New World Courtships
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IN “THE AMERICAN ORIGINS OF ‘Yankee Doodle,’” J. A. Leo Lemay locates a surprising instance of bundling in a lesser-known version of “Yankee Doodle.” The lines read: “Two and two may go to bed / Two and two together / And if there is not room enough / Lie one atop the other.” Alongside the song’s cheeky refrain to “keep it up” and “with the girls be handy,” these lines reveal that colonial Americans were none too shy about the outright sexual nature of courtship. Bundling was an early American courtship practice popular in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England and mid-Atlantic colonies that presented a young unmarried couple with the opportunity to spend the night together in the female partner’s family home for the purposes of getting to know one another. Although couples were customarily expected to retain at least some undergarments and had nominal parental supervision during the process, demographic studies show that, in this period, as many as 30 percent of all first births were conceived prior to marriage. The historian Richard Godbeer has argued that bundling was a pragmatic solution to colonial couples’ demands for independence and privacy, as parents with knowledge of their daughter’s sexual partners could intervene to force a marriage if necessary.³

Lemay’s identification of bundling in “Yankee Doodle” is significant because he dates the song to the 1740s, much earlier than previous critics, demonstrating how the song was an early site of colonial identity or, as Lemay argues, “American self-characterization.” Until Lemay’s pathbreaking article, most scholars believed that “Yankee Doodle” was a satiric British production created to mock colonials, especially New Englanders, and their provincialism. However, Lemay claims that the song was actually a colonial production ridiculing British snobbery. Posing as backward
“bumpkins,” colonial Americans turned the tables on British stereotypes of ignorant Yankees by highlighting English credulity: “If [the English] were taken in, the Americans had reversed the snobbery and proven that the English were credulous and foolish.” Lines that had previously been read as British criticisms of colonial provinciality are, Lemay argues, a colonial rejection of metropolitan disdain. The same can be said about bundling. In “Yankee Doodle,” bundling jokes are not just another British jab at colonials and their crude lovemaking, but evidence of a self-mocking Yankee humor tradition that points to the emergence of a distinctly colonial culture. If Lemay’s dating is correct, then postrevolutionary-era bundling references by Royall Tyler and Washington Irving discussed later in this chapter continue a well-established rhetorical tradition of deploying Yankee bundlers as evidence of a distinct colonial-turned-national romantic heritage available for comparison.

In contrast to the comparative marriage plots previously discussed, this chapter traces a variety of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century discursive traditions that position bundling as a courtship practice representative of the US nation and its values. However, the value of bundling’s representativeness largely depends on who is speaking and to whom they are speaking. In works as diverse as European travel writing; popular ballads such as “Yankee Doodle” and “Jonathan’s Courting”; Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast* (1787); Washington Irving’s *A History of New York* (1809); and the pseudonymous picaresque novels, *The Adventures of Jonathan Corncob* (1787) and *The Life and Adventures of Obadiah Benjamin Franklin Bloomfield, M.D.* (1818), bundling scenes provide Americans with a lively romantic tradition. However, there are few straightforward celebrations of bundling in this archive, and for good reasons: bundling is only one of the many competing courtship traditions to choose from in the ethnically and religiously diverse United States; it is frequently associated with rustic “bumpkin” characters and many Americans are understandably concerned to espouse such a provincial national identity; and, finally, this provincialism is not in line with the popular cosmopolitan sensibilities that many US writers and readers want to adopt. Instead of provincialism, many early American novelists choose rather to adapt familiar and seemingly more sophisticated British literary conventions of sensibility.

In the final section of this chapter I argue that *The Life and Adventures of Obadiah Benjamin Franklin Bloomfield, M.D.*, rejects the hierarchical evaluative tendencies of Enlightenment comparison and instead embraces the cacophony of competing romantic discourses present in
early national print culture. The novel humorously capitalizes on the almost overwhelming diversity of US romantic practices and belief systems, satirizing a consistent strain in contemporary print culture to single out romantic traditions as accurately representative of the nation. With its dizzying play of forms, conventions, and voices, this novel’s exciting heteroglossia of romantic discourses celebrates the messy tangle of romantic doings and sayings that comprise the early US romantic imaginary.

