreeable companion for a sensible man" (9). His objective in this proposal is not to take woman out of her domestic sphere by "elevating" her mind (25), but to make her better suited for her duties as wife and mother. He assures the men in the audience that "If men believe that ignorance is favourable to the government of the female sex, they are certainly deceived; for a weak and ignorant woman will always be governed with the greatest difficulty" (25). Thus, like most of his English and European counterparts, Rush urges female education only in so far as it reinforces the hierarchical power-relationships of the existing social order, especially the order of the family.

But in his "dialogue" Alcuin (1798), a series of conversations between Mrs. Carter and her guest, the Philadelphian Charles Brockden Brown, a disciple of Mary Wollstonecraft, presents a different view of an educated woman; she is not docile and easily-governed but questions why women should be excluded from the practical education that men enjoy. Brown's mouthpiece in this dialogue, Mrs. Carter, asks her guest:

What think you of female education? Mine has been frivolous. I can make a pie, and cut out a gown. For this only I am indebted to my teachers. If I have added any thing to these valuable attainments, it is through my own efforts, and not by the assistance or encouragement of others.

(21)

Mrs. Carter finds it unjust that while a man learns Latin, geometry and chemistry, a woman is "condemned to stupidity" (22); that "her tongue has no office, but to believe the sentiments of her heart, and the dictates of her understanding" (24). Instead, Mrs. Carter would prefer that education of both sexes be equal because "[m]en and women are partakers of the same nature. They are rational beings; and, as such, the same principles of truth and equity must be applicable to both" (26).

At the center of the argument about female literacy and education is the novel. Although Henri Petter reminds us that "[t]he country was too young to have a literature of its own" (11) because its inhabitants were preoccupied with physical, political, or economic survival, some American fiction written soon after the Revolution proved to be "hugely popular, and therefore influential in forming the tastes of the reading public" (16). But the novel, though popular with readers, had to withstand the criticism of reformers, especially religious groups, who claimed that fiction was a destructive force. According to Alexander Cowie, many of these reformers thought that "[r]eading fiction tended to 'inflame the passion' and 'corrupt the heart'" (5). Therefore, the task of the novelist was to prove that her or his novels did not "mirror life but . . . promote[d] morality" (6). Thus, early novels were typically highly didactic works which aimed to teach young people, especially young women, moral lessons about life and in so doing to satisfy religious reformers of the sincere moral purpose of fiction.

Because of the common belief in the eighteenth century that women were more emotional than men and less controlled by reason, critics of the novel believed that its frequent subjects--love, marriage, and passion--might negatively

influence the primary audience of novels--girls and women.⁹ Thus, many novelists in this period tried to convince critics of their sincere intentions. Lillie Deming Loshe tells us,

The novelists of the earlier period in America show, in their prefaces, a nervous consciousness of the possibility of such censure, and endeavor to forestall it by showing that they are not as other novelists--that their works are calculated, not to mislead, but to direct, the young mind.

(1-2)

But often the inclusion of a sincere and didactic preface did not satisfy adamant reformers who believed that even reading about the immoral actions of a heroine in order to prove a point might entail moral risk and that the young women readers hearing about these vices would be influenced, because of their emotional characters, to indulge in them themselves. Cowie says of the critics of the novel,

[T]here were those who felt that the moral lesson might be learned at too great peril. Tender readers might be singed if they witnessed at too close range that blaze of passion which consumed the frail characters of a novel. The serpent of

⁹Most early "sentimental" novels included a preface addressed to girls and young women. Benson states, "[N]ovels, whether with or without moral purpose, furnished a large share of the literary diet of the English woman and her American sister at this epoch" (44). See also Hunter's "Readers Reading" for more information on the female reading public.

evil, if studied too intently, might claim a new victim in the observer. To be wholly innocuous a novel must recommend virtue without even describing vice. (17)

The fears of reform-minded critics that novels might influence girls' actions were not unfounded if Mary Summer Benson's views can be credited. She claims that, "Novels had undoubtedly more influence over the standards held by women than did more formal works designed for that purpose" (44). Perhaps because fiction contained more entertaining incidents, realistic characters and exciting plots, girls read more novels than the conduct books designed for their moral instruction. This trend further alarmed reformers.¹⁰

At the center of the controversy about the novel and its female readers stands the "sentimental" novel. Inaugurated in England with the publication of Samuel Richardson's Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady in 1747-8, the genre centers, according to Cowie, on the concept of "virtue in distress" (11). Often epistolary, "sentimental" novels usually begin with a preface explaining the author's intentions and promising that the events following are true. Stock characters including a motherless heroine, commonsensical foil, and handsome rogue are often

¹⁰Hunter explains that because of the didactic nature of novels, they were often used as models for conduct among the young (92). Benson agrees with him stating that books like Richardson's "served indirectly as patterns for the young girls of this country" (188).

underdeveloped; and the seduction of the heroine through numerous deceptions on the part of the rogue and his fellow conspirators usually ends in her death accompanied by didactic moralizing about what "could have been."¹¹

Unlike melodramatic "sentimental" novels, Charlotte Lennox's The Female Quixote, or The Adventures of Arabella (1752) satirizes the "influences of the heroic romances" (Loshe 19).¹² According to Margaret Dalziel in her introduction to Lennox's narrative, Arabella, the novel's heroine, and Don Quixote, quote their novels "as authorities, and expect their own adventures to be the subject of future histories, yet both are represented as being perfectly rational, indeed sensible and intelligent, when they can forget their books" (xiv). To show readers the dangerous influence of French romances, Lennox uses many of the conventions of the "sentimental" novel: Arabella loses her mother at a young age and is educated by a well-meaning though indulgent father in a secluded setting; she is seduced by rogues eager to take control of her substantial fortune; and she is saved from many misfortunes by her commonsensical maid, Lucy. But, though seemingly "sentimental" in form,

¹¹See Herbert Ross Brown for more details about the conventions of the sentimental novel.

¹²Lennox's novel acts perhaps as a model for Tenney's narrative a half a century later. Both Lennox and Tenney obviously owe a debt, as seen in their titles, to Cervantes's Don Quixote. See Dalziel's introduction to The Female Quixote, Nienkamp and Collins's introduction to Female Quixotism, and Hoople's "The Spanish, English, and American Quixotes" for more details.

Lennox's novel is, according to Dalziel, a "burlesque of a genre that has come to seem absurd" (xviii).

The "sentimental" novel begun by Richardson and satirized by Lennox also gained popularity in the new American republic. Loshe writes that, "Didacticism and sentimentality were the chief characteristics of the British novel in the period immediately preceding the vogue of the Gothic. Naturally the same moods and purposes appear in the first American novel" (6-7). William Hill Brown's The Power of Sympathy (1789), Susanna Rowson's Charlotte Temple (1791) and Hannah Webster Foster's The Coquette (1797) represent, according to Cowie, "perhaps the most popular type of early American fiction, the sentimental novel" (17). Like their English counterparts, these novels were based on Richardson's model; they were also read widely, and appear to have had an influence on the conduct of girls. Benson states that

The American productions, although inferior in literary quality to Richardson's books, did not depart widely from his ideals, which persisted in the heroines of American fiction well into the nineteenth century, and served indirectly as patterns for the young girls of this country.

(188)

The success of the "sentimental" novel angered its conservative critics who saw its emotionalism not as a positive pattern for but as a danger to girls in the new

republic. Conservative forces actually condemned novels with a clearly moralistic, didactic goal such as those which aimed to convince girls that reason and experiential knowledge is superior to emotion and "artificial" knowledge. They even condemned novels which attacked novel reading itself.

Tenney's Female Quixotism is one of the most interesting examples of this type of anti-novel reading, pro-rational novels.

Published after the more popular Charlotte Temple and The Coquette, Tenney's 1801 narrative differs from other novels of the period by espousing her strong stand about "improper education" and novels as the reason for her heroine's misfortunes and by using satire, instead of melodrama, in her narrative. Also different are the endings of these novels; other writers blame the death of their heroines on "vice," while Tenney specifically cites novels as the cause of her still-living heroine's unhappiness.

Dorcasina, unlike the other heroines, proposes a way to keep girls from making the errors she has committed--a "properly directed" education. And while in other "sentimental" novels, the heroine succumbs to her seducers because of naïveté or misplaced trust, Tenney's Dorcasina believes the words of the devilish rogues because they sound like the romantic musings of the heroes in the novels she reads. Tenney's use of humorous incidents and characters to prove her point keeps the tone of her novel from becoming

sentimental while advocating that women need to be trained to "see life as it really is." Thus, in satirizing the foolish Dorcasina and her equally ridiculous novels, Tenney criticizes a society which educates women to be dupes of roguish suitors set on capturing a fortune.

II. "Learn to Be Wise by Other's Harm": The Voice of the Narrator

Though an advocate for female education in early America and therefore in one sense a liberal, Tabitha Tenney was not an educator herself but was apparently well-educated by her mother. Although we know little about her life, in The Dictionary of American Biography, John H. Barnett tells us that Tenney was born on April 7, 1762, in Exeter, New Hampshire, and as a young woman "acquired familiarity with intellectual and gentlewomanly accomplishments, and a code of behavior in which a virtuous common sense predominated" (373). In American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide from Colonial Times to the Present, Cathy Davidson reminds us that "it is unlikely that [Tenney's] formal schooling differed greatly from that of other respectable eighteenth-century women, or from that form of 'female education' which she satirizes in her novel" (217). She married Samuel Tenney, a physician turned politician, in 1788 and went with him to Washington after his election to the Senate in 1800. After his death she returned to Exeter where Nienkamp and Collins claim she worked to improve her skills as an accomplished embroiderer (xxiv-xxv). Female Quixotism (1801) is Tenney's only novel although a non-extant volume of essays, The Pleasing Instructor (1799), addressed to young women and "intended to 'inform the mind, correct the manners,

or to regulate the conduct'" (Davidson, American Women Writers 217) is sometimes attributed to her.