Comparing Courtships: The Marriage-Rites Genre in the United States

In chapter 1 I traced the ways that comparative anthologies of “ceremonies used in marriage, by every nation in the known world” cull protoethnographic descriptions of courtship and marriage from various travel accounts and assemble them into attractive compendiums of exotic marriage customs. During the course of the eighteenth century, these collections evolve from the titillating to the didactic and are popular with a wide variety of readers. Such books claim to provide a systemized approach to understanding and classifying the diversity of marriage rites around the globe by applying Enlightenment principles for organizing knowledge to materials aimed at a popular audience. Lisa O’Connell argues that the marriage-rites genre, coinciding as it did with British legal reformations such as Hardwicke’s Marriage Act of 1753, becomes a tool for proclaiming nationalist sentiments about British women’s supposedly more civilized treatment. In O’Connell’s account, by the mid-eighteenth century, comparative representations of courtship and marriage practices are recognized tools for distinguishing national cultures and evaluating the differences in women’s status across national borderlines. However, nationalizing projects obviously pose problems for the recently postcolonial United States. Did the United States possess any of its own distinct romantic traditions, and would they be worthy of international comparison? The problem might more accurately be deciding which of the many traditions—indigenous, imported, or blended—to cast as the romantic practice representative of the new nation.

Almost as soon as the United States existed, American authors began inserting US marriage rites into their comparative texts. However, US versions of the marriage-rites genre are generally more anxious about the nationalist claims they make. For instance, in a lengthy 1787 letter “To the Editor of the Columbian Magazine” by “A Friend to the Fair Sex,”
the author compares American Quaker traditions to other global marital practices in order to prove that American customs are among the best: “With a wish to reconcile [single women] to what is absolutely necessary [marriage] . . . I would beg leave to offer the following facts and ideas on the subject—and have thought it most eligible to collect a short account of the foreign marriage ceremonies, the barbarities and absurdities of which, will have a tendency to reconcile us to the moderation and delicacy of our own.” After detailing customs among the Laplanders, Russian peasants, Germans, Italians, Turks, Chinese, East Indians, Norwegians, Hottentots, and French, the author describes the customs of local American Quakers. While many marriageable individuals in Philadelphia apparently complained about the Quaker church’s requirement to proclaim the banns, necessitating a wait of several weeks between engagement and marriage, the author explains that this minor delay pales in comparison to the “absurd institutions of other countries, and even of some of the sects in our own state.” So, far from being a deterrent to marriage, the author argues that public professions of commitment and the “privilege of selecting the man she loves for a companion in her journey through life” ought to encourage matrimony. Whereas financial interests and “fortune-hunting” govern marriage considerations in “the old crowded cities” of Europe, “contracts, settlements of fortunes, etc. are scarcely understood by the inhabitants of America.” In this depiction of a youthful, innocent America, love reigns supreme: “After all, the best criterion of what is right in courtship or wedlock, is the portion of happiness enjoyed by the aggregate of married inhabitants in any given country: and whoever attempts to make a scale of this kind for the whole world, must place America in a very elevated situation.” Here, the text’s cross-cultural comparisons use a metric of personal happiness imported from the Scottish Enlightenment to prove that America possesses some of the best marriage arrangements. According to “A Friend,” women are happiest and most esteemed in this new and flourishing country where domestic virtues and individual choice are highly prized and money matters are relatively unimportant. As this example demonstrates, the marriage-rites genre becomes one site in which discreet accounts of particular US marriage practices prove not only the nation’s civility, but, on a more fundamental level, the very existence of culture in the United States. Comparison becomes a vehicle for positioning the United States and its romantic practices as the equivalent of other nations’ long-standing cultural traditions; however, as “To the Editor” underscores, even in the state of Pennsylvania there are many religious “sects” with
their own “absurd institutions.” Making strong claims about the nation’s supposedly progressive social mores and customs proves difficult in the face of the overwhelming diversity of US peoples, belief systems, and cultural practices. Which customs are progressive and which are absurd?