Although the details of her life are unclear, Tenney's didactic purpose in Female Quixotism is certain: novels are dangerous reading material for girls who, because of their improper education, are susceptible to the emotional excess novels encourage. Petter contends that the novel's didacticism begins with its main character:

From the outset Mrs. Tenney's heroine is predisposed to respond to all the dangerous influences that may be conveyed by fiction. Her romantic turn of mind conditions her attitude toward novels and, through them, toward sober life. This peculiar receptivity of Dorcasina was of course purposely invented and exploited by Mrs. Tenney to achieve her didactic aims. It is this intention of hers, to expose the dangers of novel-reading, that is first to be considered. (46)

Davidson, however, instead of deeming Female Quixotism an anti-novel novel calls it "a more subtle how-not-to-read-a-novel novel [in which] Tenney allegorizes the reading process and turns it upon itself" (Revolution 186). Whether we agree with Petter or Davidson, it is clear that Tenney uses satire to convince readers of the danger of novels and the inability of education, in its current state, to prepare women for real life. Indirectly through the use of humorous, stock

characters, and directly through the use of a third person narrator, whose views closely align with the author's, Tenney follows C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon's definition of satire by "blend[ing] a censorious attitude with humor and wit for improving human institutions or humanity . . . [and] attempt[ing] through laughter not so much to tear down as to inspire a remodeling" (423). By satirizing how Dorcasina's belief in the occurrences depicted in "sentimental" novels leads her to a remorseful and lonely end, Tenney indirectly criticizes the state of women's education in the American republic. Focusing on the effects of subjects often treated emotionally--love, courtship and marriage--Tenney follows the didactic views of other reformers, but her satiric tone and her chosen medium, the novel, allow her to reach a wider audience. In The Early American Novel, Petter tells us, "Protesting against the abuses of the modern novel, Mrs. Tenney herself employed the form of the novel. She not only found it the weapon best suited to fight the enemy on his own ground, but she probably also counted on the popularity of the genre as powerful help" (65).

In keeping with the conventions of romance, Tenney begins her novel with a letter to her readers, "all Columbian Young Ladies, Who read Novels and Romances" (3), which assures them that the story they are about to read is a "true uncoloured history of a romantic country girl" (3). In an

age when novels were viewed as highly suspicious works capable of turning girls' heads away from the established mores and hierarchies of the family, Tenney anticipates this counter-argument of her fellow reformers. In the opening letter, Tenney addresses this criticism of novels in general and also lays out her didactic purpose for this specific novel:

I presume 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. That, by observing their baneful effects on Miss Sheldon, who was in every other respect a sensible, judicious, and amiable girl, you may avoid the disgraces and disasters that so long rendered her despicable and miserable, is the sincere wish, my dear young Ladies, of your Friend and Admirer, the COMPILER (3).

Tenney's disapproval of novels shows her concern for the well-being of the girls to whom she dedicates her novel; she knows, as did other reformers, that more than any other segment of the population young women read and responded to novels, and that this fact put them, according to Tenney, in danger of suffering the same "baneful effects" which she plans to recount. The connection she makes between novel reading and its detrimental effects coincides with the

criticisms by other reformers that novels "'inflame the passions'" and "'corrupt the heart'" (Cowie 5).

By calling herself a compiler, not an author, Tenney further distances herself from novelists--she is not composing fiction but rather re-telling a true story which she heard from Dorcasina, "at the house of her friend, Mrs. Barry" (3). Tenney even calls Dorcasina's story a "very singular and extraordinary piece of biography" (3) which Dorcasina prevails on her to publish "if [Tenney] thought proper, for the advantage of the younger part of her sex" (3). By claiming that Dorcasina wants girls to hear and learn from her story, Tenney attempts to keep herself from being indicted as a novelist and also to criticize novels while writing one. If her opening letter is not clearly didactic enough, Tenney also includes the Latin phrase, "FELIX QUEM FACIUNT ALIENA PERICULA CAUTUM," (4) at the beginning of Books I and II which she has translated "In plain English" as "LEARN TO BE WISE BY OTHERS HARM, AND YOU SHALL DO FULL WELL" (4). This quotation, placed at the beginning and half way point of the novel, reminds the reader to observe Dorcasina's actions, not purely for her own amusement but to learn from them. But once the narrative begins, Tenney ceases to be a "compiler" and becomes a third-person, partially omniscient narrator who uses both the "re-telling" of events and her interpretation of them to make her didactic point about novels and novel reading. In her

twenty-seven mentions of novel reading, Tenney's narrator spells out its negative effects on family structure; novel reading encourages young women to ignore the rational advice of their parents and community elders and accept the emotional ploys of their possible suitors.

One of the ways novels undermined parental influence was by changing the material with which girls were educated. Feminists such as Wollstonecraft hoped that educating females in the rational discourses afforded to men would give them a better chance to compete on equal footing with them in the creation of society. But with the advance of the novel which encouraged, according to reformers, young women's emotional tendencies, reading often brought women only more exposure to emotions to which they had a purported "natural" affinity. Because girls' primary and secondary educational opportunities were limited and they had no possibility of attending university, at least half the population was taught largely at home under parental guidance.¹³ Mr. Sheldon is forced to play the role of educator as well as acting the part of both parents because "at the age of three years, this child [Dorcas] had the misfortune to lose an excellent mother" (Tenney 4). Petter calls her mother's death "a crucial calamity" (48) because of the role Mrs. Sheldon should have played in the education of her daughter. While

¹³Higher education for women was established in the mid-1800s (Evans 139).

establishing Dorcasina as a motherless heroine and therefore a "typical" romance character, Tenney also prepares the reader to experience how Dorcasina suffers from losing her mother,

whose advice would have pointed out to her the plain rational path of life; and prevented her imagination from being filled with 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)

Instead of having the benefit of his wife's advice in supervising his daughter's upbringing, Mr. Sheldon alone "attend[s] to [Dorcasina's] education" with what the narrator calls ironically, "the utmost care and assiduity" (5). Mr. Sheldon, a great reader himself with a library "furnished with the best histories, ancient and modern; and every novel, good, bad, and indifferent, which the bookstores of Philadelphia afforded" (6), has no shortage of material with which to educate his daughter, but according to Tenney's narrator, his choices lead to disaster. He allows his daughter to read whatever she chooses from his library, and while he has made histories his study and novels his pleasure, Dorcasina does exactly the opposite. Thus,

Dorcasina's education becomes a study of the sentimental, romantic, and emotional. In presenting Dorcasina's family background and describing her education, the narrator emphasizes the importance of having a mother who teaches her children, especially female, about the qualities of "lasting affection" and who encourages her daughters to see life "as it really is . . . chequered with good and evil" (325), not as uninterrupted felicity. Tenney's narrator thus advocates the continuation of practices like those advocated by Fénelon and Rousseau; the most important reason to educate a woman is so that she may act as the educator of her children. Because Dorcasina does not have a mother to educate her, she and society suffer. Her father indulges her, treating her more like a wife than a daughter.¹⁴ By allowing his daughter to read novels and failing to give her any "womanly advice" about the actual nature of life, Mr. Sheldon encourages his daughter's "natural" tendency to emotionalism--for Dorcasina, fiction becomes reality and reality, fiction.

In contrast, the Sheldon's neighbors, the Stanlys, are aware of the "baneful effects" of novels and seek to educate their daughter Harriot without exposing her to Dorcasina's favorite reading material. Although Dorcasina shows great affection for her neighbor's child, the narrator explains that Mrs. Stanly,

¹⁴See Hoople's "Tabitha Tenney: Female Quixotism," for more information about this view.

being a lady of an excellent understanding, and great discretion, . . . very wisely determined, as soon as she [Harriot] should arrive at a proper age, to send her out of the reach of Dorcasina's influence, who she was sure, would not fail to infect the mind of her young friend with the same poison which had operated so powerfully on her own. (16)

Mrs. Stanly protects her daughter and resolves to educate her with as little emphasis as possible on the emotionalism which plagues Dorcasina and which she has imbibed from reading novels. Interestingly, Tenney's narrator points out that Mrs. Stanly fears the effects of novels even though she knows that she will give Harriot the motherly advice Dorcasina has not received. By showing the profound power of the influence of novels, Tenney's narrator thus validates the concerns of conservative reformers. In order to accomplish her goal and give Harriot the opportunity to make good life decisions later, Mrs. Stanly, the narrator tells us, "send[s] her [daughter] to an eminent boarding school in Philadelphia, with an express injunction to the governess, never to indulge her in perusing novels" (16). Mrs. Stanly's actions serve her daughter well as she grows up to be an "elegant, accomplished girl" (175) who, because of her "properly directed education," marries the intelligent, distinguished, honorable, and handsome Captain Barry.

According to Tenney's narrator, novel reading intrudes into the very fabric of family structure by influencing young people to listen to fiction's unabashedly emotional advice instead of to rational parental wisdom. Playing on fears of the time, fears exacerbated by a legal system that gave a husband full control over a wife's property, Tenney emphasizes that the place where this parental advice and guidance, or lack of it, could be most crucial to a young girl's life is in the realm of romance, courtship, and marriage. Young girls, especially motherless ones, were most susceptible to such advice delivered external to the family structure. Thus, a well-educated young woman like Harriot who is protected from perusing novels by her wise mother marries well, while a woman like Dorcasina whose education is directed by her well-meaning though indulgent father ends her life as a lonely spinster. The narrator shows in four separate incidents with prospective suitors how Dorcasina's dependence on novels leads to her loneliness.

In the novel's first romantic episode, twenty-year-old Dorcasina hears that her father's friend and his son Lysander will be visiting from Virginia.¹⁵ Upon hearing of the young man's situation, age, and background, she becomes convinced, the narrator tells us, that "he was the person decreed by the stars to become her husband" (7). Although she wishes that

¹⁵See Appendix C for more information about the passage of time in the novel.

they might meet in a more romantic and mysterious manner--he might save her from falling off her horse, or he might be brought wounded to her estate after his carriage had broken down--she resolves to be his wife as long as he fulfills her expectations of love at first sight. The narrator's inclusion of these details gives the reader insight into Dorcasina's character and helps her to imagine the events to come. Even in describing Dorcasina's relationship with Lysander--the most respectable and well-meaning of her suitors--the narrator parodies Dorcasina's wishes concerning her first meeting with Lysander:

But as none of these romantic adventures, with which she had been so delighted in novels, had ever happened to her, she thought she must be satisfied if, at their first interview, he beheld her with raptures of delight; and of this she entertained not a shadow of doubt. (7)

Ironically, Dorcasina has never had the opportunity to meet a possible husband, so she projects the stereotypes from her novels onto her reality.

Based on these romantic notions, Dorcasina is disappointed when Lysander

complimented her in the same style of easy politeness in which he had done her father; no trembling, no emotion, no hesitation in speaking to her. What a thunder-stroke for poor Dorcasina,

who had calculated upon piercing him through and through at the very first glance! (10)

The idea of love at first sight, portrayed at great length in Dorcasina's novels as the necessary first step to a successful marriage, fails to occur in Dorcasina's life because of Lysander's politeness and decency; as a well-raised young gentleman, he would never woo a young lady on their first meeting. Although Lysander spends over a month at the Sheldon's estate and seems an utterly suitable mate, when he finally proposes to Dorcasina in a letter written shortly after his return to Virginia, she rejects him because, as the narrator explains, when

she compared it with various letters in her favourite authors; and found it so widely different in style and sentiment . . . she abhorred the idea of a connexion with a person who could be the author of it. What added greatly to her disgust was, that he said not a word of her personal charms, upon which she so much valued herself. Not even the slightest compliment to her person; nothing of angel or goddess, raptures or flames, in the whole letter. (13)

Dorcasina would have been more apt to fall in love with Lysander if he had complimented her physical characteristics. However, she has, as the narrator tells us, "features remarkable neither for beauty or deformity" (5). Because he

is a good man, Lysander is not concerned with her physical beauty; rather he "saw so many proofs of her sweetness of temper, condescension to the servants and duty and affection to her father, that he thought he never had beheld a lady so well calculated to render a man happy" (11). As an honest man who prizes conjugal happiness, he focuses on these qualities in addressing his proposal to Dorcasina. Tenney's narrator openly states her disapproval of Dorcasina's rejection: "[Dorcasina's] 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" (11). She differs from Lysander, who begins to love Dorcasina only after he has had the opportunity "to live under the same roof with you [Dorcasina] for a month, to have daily opportunities of observing your numerous virtues and amiable qualities" (12), in her desire to love at first sight. Dorcasina only learns after years of futile attempts to secure a husband that first impressions may be misleading, and nothing at all like the depiction of love in her novels.

In contrast to her hasty rejection of Lysander, Dorcasina too quickly trusts the next man who tries to win her affections. After Dorcasina lives quietly with her father and her novels until her thirty-fourth year, a stranger with an eye for the heiress' money arrives in L--.

The narrator tells us that Dorcasina had not often been disturbed by suitors during these years because the sensible local gentlemen who

knew how much of her time was dedicated to novels, and how uneasy she was when a new one appeared, till she could make herself mistress of it . . . notwithstanding the temptation of her money, and her agreeable person, were too prudent to think of seeking her in marriage; wisely foreseeing 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)

For the girls reading this novel, the warning of Tenney's narrator should be clear--eligible men will not marry women whose heads are lost in the clouds of romance; they want down-to-earth partners with realistic views of the world. But Patrick O'Connor is willing to risk Dorcasina's affinity for novels in the hopes of gaining her fortune. O'Connor, an immigrant con-man, cleverly speaks like the men in her novels, employing those flowery compliments that Lysander's speech lacks. He is well-informed by the innkeeper about the "weak side of [Dorcasina's] character" (18) and plans a "chance" meeting in the woods of L--. When he meets her in the grove after a one-day absence, he calls, "Divine charmer . . . how shall I ever repay this kind condescension? With

what raptures my heart is filled, only at the sound of your foot-steps!" (34). Such an outpouring of emotion, "which she thought exceeded all that she had ever read of the most violent love" (35), delights Dorcasina so "that she could scarcely refrain from throwing herself into his arms, and confessing a mutual flame" (35). Dorcasina is too blinded by what she wants to believe is true love to see that O'Connor is a bogus "divine charmer," a man without the background, breeding and money he claims to have who is interested in Dorcasina only for her £1000 a year.

If the female reader cannot discern the truth from the information about O'Connor's background or from his overtly exaggerated professions of love for a woman who is ten years older than he and was never considered a beauty, the narrator describes in satiric detail the incident of mistaken identities in the Sheldon's garden house. Because Mr. Sheldon believes that O'Connor may be an impostor, he asks Dorcasina not to meet her suitor at the grove again. O'Connor, who will not give up his nearly won fortune so quickly, convinces Dorcasina to meet him instead in her father's garden house at eleven p.m. This is the same evening that Scipio, the Sheldon's black servant, plans to stand guard for melon robbers in the garden house; he asks his friend from the village, Miss Violet, to join him. In a scene full of comic hilarity and burlesque, Tenney's narrator describes women rushing into the arms of the wrong men--

Dorcasina into Scipio's and Violet into O'Connor's. However, when the sleeping Scipio wakes to the sound of O'Connor's voice, the good servant attacks the rogue because he believes him to be a melon robber. Although O'Connor certainly deserves the blows Scipio gives him, Tenney's narrator points out in this burlesque not only that O'Connor is a rogue but also to what lengths Dorcasina will go to fulfill her romantic fantasies. Dorcasina fails to see what a fool O'Connor is making of her because the incident in the garden house resembles a case of mistaken identities in her novels. Despite her embarrassment at having been caught with her arms around Scipio, Dorcasina decides that she must visit O'Connor in his lodging to inquire after his health.

Knowing that her actions can damage her reputation, Dorcasina disguises herself as her maid, Betty, and swears to secrecy the servant boy, Patrick, who takes her to the inn. Playing again on the fears of parents and reformers, Tenney's narrator explains why Dorcasina has decided to take this risky step: "She was . . . so far gone with the novel-mania, that [the visit to O'Connor's lodgings] appeared a proper attention to a lover, who had suffered so much for her sake" (57). When she arrives to find her lover "sitting in an arm-chair, wrapped in a gown; his head . . . swathed with so many bandages, that only one eye, his nose and mouth were visible; and his whole head . . . swelled to an enourmous size" (57), she is overcome with grief and sits down next to him to cry.

As parents, reformers, and the young female readers of Columbia might expect, O'Connor is overjoyed to see Dorcasina with "her mind thus softened by his situation" (58). He decides to take advantage of her weakness to convince her to elope with him to Philadelphia and later return with the "proper recommendations" (58) to beg her father's forgiveness. By employing those overblown and romantic images which Dorcasina knows from her novels to describe her reaction to his injuries (58), O'Connor successfully uses her emotional state to his own benefit, changing her tears of grief to those of joy at their reunion and flattering her with a marriage proposal. Even the most beautiful woman appears to disadvantage when crying, and Dorcasina is far from beautiful; still, O'Connor comments on her beauty as she weeps. Tenney's narrator warns readers not about the dangers of looking unattractive even when crying but of the harm of allowing emotion to obscure logic. Instead of immediately rejecting such a forward proposal, "Dorcasina listened to him in silent pleasure. This manner of proceeding was so comfortable to many instances which she had read in her favourite authors, that she was upon the point of giving her consent" (58). Luckily, her devotion to her father keeps her from taking this step toward her demise. Dorcasina knows that a promise to O'Connor is a betrayal of her father; she has promised Mr. Sheldon that she will not marry O'Connor before he hears from Lysander about the Irishman's

background. Tenney's narrator appears to hint here at the possibility of Dorcasina's reform, of her transformation in the final chapter; even cases of novel-mania as "far gone" as Dorcasina's can be counteracted by a child's rational recognition of a parent's concern. But, as we shall see, Dorcasina's novel-mania actually becomes much worse before she is cured. As in a spiritual narrative, she must fall to absolute abasement before discovering moral focus, though here the focus is on rationality not faith.

Unfortunately, leaving the inn puts Dorcasina in even greater peril. She is mistaken for a prostitute and assaulted, chased by a group of boys who rip off her clothing, and left unconscious on the Stanlys' front porch. When she is finally discovered, brought inside, revived, and given a chance to tell her story, Mrs. Stanly is shocked and surprised at the events. The narrator moralizes: "[Mrs. Stanly] well knew, that Dorcasina had imbibed from the books she had perused, a most romantic turn; but she had no idea that she could have been led so widely astray from the path prescribed by reason and prudence" (61). Dorcasina's emotions, condition, and understanding give Mrs. Stanly even greater reason to believe that her decision to keep her daughter Harriot from reading novels has been a wise one.