Before a national culture could be determined, then, a specific courtship ritual or marriage custom must be nominated above others as representative of the nation’s values and character. Lacking a majority, it seems that the Quaker romantic tradition promoted by “A Friend” did not establish itself as the representative romantic practice in the larger field of the marriage-rites genre. However, the problem of locating representative traditions among a diverse and divided US population was further complicated by early nineteenth-century Romantic-era beliefs that national culture emerges from long-standing “indigenous” customs; most often this meant local, rural folk practice. Many early nationals argued that former colonies, lacking a unique language and deep historical connections to their geography, could not yet muster the necessary requirements for a unique national culture. For instance, in his well-known 1815 “Essay on American Language and Literature,” William Ellery Channing claims that given the colonial origins of the United States, there could be no “native” language and, thus, no basis for a US national literary tradition. From this point of view, the United States might well remain a mere clone of British traditions with no “native” literature of which to speak. Channing continues his explanation for the disappointing lack of American literature in the early national period with his additional charge that the new nation had yet to develop a market for US authors, in large part because American readers continue to import their reading materials from abroad. Clearly, whatever US culture, romantic or otherwise, would be, it would be a blend of existing British traditions with those of more recent US construction; but, in this sense, it was not so far removed from the Romantic-era efforts of Celtic nationalists such as Sir Walter Scott, whose well-documented invention of “traditional” Scottish culture took the literary world by storm with his landmark novel Waverly (1814).

What might appear to be the seeming limitations of bundling as a national romantic practice—its regional association with New England Yankees and its reputation as a lower-class practice—could be seen, according to Romantic-period values, as assets for bundling’s authenticity as folk tradition. This Romantic-era turn to bundling is rather surprisingly initiated by the complicated maneuver Lemay tracks in “Yankee
Doodle”: a colonial investment in and reclaiming of seeming provincialisms as authentic “heritage.”

“A little peaceable bundling”: Yankee Romance as Heritage

Before a romantic practice can become a tradition, it must be widely recognized as social protocol. To be a meaningful marker of “heritage,” the same romantic practice must be invested with historical meaning as a source of local identity and pride. For bundling to be a heritage tradition, it must not only be a romantic practice from the past, but it must also carry with it a useful set of values and meanings for contemporary people about how their collective, regional, and, in this case, romantic identity has come to be. For New Englanders, bundling’s heritage standing stems from what Edward Said calls a contrapuntal reading strategy in which colonials value a practice in direct opposition to European criticisms of that same practice.10

European travelers frequently comment on the widespread practice of bundling across the northern and middle North American colonies, recognizing in it a form of colonial alterity. For instance, according to British lieutenant Thomas Anburey’s Travels through the Interior Parts of America (1789), bundling is an “unaccountable” colonial oddity.11 In a scene that might have come directly from a British sentimental novel, Anburey describes the temptations he faces when his colonial hosts offer their daughter, the “very pretty black-eyed” Jemima, as his bedmate. Because beds were scarce, Jemima’s parents view sharing a bed as an obvious and completely innocent solution. Anburey, however, finds the sexual temptation exceedingly great and finally rejects this “test of virtue,” exclaiming “how cold the American constitution” must be to withstand Jemima’s allure.

As this example shows, bundling could include nonsexual bed-sharing activities (think, for example, of Melville’s Queequeg and Ishmael snugly sharing a bed at an overcrowded inn). However, most European travelers comment on bundling as a specific courtship ritual, also known as “girling of it,” and “staying with.”12 Andrew Burnaby notes during his 1759–60 tour of Massachusetts that after the parents retire, “leaving the young ones to settle matters as they can,” the lovers “get into bed together also, but without pulling off their undergarments, in order to prevent scandal.”13 Johann Schoepf, a German botanist and chief surgeon for a group of Hessian forces during the revolution, observes reassuringly that “the young woman’s good name [is] no ways impaired” by the
liaison. Far from stealthy nocturnal visits, “parents are advised” of these meetings and engagement is not a prerequisite; rather, “these meetings happen when the pair is enamored and merely wish to know each other better.”

Taken together, though, these repeated European expressions of surprise, shock, and suspicion underscore the ways that metropolitan writers see bundling as an expression of colonial alterity.

For their parts, many colonists responded to Europeans’ scandalized reports with righteous indignation. For instance, in 1781, the Reverend Samuel Peters rebutted such reports by insisting that bundling was an innocent practice: “Why it should be thought incredible for a young man and young woman innocently and virtuously to lie down together in a bed with a great part of their clothes on, I cannot conceive.” Speaking from a position of church authority, Peters’s support for bundling is one of the strongest contrapuntal interpretations. More broadly, though, he speaks to a revolutionary-era sensitivity to European condescension by turning the tables to question European morals: “It may seem very strange to find this custom of bundling in bed attended with so much innocence in New England, while in Europe it is thought not safe or scarcely decent to permit a young man and maid to be together in private anywhere. . . . Europe will discover that there is more Christian philosophy in American bundling than can be found in the customs of nations more polite.”

In Peters’s defensive comparison, bundling easily fits within preexisting comparative marriage-rites frameworks for evaluating national “politeness,” and in his account, American bundling trumps Europe’s false modesty. From this perspective, bundling is primarily an opportunity for carefully regulated privacy, where couples might forge an emotional bond. It is a testing ground for the likelihood of long-term emotional and physical compatibility, and, as such, neatly fits young couples’ increasing demands for companionate marriage.

The historian Richard Godbeer argues that by the mid-eighteenth century, bundling accommodated both young colonial couples’ increasing insistence on sexual and marital independence as well as a pragmatic parental desire for sexual surveillance. Thus, in the event that premarital sexual intimacy ended in conception, parents with knowledge of their child’s sexual partners could intervene to promote a timely marriage. As mentioned previously, as many as 30 percent of all first births in the revolutionary era were conceived prior to marriage. These numbers indicate that, contrary to Anburey’s claim, colonials were anything but “cold” in bed.

Published in London, the pseudonymous picaresque novel *The Adventures of Jonathan Corncob, Loyal American Refugee* (1787) loads its pro-
agonist with stereotypical Yankee features, including a predilection for bundling. Because little is known about the publication history of *Corncob*, it is difficult to ascertain the novel’s origins. As R. W. G. Vail suggests, it is highly probable that it was written by an English author satirizing the stings of recent revolutionary losses. Jonathan describes himself as a Loyalist, but at the start of the novel he explains that he has been exiled from England for unpaid debts, and continues in his habits of exceeding his income in his present location, a garret apartment in Flanders. Writing from necessity, but also for amusement, Corncob relives his previous adventures on the page. Although he never disavows his Massachusetts Bay roots, neither does he embrace a metropolitan English identity. As Henri Petter notes, Jonathan’s loyalty is “to himself rather than any country or institution.” He is adrift in the world, hilariously pursuing pleasures and experiencing many amusing setbacks along the way.

Yet Jonathan never learns from his mistakes, never tempers his desire. Indeed, he never acknowledges any genuine impropriety on his part, whether sexual, political, or commercial. This overconfidence leads the reader to question Jonathan’s morality, for any time Jonathan faces punishment, he runs away or switches sides. Cathy Davidson observes that Jonathan’s penchant for moving to a new setting, which she calls *global episodism*, is quite common in picaresque novels of this period. Looking back, Jonathan traces his rambling lifestyle to “the first little mistake I ever made in bundling.” Since he also tells his reader that he has “already bundled with half the girls in the neighborhood,” the reader presumes that Jonathan only regrets that in this particular instance, bundling led to his fathering an illegitimate child. Jonathan marks his bundling “American beauty,” Miss Desire Slawbunk, with highly racial descriptors: she is a “little dusky” and has a “certain languor in her look that was not displeasing.” Desire also has a sweet tooth, leading to the overconsumption of “melasses” and the loss of six upper and six lower teeth. Tying the “dusky” Desire to sugar consumption gives readers a new vantage on Desire’s oversexed behavior. Like many profit-hungry New Englanders, Desire is tied to the triangle trade of slaves, sugar, and manufactured goods.

When Jonathan arrives at the Slawbunk house, he announces his intention to “tarry” with Desire and is accepted by her. After some unremarkable conversation on the cold, Desire observes that the fire is “by no means brilliant.” She begins to fan the flames with her petticoats, giving Jonathan a view “that vied with all the snow and forests of the continent. Without improving the fire, she had produced an equal effect . . . I could
not help proposing to bundle.” Quickly stepping to the bed, the couple undresses “according to the rules of bundling, scrupulously reserving the breeches and underpetticoat,” but this last reserve of modesty is no match for this clever couple. After a little tickling match, Corncob observes “we exceeded all the bounds of bundling. Heaven only can tell what become of the petticoat during the night, but in the morning we found it kicked out of the foot of the bed.” After a few months, it is clear that Desire is pregnant and a committee forms to resolve the situation. Jonathan is faced with the choice of marrying Miss Slawbunk or paying a fine of fifty pounds. Jonathan chooses instead to abscond to New York, a Loyalist stronghold. What is remarkable about this passage is how explicit Jonathan is about the bundling—no other scene I have found offers so much detail—and how assertively Desire plays her part in the action. She is no victim of deceit, no naïve or misguided waif, no passionless nineteenth-century angel in the house. She literally and purposely fans the flames in this encounter.