The Stanlys assist Dorcasina in numerous other romantic scrapes. After O'Connor and Philander leave town, Dorcasina "confine[s] herself pretty much to the house, for several

years; employing her time, as usual in the duties of the family" (151). Following her adventures, Dorcasina returns to her "proper" sphere working happily in the family and showing some of the "amiable" qualities of her youth. Mr. Sheldon even begins to believe that Dorcasina is "radically cured of her romantic turn of mind" (152). But it "only lay[s] dormant for want of a proper object to excite it" (152). This "proper object" is twenty-four-year-old Captain Barry who arrives at the Sheldon estate injured from his duties in a military action against the Ohio Valley Shawnees under General Arthur St. Clair.¹⁶ The narrator tells us that Dorcasina, now forty-one, is struck by the similarity of the situation to ones described in her novels: "A young officer wounded, coming at that time of night, for relief and entertainment, had something in it so charming, so romantic, and so singular that she directly concluded he was sent by heaven to become her husband" (153). Her assessment of the situation is similar to the conclusion she had come to when Lysander arrived in L-- years earlier. Like Lysander, Barry is a decent man, but unlike the young Virginian, he is not interested in Dorcasina, who although kind and charitable towards him, is old enough to be his mother and by most eighteenth-century standards past marriageable age. Instead

¹⁶Joseph, Jr. explains in his The Indian Heritage of America that "St. Clair suffered the worst defeat ever administered by Indians to the U.S. troops, losing more than six hundred men on November 4, 1791." (316)

of seeing the situation for what it is--a wounded man seeking shelter and comfort on his way home from a war--Dorcasina projects her distorted romantic views onto it: "She lay, a great part of the night, in a pleasing delirium; in building castles of airy felicity, which she was on the point of enjoying, in a union with a brave and accomplished officer" (154). The wording Tenney's narrator uses makes clear her opinion of such thoughts; they are but "pleasing delirium" and "castles of airy felicity." No reality exists in these dreams. The longer girls read novels and remain lost in "pleasing delirium," warns the narrator, the less chance they will have to marry a good man.

Because Dorcasina is sure that Captain Barry is to be her husband, she becomes the ready dupe of Barry's servant, James, who knows that if he can "wean Dorcasina's affection from his master, and fix them on himself" (265), he can "marry the heiress to an estate of one thousand pounds a year" (165). To fulfill his goal of capturing a rich bride, James convinces Captain Barry that the only way for him to recover and go home to his family is to find some time away from Dorcasina who "sticks to him like a burr" (163)--visiting, nursing, and conversing with him incessantly. The captain, thus, agrees that James should visit Dorcasina in her chamber in his stead. The captain does not realize that James plans to seduce Dorcasina by disguising himself with Barry's robe, using a false voice, and insisting that he

always visit Dorcasina at night. Through his skillful charade, James easily convinces Dorcasina that she should elope with him; she believes him to be the young, noble captain and "she recollected that she had read of numerous young ladies, who had taken a trip to Scotland, when their parents were opposed to the union with a favoured lover. She began to be pleased with the air of romance and adventure, which her eloping would have, and this more than any other consideration reconciled her to the step" (168). Because she wants to believe that the captain is in love with her, Dorcasina makes the foolish choice of agreeing to elope with his servant. In this deception scene, Tenney's narrator clearly warns her female readers that men are not always who they seem to be and that novels often help to obscure the truth of identity. Dorcasina is so pleased with the attention she receives from James that he convinces her to act out one of the plots in her novels--eloping with a favored lover out of the view of concerned parents. Dorcasina has become so desperate to have a husband that now she will do what she would not do years earlier with O'Connor.

However, this adventure ends as soon as Dorcasina discovers that her young suitor is not the captain but his servant. A sledding accident forces the pair to walk through the snowy woods searching for sanctuary. There, James "resum[es] . . . his own natural voice and manner" (193).

Dorcasina is shocked "to find, on a sudden, as if awakening from a pleasing dream that she had . . . eloped with a common soldier, a servant to the gentleman by whom she thought herself courted" (194). The "pleasing dream" to which Tenney's narrator refers shows her disapproval of Dorcasina's actions which are not based in reality but in fantasy. Dorcasina allows James to convince her to elope with him despite her father's possible reaction, but when she finds that she has engaged herself to a servant, she suddenly threatens her father's wrath. Through her narrative voice, Tenney is warning again about the deceptive tactics of greedy men which can be more successful when girls believe real life to be like romance novels. With the narrator's good advice, surely her female readers will learn more quickly than Dorcasina about the traps of romance. When Dorcasina returns to L--, she is once more assisted by the Stanlys who help her to reconcile with her father and keep the affair from the ears of the other villagers.

Even after so many misadventures, Dorcasina, now age fifty, continues to look for romance as described in the sentimental stories of her novels. She falls in love with her servant, John Brown, solely because she believes that he, like the character in "Roderic [sic] Random" (227), is a gentleman in disguise. Even though all the evidence points to Brown as a young, almost illiterate servant, Dorcasina projects the story of a gentleman of lost fortune onto the

situation.¹⁷ John, who "really wished to express himself so as to please her; but he was too ignorant of polite language, and especially that of novels, to do it readily to her satisfaction" (238) plays along with her fantasy. Instead of being tricked by a prospective suitor as in the past, Dorcasina now actually designs her own deception which leads her to believe foolishly that John will be a good husband for her. Again, Tenney's narrator warns girls about creating from nothing the airy castle of romance which can cause a woman to lose not only her pride but also her fortune.

To keep Dorcasina from marrying John Brown, the Stanlys, under the guidance of Harriot, trick Dorcasina into believing that Montague, who is Harriot in disguise, is in love with her. Montague ultimately kidnaps Dorcasina to a cottage outside of L-- for a "twelvemonth's seclusion from the books, which had corrupted her, and from every person whom she could possible mistake for a lover" (292).¹⁸ While in confinement there, Dorcasina meets Mr. Seymore who is the most deceitful of all of her suitors. Seymore is after Dorcasina's fortune because he "had squandered his time and money in gaming houses and brothels, though he had an amiable wife and several fine children" (297). He knows of Dorcasina's inheritance and her affinity for novels which will render it easy for him to convince her to be his wife:

¹⁷See Section IV for more details.

¹⁸See Section III for more details.

"Dorcasina's supposed derangement was a pleasing circumstance; because, if, in the lucid intervals which he was informed she had, he could gain her consent to become his wife, he could afterwards keep her confined, and enjoy her property" (298). Laws of coverture which affected women's economic power until the 1830s (Evans 77) make Dorcasina especially susceptible to Seymore. Because after marriage all of a woman's property would be transferred to her husband, the choice of a scoundrel for a mate could leave a woman destitute, abandoned, enslaved, or dead. Foolishly, though she knows little about him, Dorcasina finds Seymore irresistible: "His account of himself was romantic and extravagant, and of consequence, exactly suited to her taste. She found realized in him that constancy, of which she had so often read; and his company had become extremely agreeable" (Tenney 303).

As Dorcasina ages and her projections of romance become increasingly ridiculous, the warnings of Tenney's narrator become more serious and didactic. Novel reading is not just a fancy which makes girls act foolishly. In Dorcasina's case, novel reading can have serious social, economic, and moral consequences. The narrator, who has mocked Dorcasina since her rejection of Lysander, gives here her final insult. Mr. Seymore is anything but constant and Dorcasina's decision to love him anything but agreeable. Indeed, Dorcasina has become an utter fool, and each adventure has been worse than

the last, giving the appearance not only that she will never overthrow the infection of novels but that the infection grows more pernicious. But, the narrator insists to her female readers, they must not be tempted by novels. Keep reading this "novel," but abjure all others.

III. Commonsensical Maids and Properly Educated Ladies: The Voices of the Foils

Through the voice of her repeatedly didactic narrator, Tenney successfully shows young ladies that both family structure and female happiness can be adversely affected by novel reading. These criticisms were supported by many readers and thinkers of her day and are fortified by the opinions of a number of the novel's characters. Among them, Betty, whose sound advice is systematically ignored by her mistress, and Harriot, whose guidance leads eventually to Dorcasina's novel-ending revelation, take the leading didactic roles in the novel and act as seconds to the narrator's stated purpose.

Although Mr. Sheldon attempts to advise Dorcasina about the harmful effects of her novels, he has failed to educate his daughter properly and therefore, his advice is usually better expressed from the mouths of two female realists, Betty and Harriot. Tenney chooses women as the best mouthpieces for her didactic doctrine, hoping perhaps to replicate practical advice from the female readers' own mothers or to reach those motherless readers whose fathers have been ineffective in educating them.

Betty, "a good-hearted, honest creature, possessed of a tolerably good natural understanding" (8), has some of the characteristics of the foil of sentimental novels, including

working-class common sense. Although Betty is "very ignorant and extremely superstitious" (8), her common sense keeps her out of trouble and her advice, would her mistress heed it, is often the best that Dorcasina receives. As a servant girl who knows more of the world "chequered with good and evil" than her mistress could ever learn from novels, Betty is aware of the ploys of licentious men. But Dorcasina lives too much in fantasy to listen to the advice of her maid. Most young ladies reading Tenney's novel probably had the advantage of a maid's service but probably did not think that a maid's advice was worthy of consideration. By portraying Betty as uneducated yet experientially wise, Tenney breaks down the boundaries of class and makes an argument for "common" wisdom over book knowledge. By including Betty as a role model for young ladies, Tenney does not advocate that middle-class women accept the level of education of the working class, but rather insists on experiential knowledge as the first of two cornerstones in the "proper" education of all young girls. Travel and work outside the home as a school teacher or governess was often viewed as positive addition to book learning.¹⁹ Dorcasina, whose sheltered life has led to her desire for escape into a fantasy world of novels, might have been less adversely affected by the romantic propositions of her suitors had she had the

¹⁹Evans states that, "Income-earning opportunities for more middle-class young women developed in response to the increased demand for education" (61).

opportunity to talk to other women about marriage and courtship and to experience the world outside of L--.