Rather surprisingly, Desire returns several times during the course of the novel to aid Jonathan in times of need. She seems to have something of a soft spot for him, despite his abandoning her. Indeed, Desire roguishly makes the best of her situation. After an unfortunate miscarriage, resulting in her losing Corncob’s child, Desire beds with another young man and this time she lands herself a husband. Speaking in the first person, Desire informs Jonathan: “The committee of safety was consequently assembled, and it was determined, that for the security of the township, the captain should be put in gaol, and forfeit all right to his exchange, unless he married me: in this dilemma, Seeclear Sedley chose rather to become a sober husband, and I am now the captain’s lady at your service.” Later, Desire unaccountably shows up in the jail cell next to Jonathan and digs a passageway between their cells. She relays news of Seeclear’s murder while defending her from sexual threats by an Irish soldier; how she was forced to live with the Irishman until he was hanged as a deserter; and how she was then taken captive by a Hessian mercenary from whom she eventually escapes. Finally, Desire locates a relation of her former husband’s in a Boston jail, but when the cousin escapes, Desire is accused of assisting him. Consequently, she suffers tarring and feathering and is put in prison for her supposed offense. While in jail, Desire restores Jonathan to her embraces and adds the jailor to her increasing list of lovers. Although she is only a minor character and clearly operates outside the bounds of socially prescribed feminine modesty, Desire Slawbunk, like Defoe’s Moll Flanders before her, is a survivor and an adventuress.
She always seems to land on her feet. I cannot help admiring Desire’s pluck, but she is certainly not a model of appropriate behavior or a satisfactory stand-in for the nation. US readers in 1787 would be understandably reluctant to valorize a racially marked, passionate, roguish woman such as Desire. *Corncob* is anti-American satire, then, not a genuine endorsement of colonial sexuality. After the sting of military defeat, it seems that a little brazen bundling humor may have provided a balm for at least some London readers.

In contrast to these condescending British portraits of Yankee bundling, Cameron Nickels claims that the rustic Yankee stock character, “Jonathan,” “had become ... the archetypal American, the embodiment of the common man”; moreover, Jonathan’s predilection for bundling and his bumpkinish courting style are central to his characterization. Although Nickels does not frame Jonathan’s representativeness as a contrapuntal revaluing of colonial provinciality, his study usefully identifies bundling as a key feature of his representativeness. For a look at how Americans attempt to claim Yankee provincial lovemaking as heritage, Thomas Fessenden’s popular 1795 broadside “Jonathan’s Courting, or, The Country Lovers” provides an arch example: “And now the people went to bed: / They guessed for what he’d come, sir; / But Jonathan was much afraid, / and wish’d himself at home, sir / ... / Sal cast a sheep’s eye at the dunce, / Then turn’d towards the fire, / He muster’d courage, all at once, / And hitch’d a little nigher.” Far bolder than her “sparking” partner, Sally teases Jonathan until he begins to twitch with nervous energy, leading Sally to respond by dousing Jonathan with a bucket of water. In short, Fessenden depicts Jonathan as an incompetent lover. This popular broadside was frequently anthologized in later nineteenth-century collections of American literature. Fusing this protracted moment of bungled bundling to the tune of “Yankee Doodle,” Fessenden’s celebration of colonial provinciality resonated with the historical weight of revolutionary patriotism and victory against the British.

The dilemma posed by using provincial folk culture to establish a colonial identity is that it risks presenting all Americans as naïve and rustic. Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast* (1787) registers this problem by comparing the courtship styles of stock characters such as Jonathan, the typical rustic Yankee, with the respectable Captain Manly and the foppish Billy Dimple. Tyler’s Jonathan speaks in crude dialect and his uncouth manners are humorously out of fashion; he finds urban customs and manners altogether incomprehensible. After unsuccessfully wooing a city housemaid, Jonathan declares: “Gor! she’s gone off in a swinging
passion, before I had time to think of consequences. If this is the way with your city ladies, give me the twenty acres of rock, the Bible, the cow, and Tabitha, and a little peaceable bundling.”

Of course, while Jonathan’s bundling might serve as an “indigenous” source of American identity and cultural traditions, Jonathan is not the hero of Tyler’s play. Instead, Captain Manly embodies the best of American masculinity in his sentiment, virtue, and class standing. As Cameron Nickels comments, “The more identifiable and thus indigenous those qualities were made . . . the more clearly they represented social, cultural, and even political distinctions that were undesirable.”