Because the female reader knows more about O'Connor than do either Dorcasina or Betty, she views the maid's doubts about her mistress's new affections for O'Connor and her regret that Dorcasina has rejected Lysander as more practical, rational, and correct than Dorcasina's emotional reaction to O'Connor's flirtations:

What, has he then made love to you, ma'am?
[asks Betty].

Yes, indeed, he has, and his sentiments are so congenial to my own, that I am certain we are destined for each other [replies Dorcasina].

So you thought of Lysander, ma'am.

But it was before I saw him, Betty; the moment I beheld him, I was convinced of my mistake; I felt none of that fascination, that enchantment, that inexpressible something, which draws the soul along in spite of all our efforts to resist the bewitching influence.

Well, my mind of him, said Betty, is, that he is a bold, impudent [sic] fellow, to go for to talking about love the first time he seed you...

(28)

For Betty, wise to the ways of the world and "possessed of a tolerably good natural understanding," O'Connor's professions

of love seem justly "impudent." While for Dorcasina, unable to tell novels from reality, the similarities of O'Connor's words and actions to those of suitors in her novels are proof of her destiny with him. Thus, the uneducated maid speaks the truth about the roguish O'Connor while her mistress, the "educated" heiress, blindly accepts his faults and dismisses Betty's advice. According to Tenney, Betty's experiences substitute for a more formal education and serve her better than Dorcasina's book knowledge, based as it is on novels.

Betty's lack of formal education transforms her into a role model because she substitutes common sense for book learning. Restricted from novels and other printed materials because she cannot read, Betty must learn about relationships with men through experience and advice from parents and peers. By allowing an illiterate foil to advise a literate heroine in a novel about female education, Tenney might be seen as contradicting the view that women need more education; however, her use of Betty strengthens the idea that women, especially those who lack life experience, must be educated with a greater emphasis on common sense as well as reason. Betty, who often knows exactly what Dorcasina's suitors are planning, exemplifies the commonsensical woman.

Unlike Mr. Sheldon, who takes so long to realize the effect of novels on Dorcasina, Betty understands from the first episode with O'Connor why her mistress is so smitten: "Pho, pho," said Betty, "all this stuff you have got from

your books. I thought never any good would come from so much pouring" (33). She realizes why her mistress, who is "now less of a love object than at age eighteen" (34), overlooks O'Connor's motives and her own aging face in the mirror. But Betty's objections mean little to Dorcasina whose fixation with fiction blinds her to ideas about romance which do not correspond with those in her novels. Betty explains that: "People don't so easily die of love, I have known a great many crosses, but they all got it over in time, married some other person, and lived very happy" (33). She knows from experience that love, although a powerful emotion which takes some "getting over," is not the cause of death for young men and women. Dorcasina terms Betty's ideas "vulgar[,] certain that her own feelings are "pure, refined passion" (33). Dorcasina does not believe that an illiterate woman, because she has never read about love, can feel the passion of a literate woman. By juxtaposing the views of these two women and through Betty's own words, Tenney urges young readers to seek experiential knowledge over fantasy. And by placing one of Dorcasina's best teachers close to her throughout the novel, Tenney reminds female readers that common sense is often embodied in those close to them, including servants. Betty, whose inability to read keeps her from visiting Dorcasina's fantasy world, retains her "natural" sense of reality. Thus, through Betty, Tenney contradicts the ideology of many eighteenth century educational tracts which

suggested that women were "naturally" fanciful and emotional. Even a servant can have "sense."

Luckily for the "heroine," Tenney incorporates another character who does more to foil her Dorcasina's foolish plots than Betty ever could and who is the moral center of the novel, its true heroine. Whereas Betty represents experiential common sense, Harriot Stanly embodies rationality and well-directed education, the second and more important cornerstone in the "proper" education of young middle-class girls. Harriot, who spends the first half of the novel at boarding school and out of the reach of Dorcasina, is reintroduced into the plot when Dorcasina is well into her forties. The Stanlys are invited to the Sheldon's for dinner to meet Captain Barry, a man some twenty years Dorcasina's junior whom she believes she will marry. Everyone except Dorcasina realizes that the young captain is in no way enamored with the old heiress, but they are too polite to say so. To the disgust of all present, Dorcasina dresses up in an outlandish outfit and fawns over Barry throughout dinner. Afterwards, Harriot and her mother discuss the events of the evening:

Well, mama, said she, such a ludicrous scene I never witnessed. I really pitied the captain. And did you ever see any body so ridiculous as Dorcasina? I would not be an old maid for all the world. (180)

Because she has not been exposed to novels, because she has a mother to guide her, and because she has experienced the world outside of L--, young Harriot is already more sensible than her elder neighbor. Her mother, not wanting Harriot to think that all unmarried women act like Dorcasina, reminds her that "All single women are not thus ridiculous" (180). Mrs. Stanly is, of course, aware that although many young single women in the eighteenth century were engaged in the business of seeking a husband, after age thirty women were considered spinsters, thus less likely to marry. Many of these middle-class spinsters, as well as some widows, committed themselves instead to the task of administering the family's estate or working in domestic service or millinery (Evans 35). Not so Dorcasina, who remains afflicted with novel reading. Mrs. Stanly explains to her daughter, and through her to all young female readers:

I never spoke to you, my dear . . . of Dorcasina's weakness; because I intended, if ever an opportunity presented, that you should have ocular [sic] demonstration of it, to convince you, in a forcible manner, of the pernicious effects of reading novels. Miss Sheldon is possessed of an amiable disposition, and an excellent heart; and on every subject but one, her understanding is strong, and her judgment good; and in her youth her person was tolerably

pleasing. But having that propensity so common to youth, to peruse every novel she could lay hands on, and unfortunately obtaining as many as she wished, her head has been, for many years, completely turned; and she has been by turns the dupe of knaves and fools. I know that you used to think hard that I prohibited you such kind of reading; but, with such an instance of its baneful effects continually under my observation, I was determined that you should be educated in total ignorance of its fascination. (180-1)

Through the voice of Mrs. Stanly, Tenney reiterates her social critique. But Harriot's parents need not worry about their daughter who has accepted their advice wholeheartedly as, Tenney implies, should her readers. Before a trip to Philadelphia, Harriot visits Dorcasina who tries to convince her that she will be "laughed at" in the city for not having ever read a novel. Harriot replies:

If I may be allowed . . . to form an opinion by the little I have observed of life, and by what I have been told of novels, they are seldom natural; but colour every thing much too highly, and represent characters and situations, which never have existed. (221)

In contrast to Dorcasina, Harriot sees that the "unnaturalness" of novels makes them unacceptable reading.

Their propensity to "color everything too highly" obscures the reality of life. These views, which are the result of a carefully planned education, give Harriot the ability not only to rebut Dorcasina's argument about novels but also to save her from a marriage to John Brown.

After Mr. Sheldon's death, the task of keeping Dorcasina from being made the dupe of self-serving suitors--namely John Brown and Mr. Seymore--is left to the Stanly family. When, for example, Dorcasina fixes on John Brown, the Stanlys realize that this country bumpkin is in no way a gentleman but is clever enough to go along with Dorcasina's plans to make him master of her estate. Mrs. Stanly plans to talk Dorcasina out of the engagement by "represent[ing] to her, in a forcible manner, the impropriety of her conduct, and the disgrace she would bring upon herself by marrying a fellow whom nobody knew; one so much younger than herself; one so perfectly clownish in his manners, and so totally illiterate" (251). Harriot, however, fears that her mother's arguments will not convince Dorcasina "who, in all love matters in which she had ever been engaged, had acted as if she were totally devoid of reason" (251); therefore, Harriot becomes an active "heroine" and concocts a plan to make Dorcasina fall out of love.

Dressed as Captain Montague, Harriot presents Dorcasina with her mother's arguments, but she cleverly offers Dorcasina great gain if she gives up John Brown: "A handsome

well-bred fellow, for an awkward, ungenteel booby; an ardent lover for a lukewarm one, a gentleman for a clown, and the applauses of all good people for your choice" (265).

Harriot knows that these clever and dissembling arguments will be better received when they come from the mouth of a man and prospective lover. Harriot succeeds in convincing Dorcasina to wait a month to marry John Brown because Montague's actions are so passionate and forceful that they remind Dorcasina of the actions of men in her novels. Moreover, she is taken with the idea of having two lovers at one time. In dressing Harriot as a man and having her play the role of Dorcasina's suitor, Tenney again contradicts the established ideology that women are "naturally" prone to sentiment. Harriot knows exactly how to convince Dorcasina of the advantages of loving Montague over Brown, and though her tricks play on Dorcasina's novel-induced emotionalism, Harriot herself approaches the problem at hand in a logical, rational manner, while easily "passing" for a man in Dorcasina's eyes. Tenney may be trying to point out that men, too, are susceptible to these prescribed roles, and they may be just as easily "played" by women as by men. If society expects women to be "emotional," it expects men to be "logical." The rigidity of this dichotomy, implies Tenney, is false.

While continuing to warn girls about the ability of novel reading to warp their views, Tenney also turns

traditional gender roles upside down, making a woman both the suitor and the object of desire. While wooing Dorcasina, Montague/Harriot talks her out of marriage, for a marriage to Montague will not result in a union. Although Tenney spends much of the novel critiquing the conventions of marriage laws and the way in which men woo prospective wives, she concludes here with her strongest criticism of the way marriage is portrayed in novels. Harriot knows that to make a successful match a young lady must avoid falling in love at first sight; instead, the prospective mate should be well-known to her family and community. She must avoid a man who encourages her to meet with him in secret; instead, she should be pleased when he insists that they meet in openness at the family home. And she must resist the temptation of elopement; she should always urge her suitor to ask for the reasonable advice of her family.