Claiming bundling proves a double-edged sword in that it promotes US distinctiveness by admitting its own provinciality—even Tyler could not avoid a postcolonial anxiety that “Jonathan” and his bundling would be criticized as outré in Europe.

Tyler walks a middle path by maintaining the tensions between “bumkinish” bundling and the fashionable cosmopolitan culture of sensibility circulating in the Atlantic world. With Manly as the hero, Tyler essentially has it both ways by including a stock Jonathan—a nod to colonial heritage—while clearly endorsing the more sophisticated masculinity of Manly. But the sharp class divisions Tyler depicts between bundlers and nonbundlers may not be entirely accurate. For although many accounts represent bundling as a primarily lower-class, folk practice, even the future president John Adams recommended that when practiced with discretion, couples could benefit from the test of compatibility it provided. And, during the same year that Adams and his future fiancée, Abigail Smith, went on a seemingly unchaperoned weekend trip together, he wrote that he could “not wholly disapprove of bundling.”

With no proof that the future first couple actually bundled, we must instead be satisfied with the fact that even an ambitious man like Adams found some charm in the idea of bundling.

In *A History of New York* (1809), Washington Irving continues the satiric treatment of bundling, although he manages this satire in such a clever contrapuntal twist as to reverse many condescending British attitudes about the supposed cultural inferiority of the former colonies. Writing as Diedrich Knickerbocker, Irving humorously ascribes both the population growth and peculiar characteristics of the “Yankee race” to New England bundling: “This amazing increase may, indeed, be partly ascribed to a singular custom prevalent among them, commonly known by the name of bundling—a superstitious rite observed by the young people of both sexes, with which they usually terminated their festivities,
and which was kept up with religious strictness by the more bigoted part of the community.”

Irving’s obviously biased Knickerbocker describes bundling in titillating, yet oblique terms. This “singular custom” is not only “superstitious” and “primitive,” but it also serves more generally as a representative species of regional culture—that is, Yankee “shrewdness” in bargaining: “Thus early did this cunning and ingenious people display a shrewdness of making a bargain which has ever since distinguished them, and a strict adherence to the good old vulgar maxim about ‘buying a pig in a poke.’” Knickerbocker polarizes upstart invading Yankees against previous generations of Dutch populations of New York by giving each group distinctive, if unflattering, features. In Knickerbocker’s assessment, Yankee courtship perversely begins where “ours” ends; that is, in bed. As an “indispensable preliminary,” bundling prioritizes sexual intimacy and physical compatibility; yet, in Knickerbocker’s humorously biased account, Yankee bundling is morally suspect. The latent irony, here, is that despite its morally suspect nature, bundling is particularly generative. Knickerbocker claims:

To this sagacious custom, therefore, do I chiefly attribute the unparalleled increase of the Yanokie or Yankee race: for it is a certain fact, well authenticated by court records and parish registers, that wherever the practice of bundling prevailed, there was an amazing number of sturdy brats annually born unto the state, without the license of the law or the benefit of clergy. Neither did the irregularity of their birth operate in the least to their disparagement. On the contrary, they grew up a long-sided, raw-boned, hardy race of whalers, wood-cutters, fishermen, and pedlars, and strapping corn-fed wenches, who, by their united efforts, tended marvelously toward peopling those notable tracts of country called Nantucket, Piscataway, and Cape Cod.

With a good deal of tongue in his cheek, Irving via Knickerbocker shows how bundling not only produces “sturdy brats,” it also produces a distinct, local culture with its own sexual codes and customs.

In contrast to charges of New World degeneracy posed by the French natural historian Count Buffon, for instance, who hypothesized that the cold North American climate decreased sexual libido, shrinking both the stature and the population size of all North American life, Irving insists that colonial courtship practices produce an abundant population. Far from something to shrink at, Irving jokes, colonial America’s supposed sexual and moral degeneracy *generates* a distinctly Yankee race with its own “singular” customs. Despite the custom’s negative
reception by European travel writers, Irving recognizes that bundling is an authentic source of US difference—even if that difference is valued negatively in Europe. Echoing Buffon, British lieutenant Thomas Anburey’s assessment of Americans’ “cold” sexual constitution could not be further from the truth, Knickerbocker retorts, as he describes Yankees as a passionate “race of brisk, likely, pleasant-tongued varlets,” who “soon seduced the light affections of the simple damsels from their ponderous Dutch gallants.”

Indeed, Knickerbocker’s “brisk” Yankees make quick work of courting in order to get on to the more serious business of squatting on Dutch New Yorkers’ lands. Through ingenious satire, Irving transforms Anburey’s report on the “unaccountable” custom into the site of a distinctive local romantic tradition, “brats” and all.

Where Jonathan Corncob gives us salacious detail, Irving couples quasi-ethnographic accounts of bundling with Yankee stereotypes to “authenticate” America’s unique romantic heritage. Irving ups the ante on Knickerbocker’s credulous historical account when he humorously reverses bundling’s actual origins from the Old World to the New. In open defiance of common knowledge that bundling was adapted from the Dutch practice of queesting, Knickerbocker argues that, in fact, obnoxious Yankees teach the Dutch to bundle rather than the other way around. When it comes to bundling, Knickerbocker explains, American colonials are the innovators: “Among other hideous customs . . . [Yankees] attempted to introduce . . . [was] bundling, which the Dutch lasses of the [New] Nederlandts, with that eager passion for novelty and foreign fashions natural to their sex, seemed very well inclined to follow, but that their mothers, being more experienced in the world, and better acquainted with men and things, strenuously discountenanced all such outlandish innovations.”

Colonizing logic dictates that Europe is the source of “civilized” culture. By denying that colonial peoples possess their own civilized culture, the metropole benefits by selling consumer luxuries to eager colonials anxious about their own supposed lack of culture. In his humorous reversal of the origins of bundling, Irving unseats Europe as the generative site of culture by pointing to the “innovation” of Yankee bundling. When it comes to love, Yankees have creativity and a growing population on their side. Of course, in Knickerbocker’s representation Yankee bundling is not civilized; nevertheless, it is an export commodity, taken up by the Dutch. In Irving’s savvy hands, distinctive Yankee heritage becomes a complex vehicle for debating the sources and meanings of culture.
Atlantic Currents of Seduction: Connecting the Local and the Global

If bundling receives ambiguous support from John Adams, Royall Tyler, and others, we might characterize it as an early and unwieldy form of local color writing, rather dangerously advertising its own provinciality. As such it offers only a limited regionalism, rather than the patriotic nationalism demanded by Channing and others. As authors recognize the problems of promoting their own provinciality, bundling does not make its way into the larger repertoire of American literature and seems to fade away in actual practice as well. The historian Richard Godbeer has a different explanation for bundling’s disappearance at the turn of the nineteenth century. He argues for a linear progression from previously permissive attitudes toward bundling that gradually give way to a “widespread anxiety about the vulnerability of women,” manifest in the prevalence of seduction literature in the 1790s. However, Alan Taylor suggests yet another explanation: “A more satisfactory explanation for the apparent coexistence of pragmatic courtship [embodied in bundling] and literary hysteria [seduction fiction] is that they derived from, and spoke to, two different generations in two distinct social orbits: one mid-eighteenth-century, rural, and traditional; the other late-eighteenth-century, cosmopolitan, and upwardly mobile. . . . The print media spoke first and foremost to the middle-class Americans who longed to perfect the manners and the morality that comprised ‘gentility’—a standard that derived from an idealized image of the British gentry as found in Jane Austen’s novels.”

I tend to agree with Taylor, although on this last point, I would suggest that the fictional models are a slightly older set of sentimental novelists still popular in the United States: Richardson and Sterne. American readers infatuated with Charlotte Temple prefer the more direct confrontation with seduction initiated by Richardson over the more subtle seduction subplots found in Austen.

Seduction fiction in the vein of Samuel Richardson favors the machinations of a powerful male who victimizes a virtuous female, undeserving of such treatment. As Cathy Davidson notes, “women are seduced in the novel[s] not by their own uncontrollable desire but by the verbal chicanery of men.” While this might suggest that women were powerless dupes to rakish men, many authors of seduction fiction encouraged women readers to see through a seducer’s duplicitous words, to be cautious, and even to educate themselves against such seductive arts. As many literary critics have argued, the theme of vulnerable women was es-
especially appealing to US readers who saw their new political situation in such seduction scenarios; as John Adams observed, “Democracy is Love-lace, and the people are Clarissa.”