Unlike Dorcasina, who is "incapable of listening to reason" (277), Harriot takes her own rational advice (or applies that which her parents have given her) when she chooses Captain Barry to be her husband. Harriot has already noticed her future husband when she meets him for the first time at the Sheldon's dinner party: "He appears to be a man of so much good sense, and such delicacy of sentiment" (181). The captain fully gains favor with Harriot, the Stanlys and the reader when he reappears at the house in Philadelphia where Harriot is staying. He is drawn to the vivacious young

woman, and although he speaks to her at some length on this first encounter, their conversation differs greatly from any Dorcasina has with her beaux or from interviews between lovers in romance novels. Captain Barry asks about Harriot's family, the Sheldons, and Dorcasina, rather than commenting on the color of Harriot's skin, the brilliance of her eyes, or the strength of his love. In fact, Barry's approach to wooing a woman closely resembles Lysander's. But whereas Dorcasina rejects the amiable, rational young Virginian, Harriot "whose heart was entirely disengaged" (223), grows more fond of the captain: "His character having more in it of solidity than brilliancy, his valuable and amiable qualities did not all at once disclose themselves; but every new interview brought them more and more to light, and consequently raised him higher in her esteem" (223-4). When he does write to her of love, she refers the letter to her parents who are so confident of her "taste and discretion" (234) that they declare her choice proper without needing further information. In making her choice in a rational manner, Harriot further proves herself a "properly educated" young woman, and Tenney further advocates a similar kind of education, based on books of utility and reason, for the daughters of the new republic.

Although similar to other "sentimental" novels whose didacticism shows female readers how not to act, Tenney's narrative also includes in Harriot a model for young ladies

of how to act. Contrasted with the foolish Dorcasina, Harriot becomes the center around which the satire revolves. All of Dorcasina's actions, from her novel reading to her poor choices concerning love and marriage, stand in opposition to Harriot's, giving the reader a clear choice between a motherless novel reader who never leaves her village and ends up a spinster and a lady well-educated without novels in Philadelphia who marries a gentleman. Tenney clearly wants her female readers to choose to be like Harriot. In fact, Harriot is the kind of ideal reader Tenney is trying to reach--a well-educated, rational young woman who can choose not to read novels or be affected by them.

IV. "I Have Read of All This, and Much More": The Voice of Dorcasina

While Tenney's narrator and her supporting characters begin and end the narrative with the same poor opinion of novels and novel reading, Dorcasina alone changes her view, though it takes her thirty years and three hundred pages. As the novel concludes, she agrees with her family and friends that experiential knowledge is a necessary companion to book learning and that the value of written works of "real utility" far outweighs that of romances. Prior to this, most of Dorcasina's fourteen mentions of novel reading throughout Female Quixotism show her to be an immature, emotional, easily-swayed woman, dependent on novels for her understanding of the world. Only in the last pages of the text do we hear the words of a woman converted--a mature, rational, realistic person, aware of how "life really is," and of how novels and novel-reading pervert the female understanding. This sudden transformation shows that Dorcasina is finally heeding the advice of Tenney's narrator and of the other characters, which in turn mirrors the advice of many contemporary reformers and educators. To prove how intense Dorcasina's affliction has been and how radical her transformation is, Tenney lets us hear Dorcasina justify her relationships with four different men because they are similar to the heroes in her novels. Finally, through her

friendship with Harriot, Dorcasina is able to reflect truthfully on her life--her past adventures and improper education--and to present a plan for the education of Mrs. Harriot Barry's daughters and all other daughters of the new American republic.

Dorcasina first speaks about her belief in the connection between the fictional love affairs in her novels and the real life passions of men and women when discussing O'Connor. Because her former suitor is rumored to have been living in the grove, Dorcasina walks to look for him. Though she accompanies her mistress, Betty dismisses the rumor because the weather is bad and because "he would starve for want of victuals" (106). To her practical maid, Dorcasina replies:

As to the dreadful sights, Betty, with which your imagination is so filled, they are seen only by the eye of superstition. All the rest is very trifling, compared with the absence of those we love. I have read of all this, and much more, being endured for the sake of a beloved object.

(106)

Although Betty offers a logical explanation for her opinion--cold, wet weather and lack of food and shelter would force even the most hearty, ardent lover indoors--Dorcasina is convinced that the romantic O'Connor has been camping out in the grove waiting day and night for her to appear.

Dorcasina's proof for this assertion is the presence of her newly-carved name under O'Connor's, which she had carved on the grove's trees after he left L--. But the reader knows that the carvings come not from O'Connor's knife but from that of Philander, "an excellent scholar, a genius, and a wag . . . [who] loved fun to excess; and was noted for the many tricks he had played on his tutors" (104). Because of his love of fun, not Dorcasina, Philander who "had no difficulty in guessing by whose hand [O'Connor's name] was carved . . . instantly took . . . to place the name of Dorcasina, on all the trees directly under that of O'Connor" (105). As a well-read man, Philander would certainly have been familiar with the ideas of romance in Dorcasina's novels. Like O'Connor, who may also have read romances but for quite a different purpose, Philander knows what to say to make Dorcasina fall in love with him, and she is completely conned.

Despite word from the innkeeper that O'Connor is not in L--, Dorcasina is convinced that O'Connor has lately visited the grove. Thus, she leaves a note for her former suitor in the bough of one of the trees. The note is intercepted by Philander who understands Dorcasina's novel-induced romantic fantasies and wants to have fun at her expense. He responds like a heart-sick lover in a sentimental novel claiming that he will hang himself "on the same tree that bears [Dorcasina's] refusal" (112). When Betty, suspicious of his motives, advises Dorcasina to refuse the "impudent

rabscallion['s]" (113) request to meet him in the evening in the grove, Dorcasina justifies her fulfillment of his request with reference to her novels:

I thought, Betty, that you had more humanity. However, as it is impossible that you, who never felt the passion of love, nor read any of those affecting descriptions of it, over which I have shed so many tears, can form any idea of its force and power, or the fatal effects it sometimes produces. (113)

Tenney presents Dorcasina as a dupe, Betty as her wise, though disregarded counsel, and Philander as a fun-loving scholar whose name alone should warn Dorcasina that he is "engaging in a love affair without serious intent" (OAD 669). But the heroine is too blinded by her belief in novels to see even blatant clues to character and thus acquiesces to Philander's request. The well-informed young lady reader, however, should realize Philander's motives.

Almost forgetting the loss of her dear O'Connor, Dorcasina becomes more and more drawn to the mysterious stranger to whom she grants a lock of her hair. He asks for an evening interview, assuring Miss Sheldon that if he is denied, he will kill himself. Although Betty is suspicious of Philander's motives and advises Dorcasina to stay away from the grove at night, Dorcasina, referring directly to her reading, is convinced of the sincerity of his love and

decides that, "I shall . . . follow my own opinion and risque the consequences" (113). Knowing how important reputation is to making a suitable match, few reasonable eighteenth-century women would have "risked the consequences" of an outdoor evening meeting with a man. However, Dorcasina's belief in passion outweighs her adherence to common sense, purged by too much novel reading. Had Dorcasina read books of utility instead of novels, she would not have been tricked by Philander, attacked by his supposed lover, deceived into meeting Mr. Puff, the barber, or kidnapped and held hostage by the young scholar. But, as Dorcasina tells us, she is enthralled by novels and accepts Philander's verbal parody of them for true love. This parody is made easy for him because all he must do is copy the words and actions of what Dorcasina has read. Even when her father rightfully condemns Philander's actions as "unpardonable insolence" (143), Dorcasina once more refers to novels and their "truth":

[Y]ou quite mistake the matter. Never was a poor youth more violently smitten; and, had you but seen and heard him, you would have been convinced of it to a demonstration. His attempt to carry me away was but the natural consequence of his despair. And, beside [sic], it was no new thing; for I have frequently read of ladies being forcibly carried off by resolute lovers. (143-4)

Thus, Dorcasina's unwavering belief in the portrayal of love found in her novels keeps her from listening to her father's sound advice. In an age in which a parent's words were revered, and children addressed their fathers, as Dorcasina does, as "Honored and Dear Sir" (134), telling one's father that "you quite mistake the matter" is a clear breach of familial hierarchy as well as common sense.

As the novel progresses and Dorcasina ages, her reactions to men become more and more ridiculous. For example, when Captain Barry arrives wounded at the Sheldon's Dorcasina concludes that "he was sent by heaven to become her husband" (153). When Betty mentions that she is "old enough to be [Barry's] mother" (154), Dorcasina yet again uses novels as her authority:

Who, pray ever read or heard of a few years, one way or the other, being an insurmountable obstacle, when the passion was sincere? Can you imagine that such an incident as this would happen without producing some important consequences? No, depend on, Betty, we are destined for each other, and shall be mutually pleased as soon as we become acquainted. (154)

Dorcasina's reaction is especially humorous because she and Captain Barry have never met. Yet already she is constructing their relationship, as she did some twenty years before with Lysander. Again, Dorcasina's belief in the

fantasy world of novels renders her incapable of seeing the illogic of her behavior.

Dorcasina also invents the affection of John Brown who comes to work for her after Mr. Sheldon's death. To prove him the disguised gentleman she believes him to be, Dorcasina interviews him (229-30). In a short and simple discussion, Dorcasina convinces herself that because of John's short answers, hesitations, and uneasiness, "he did not wish me to penetrate too far" (230) and is, thus, a gentleman in disguise. Instead of concluding as Betty does that John's short answers are caused by his embarrassment and his fear of offending a lady of a higher social standing, Dorcasina believes him to be withholding information; instead of realizing that his blushes are a reaction to his affection for a young servant, Dolly, Dorcasina thinks he loves her. As with Captain Barry, Dorcasina projects her desire for a romantic interlude and a blissful marriage onto the obviously unfitting person of John Brown. By focusing on Dorcasina's ridiculous reactions to John, Tenney continues to criticize Dorcasina's inability to see reality because of novel reading; but, because John is a servant, she also shows her concern for the breakdown class as well as family structure. Were Dorcasina to marry John Brown, her household would come under the control of an uneducated man. By positing John as the possible new master of the Sheldon's substantial fortune, Tenney criticizes the way the marriage market breaks up

inheritances--money and property are not passed on to daughters but often to those daughter's husbands.

Unlike Dorcasina, Mrs. Stanly believes John is a simpleton at best and a rogue at worst and, thus, tries to convince Dorcasina to break off her engagement with her latest suitor. But Dorcasina is not dissuaded by Mrs. Stanly's arguments and explains to her why John might be disguising himself: "Oh a number of reasons might induce him to do it; he might have been reduced in his circumstances; and I have read of gentlemen who have disguised themselves as servants for the sake of being near a beloved object" (254). Once again Dorcasina's dependence on her novels to interpret her life situations puts her in a ridiculous predicament. Mrs. Stanly knows that John is not well-educated enough to be the master of the Sheldon's estate, and that Dorcasina should realize that his assurances of love--"I loves you better than I do anybody in the world" (238)--are not the words of a gentleman in disguise but of a servant trying desperately to please his mistress.

The change in Dorcasina's perceptions of romance occurs after Harriot and her family kidnap Dorcasina to keep her from marrying John Brown. Dorcasina visits Harriot who has married Captain Barry and seems destined for wedded bliss. But, Dorcasina is surprised to find that Harriot's life is "not unattended with cares and anxieties" (320); her mother

has died, her husband is ill, and her housekeeper has run off with the valuables. Dorcasina tells Harriot, now Mrs. Barry:

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. . . .

Indeed, Miss Sheldon, replied Mrs. Barry, your observation is just. I have been married a twelvemonth, to the man whom of all the world I should have chosen. He is every thing I wish him to be; and in the connection I have enjoyed great felicity. Yet, strange to tell, I have suffered more that [sic] I ever did before, in the whole course of my life. (320-1)

The ideas of romance, courtship, and martial bliss presented in Dorcasina's novels are finally and fully refuted in Mrs. Barry's life. Although Harriot Barry chooses a caring, sensible man as her husband, life is far from perfect. Even a woman like Mrs. Barry who has done everything she should have, does not live a life of continuous "felicity." Tenney asks the reader to imagine what a woman's life would be like were she not as reasonable, as sensibly educated, and as committed to her parents' ideals as Harriot Barry; she asks the reader to imagine a woman like Dorcasina.

Why, though, after so many years of living in a fantasy world of novels, and therefore misinterpreting the real world

of personal relationships, does Dorcasina finally see that her novel-ridden past has kept her from having the kind of life Harriot enjoys and at times endures? Perhaps because she finally learns that even the most well-made matches are never without imperfections and trials, Dorcasina is able to realize that her novels do not imitate life. Perhaps Dorcasina's experiential knowledge finally helps to counteract the absurd idealities that she has been reading for so many years. Or, perhaps, she realizes after thirty years that although she has tried to act like the women in her novels and respond to romantic situations as they do, she is still unmarried. Whatever Tenney's rationale for this transformation, it is necessary to her didactic purpose. Dorcasina's transformation must be brought about by experience and by the example and advice of a rational woman.

To complete the comparison between Dorcasina and Harriot, the anti-heroine heroine and heroine anti-heroine, one who has spent her life distracted by the sentimental plots of novels and the other who has been sensibly educated without exposure to fiction, Tenney finishes her novel with a final didactic letter from Dorcasina. Dorcas, as we should again call her, writes that her fate as "old maid" instead of "matron," childless instead of raising "amiable children" (324), is a result of her novel reading: "A strong relish for novels, if unchecked in its operation, naturally prevents the formation, in young minds, of a taste for books of real

instruction and utility" (324), she tells the young readers of Columbia. Dorcasina now sees that her mind has been one whose taste was destroyed. Because of the "eighteenth-century assumption that narrative directly addresses questions on the conduct of life" (Davidson, Revolution 187), Dorcasina has spent her life associating, through her reading, with characters who are far too easily swayed by emotions. Dorcasina writes: "Had my education been properly directed . . . I believe I might have made acquirements, which would have enabled me to bear a part, perhaps to shine, when thrown among people of general information" (Tenney 325). This general information comes from the knowledge of experience and from didactic written works other than novels, including the histories, travel narratives and "books of real instruction and utility" (324) which filled Mr. Sheldon's library. The people among whom Dorcas might shine are all those educated citizens, men and women, who learn and read without being unduly swayed by their emotions. Making this discovery so late in her life, Dorcas can do nothing to save herself from the effects of "pernicious volumes" (325), but she can advise Harriot Barry and the reader how to avoid the ignorance of her youth, embarrassment of her middle age, and blindness of her later years. She tells Harriot Barry that if she ever has daughters, she should:

Withhold from their eye the pernicious volumes,
which, while they convey false ideas of life, and

inspire illusory expectation, will tend to keep them ignorant of everything really worth knowing. . . . Suffer not their imaginations to be filled with ideas of happiness, particularly in the connubial state, which can never be realized. Describe life to them as it really is, and as you have yourself found it, chequered with good and evil. Teach them that a considerable proportion of human misery proceeds from human imprudence.

(325)

In this final didactic statement, Tenney allows the reformed Dorcas at last to speak for the author and her narrator and for Betty, Harriot, and the other sensible characters and to present the greatest problem of female education in the new republic as one based on the pernicious emotionalism found in novels. With Dorcas's letter, Tenney lays out her plan for a more effective system of teaching young women which emphasizes a realistic view of life based on reason and experiential knowledge. Through the reformed Dorcas, Tenney asks her female readers to take the initiative in instituting these reforms in their own households and eventually with their own female children.

Conclusion

Tabitha Gilman Tenney's Female Quixotism is a satirical novel which criticizes the faulty educational system which helped to make eighteenth-century women totally dependent on their husbands. By placing the novel in the historical context of a period rife with fears about increasing literacy, female education, and novel reading, I have tried to show that Tenney satirizes more than just the antics of one foolish woman or the silly novels Dorcasina reads. Tenney is criticizing a system which produces such foolish and therefore powerless women by basing their education on the emotionalism found in novels.

As I show in Section II, Tenney's didactic narrator repeatedly insists that novel reading warps the young female reader's sense of reality by showing how it keeps Dorcasina from understanding the good intentions of Lysander and the ploys of a series of rogues from O'Connor to Seymore. By repeatedly criticizing Dorcasina's choice of reading material and reactions to suitors, Tenney portrays Dorcasina not as the narrative's heroine but as the object of her satire and the novel's greatest dupe.

By examining the novel's foils in Section III, I show that Tenney's didacticism also works through positive examples of women, setting up Betty as a commonsensical foil to Dorcasina and Harriot as the novel's "reasonable" and

actual heroine, a true moral foil to Dorcasina's excesses. By including Harriot as a role model for girls, their education, and their rational responses to relationships with men, Tenney advances her satire by giving it a clear center. Harriot represents the ideal educated woman and the ideal reader.

While Tenney spends much of the novel criticizing novels, her most direct criticism of the educational system comes in the final pages of the narrative in the form of Dorcasina's letter, which I address in Section IV. Here, it becomes clear that Tenney's whole purpose has been to show through example and with a repetitively didactic narrative voice that though novels form a major part of the problem with the way in which females are educated to make life and marriage choices, novels actually act merely to exacerbate the faults of a system which educates girls to make their decisions based on emotion, not on reason. The fact that Tenney criticizes more than novel reading helps explain why she is able to use the novel form as anti-novel. As a conservative reformer, Tenney wants to extend educational opportunities to girls and to focus female education. Only then can girls make better choices in a domestic realm already established for them. Thus Tenney's choice of the satirical novel allows her narrative to be at once liberal and conservative; looking forward to a society in which both men and women are educated in reason, yet looking back to a

past when girls were not allowed to read novels. The novel, thus, deconstructs itself as a novel about not reading novels, but reconstructs itself as something more than a novel.

Appendix A--Specific Mentions of Novel reading in Female Quixotism

Page	Speaker	Quotation
3	narrator	"That, by observing [novels'] baneful effects on Miss Sheldon, who was in every other respect a sensible, judicious, and amiable girl, you may avoid the disgraces and disasters that so long rendered her despicable and miserable, is the sincere wish, my dear young Ladies, of your Friend and Admirer, the COMPILER."
4-5	narrator	"At the age of three years, this child had the misfortune to lose an excellent mother, whose advice would have pointed out to her the plain rational path of life; and prevented her imagination from being filled with the airy delusions and visionary dreams of love and rapture, 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."
6	narrator	"Miss Dorcas Sheldon, either from nature or education, possessed nearly the same taste in books as her father, with this difference only, that novels were her study, and history only her amusement."
6	narrator	"Mr. Sheldon, who himself had experienced nothing but pleasure in the time spent in reading the former [novels], unfortunately indulged his daughter in the full latitude of her inclination; never considering their dangerous tendency to a young inexperienced female mind."
7	narrator	"But as none of these romantic adventures, with which she had been so delighted in novels, had ever happened to her, she thought she must be satisfied if, at their first interview, he beheld her with raptures of delight. . . ."
11	narrator	"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."
14	narrator	". . . add to this that some of the gentlemen who were fortunate enough to be of her acquaintance, knew how much of her time was dedicated to novels . . . Those, therefore, who were acquainted with this circumstance, notwithstanding the temptation of her money, and her agreeable person, were too prudent to think of seeking her in marriage; wisely foreseeing 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	narrator	"It was sufficient to keep them 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."

16	narrator	"And this resolution she [Mrs. Stanly] put in practice some years after, by sending her [Harriot] to an eminent boarding school in Philadelphia, with an express injunction to the governess, never to indulge her in perusing novels . . ."
25	narrator	"On entering the borders of this sequestered scene, she requested Betty to remain there, while she went forward to explore the interior, with no other companion than one of her favourite novels."
26	narrator	"O'Connor . . . dwelt with particular pleasure on the writers of novels, and asserted that they alone described the passion of love in its true and genuine colours."
33	Betty	"'Pho, pho,' said Betty, 'all this stuff you have got from your books. I thought never any good would come from so much pouring.'"
35	narrator	"Dorcasina was so delighted with this rhapsody, which she thought exceeded all that she had ever read of the most violent love, that she would scarcely refrain from throwing herself into his arms, and confessing a mutual flame."
50	narrator	"His [Mr. Sheldon's] 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, disordered every faculty of her mind."
57	narrator	"She was, however, so far gone with the novel-mania, that it appeared a proper attention to a lover, who had suffered so much for her sake."
58	narrator	"This manner of proceeding was so comfortable to many instances which she had read in her favourite authors, that she was upon the point of giving her consent."
61	narrator	"She [Mrs. Stanly] well knew, that Dorcasina had imbibed from the books she had perused, a most romantic turn; but she had no idea that she could have been led so widely astray from the path prescribed by reason and prudence."
68	narrator	"She first took up her work; but pricking her finger at every stitch, she threw it aside, and replaced it with a book."
106	Dorcasina	"I have read of all this, and much more, being endured for the sake of a beloved object."
113	Dorcasina	"I thought, Betty, that you had more humanity. However, as it is impossible that you, who never felt the passion of love, nor read any of those affecting descriptions of it, over which I have shed so many tears, can form any idea of its force and power, of the fatal effects it sometimes produces, I shall not consider you a qualified to give advice, and shall therefore follow my own opinion and risque the consequences."

143	Dorcasina	"... for I have frequently read of ladies being forcibly carried off by resolute lovers."
144	Mr. Sheldon	"Oh! those poisonous, those fatal novels!" exclaimed Mr. Sheldon; 'how have they warped your judgment, and perverted your understanding. Would to heaven people could find some better employment, than thus turning the heads of inexperienced females! would to heaven I could have foreseen the fatal consequences of allowing you a free access to them! but it is now too late, and the evil I fear is irreparable."
154	Dorcasina	"Who, pray ever read or heard of a few years, one way or the other, being an insurmountable obstacle, when the passion was sincere?"
168	narrator	"She recollected that she had read of numberless young ladies, who had taken a trip to Scotland, when their parents were opposed to their union with a favoured lover."
180	Mrs. Stanly	"I never spoke to you, my dear,' said Mrs. Stanly, 'of Dorcasina's weakness; because I intended, if ever an opportunity presented, that you should have ocular demonstration of it, to convince you, in a forcible manner, of the pernicious effects of reading novels."
221	Dorcasina	"Never read a novel!" exclaimed Dorcasina, with astonishment. 'Poor girl, I really pity you."
221	Harriot	"...by what I have been told of novels, they are seldom natural; but colour every thing much too highly, and represent characters and situations, which never have existed."
221	Dorcasina	"Why, you will be laughed at in Philadelphia, and set down as a person destitute of all taste and refinement, if you let them know, good heavens! that you never read a novel."
227	narrator	"The first symptom which Dorcasina showed of recovery did not take place till towards spring; which was her calling for some of her favourite authors."
229	Betty	"Her reading only one of them there devilish books, now, has turned her brain quite topsy-turvy."
236	narrator	Dorcasina now turned her attention to Miss Stanly; expressed great pleasure at seeing her, and inquired about all the news, all the fashions, and all the new novels."
238	narrator	"John really wished to express himself so as to please her; but he was too ignorant of polite language, and especially of that of novels, to do it readily to her satisfaction."
254	Dorcasina	"... and I have read of gentlemen who have disguised themselves as servants for the sake of being near a beloved object."

277	Mrs. Stanly	"We must separate her from this fellow . . . and I think, if she were kept, a twelvemonth, where she could have no access to the books, which have deranged her ideas, it might possibly be the means of restoring her senses."
288	H. Montague (Harriot)	"Such articles of clothing as may be necessary for you in your retreat shall be forwarded, together with a number of books of history and travels, to enable you to pass your time agreeably and usefully."
292	narrator	"Harriot then gave him a particular account of all her late transactions; informing him how she had visited Dorcasina, in the character of a young officer, in the hope of detaching her from Brown; her ill success in the affair; and, finally, the plan they had concerted, and put in execution for conveying her out of the reach of both Brown and the books that had so wretchedly perverted her understanding."
293	narrator	" . . . but he was greatly diverted with the account Harriot gave of her courtship, and he approved highly of the plan of her removal, saying, if any thing could cure her strange infatuation, it would be a twelvemonth's seclusion from the books, which had corrupted her, and from every person whom she could possibly mistake for a lover."
295	narrator	"When it would not admit of either of these diversions, the well chosen books, with which she had been supplied, amused her within doors."
299	narrator	"Being informed by Giles that she had a variety of books, he bethought himself of sending to borrow one, hoping it might lead to an interview."
300	narrator	"Seymore first took down one book, then another; and, by making several observations upon them, led Dorcasina insensibly into conversation."
303	narrator	"She found realized in him that constancy, of which she had so often read; and his company had become extremely agreeable."
323	Dorcas	"My dear father--But I will cast no reflections on his memory. Attached to novels himself, as a course of amusement, from which he had received no injury, he did not foresee, or suspect the mischiefs they might produce, in a young girl like me, ignorant of the world, and of a turn of mind naturally romantic. I was therefore left to gratify my taste for this kind of reading, without restraint; and this imprudent indulgence has been the cause of my ruin."
324	Dorcas	"Heaven forgive me if I am sometimes half tempted to wish its curse on the authors of the writing, which had so far perverted my judgment, and depraved my taste, as to induce me to reject it."
324	Dorcas	"This will be my serious employment: but it will leave me many leisure hours, for which I must have some amusement; and this is most readily found in books."

324	Dorcas	"A strong relish for novels, if unchecked in its operation, naturally prevents the formation, in young minds, of a taste for books of real instruction and utility."
325	Dorcas	"I am obliged, therefore, to take it in those very books, which, by perverting my judgment, and filling my fancy with visionary expectation, have occasioned most of the serious evils of a very eventful life. They 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 unallayed felicity is, in their life, unattainable"
325	Dorcas	"Permit me to mention one more ill effect of my course of reading, which, were I differently situated, would be a source of much mortification. I think I possess a mind, which was originally capable of considerable improvement by cultivation. Had my education been properly directed . . . I believe I might have made acquirements, which would have enabled me to bear a part, perhaps to shine, when thrown among people of general information."
325	Dorcas	"With held from their eye the pernicious volumes, which, while they convey false ideas of life, and inspire illusory expectations, will tend to keep them ignorant of every thing really worth knowing . . ."

Dorcasina
Betty
Mr. Sheldon
Mrs. Stanly
Harriot
the narrator

mentions novel reading

14 times
2 times
1 time
2 times
2 times
27 times

The total number of times novel
reading is mentioned in Female
Quixotism is

48 times

Appendix B--Uses of the Epistolary Form in Female Quixotism

Page	Recipient	Writer
3	All Columbian Young Ladies who read Novels and Romances	the compiler
12	Dorcasina Sheldon	Lysander
13	Lysander	Dorcasina
24	Dorcasina	Jonathan Greenough
41-2	Dorcasina	Patrick O'Connor
43	O'Connor	Dorcasina
43	O'Connor	Dorcasina
50-1	O'Connor	Dorcasina
51-2	Dorcasina	O'Connor
55	O'Connor	Dorcasina
64-5	Lysander	Mr. James Sheldon
65	O'Connor	Dorcasina
72	Mr. Sheldon	Lysander
79	O'Connor	Dorcasina
80	Dorcasina	O'Connor
84	Mr. Sheldon	Mr. Thomas Stanly
90	Dorcasina	O'Connor
107	O'Connor	Dorcasina
107-8	Dorcasina	Philander
109	Philander	Dorcasina
110	Dorcasina	Philander
112	Dorcasina	Philander
125	Dorcasina	Philander
134-5	Mr. Sheldon	Dorcasina
258	residents of L	John Brown
287	Dorcasina	H. Montague
296	H. Montague	Dorcasina
323-6	Mrs. Harriot Barry	Dorcas Sheldon

Appendix C--Passage of Time in Female Quixotism

Section	Page	Topic	Age of Dorcasina
Book I.1	3-4	compiler's letter	50
I.2	4-7	childhood	0-20
I.3	7-16	Lysander	20
I.4	17-151	O'Connor	34
I.5	108-51	Philander	34
Book II.1	152-203	Captain Barry and James	41
II.2	203-26	Mr. Cumberland	45
II.3	227-92	John Brown	49
II.4	259-97	H. Montague	49
II.5	297-316	Mr. Seymore	50
II.6	316-26	Dorcas's concluding letter	50

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