More recently, though, scholars of seduction fiction have pushed back at these nation-centered and US-centric interpretations. For instance, Toni Bowers recovers a long history of British seduction stories stretching back to the seventeenth century, a timely reminder that seduction themes have a long provenance before the emergence of the United States or US reading publics. In his deft account of Richardson’s popularity in the colonial and early national United States, Leonard Tennenhouse argues that American fiction is deeply indebted to British literary traditions; so much so that Tennenhouse argues it fostered diasporic ties well into the nineteenth century. Rather than a specifically homegrown plot or readerly priority, seduction fiction registers a cosmopolitan sensibility that exceeds the borders of the United States. As Bowers and Chico argue, seduction and sentiment belong instead to “synergistically” connected eighteenth-century Atlantic readers and their worlds.

Tracing the development of the early American novel in an Atlantic world-system, Steven Shapiro similarly claims that national frameworks are inadequate to the task of meaningfully accounting for the changes in the early American novel. Shapiro identifies the difficult ruptures in colonial structures of feeling caused by the revolution and explores how traditional forms of communication were no longer adequate to convey new postrevolutionary patterns of thought. At the same time, new forms and conventions of expression had not yet emerged to describe postrevolutionary social relations. Shapiro convincingly locates this problematic transition period in the United States alongside a larger Atlantic world geoculture organized around sensibility, sensational consumption, slavery, and sentimental cultural productions, such as novels. In brief, Shapiro notes how a merchant class largely outside of the revolution-ary politics of the 1770s and 1780s eschewed nationalist discourses that alienated potential trade relations, instead adapting “older forms of expression, like those caught within the slightly obsolete British and French sentimental novel, to represent their anxieties and experiences.” US readers’ embrace of seduction fiction and its cosmopolitan morality appears to be not only a salient metaphor for US political anxieties, but also an avenue for displaying one’s knowledge and performance of already established currents of European taste. Oddly, seduction fiction was a safely approved vehicle for the demonstration of cosmopolitan sensibility, whereas bundling still invited European smirks. For Ameri-
cans who hoped to participate in Atlantic world mercantile exchange, adapting cosmopolitan forms and conventions of sentiment proved more advantageous than provincial or national forms of expression.

This perspective helps to explain how Susanna Rowson’s most famous novel, *Charlotte Temple* (1791), a relative flop upon its original publication in London, became a US best seller reprinted 161 times. In the ample extant commentary on *Charlotte Temple*, critics have largely overlooked the novel’s surprising lack of attention to its transatlantic settings. For instance, Rowson does not capitalize on her firsthand experiences of Atlantic crossings; instead, the Atlantic is more of an allegorical divide between Charlotte’s innocent past and troubled future. In every respect, the spaces of England and America are culturally and geographically indistinct. My point is that unlike the provincially located activity of bundling, seduction is not associated with a specific place or time. This lack of specificity proves an asset as the novel’s solicitation of a cosmopolitan sensibility allowed US readers to feel themselves part of a larger network of social relations across disputed borders.

Political differences do not prevent sentimental readers from sharing emotional bonds forged through sympathy with Charlotte, but most important, those emotional bonds are not dependent on geography. Instead of a regionally limiting and provincially marked romantic practice such as bundling, many US writers and readers preferred to tread familiar novelistic ground by reframing seduction stories for American readers.

Compared to Rowson’s indistinct transatlantic settings, Martha Meredith Read’s lesser-known *Margaretta; or, The Intricacies of the Heart* (1807) expands the arena of seduction to encompass a larger circuit of the Atlantic world. Read’s eponymous heroine faces sexual coercion and assault first in rural Maryland, and then again in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Saint-Domingue, and England, before finally marrying and moving to the idyllic Susquehanna Valley. Although these various settings are far from fully developed chronotopes, Read gives each setting a level of detail that infuses her endless cycle of seductions with some variety. Because *Margaretta* is an epistolary novel, each setting gains a distinctness through Margaretta’s first-person observations. Much like Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, Margaretta’s heroine is a strikingly attractive country girl whose manners and beauty draw the attention of a socially superior set. Without getting too mired in the plot, Margaretta, like Richardson’s Pamela, relies on her own ingenuity and the kindness of strangers to escape repeated assaults on her virtue; and, like Pamela, she is rewarded by a loving marriage to a man who has learned to properly prize that virtue. If in every
part of the Atlantic world Margaretta faces sexual assault, it is also true, as Richard Pressman observes, that as a symbol of the vulnerable nation, Margaretta is never penetrated. Read adapts Richardson’s slightly outmoded epistolary style, recasting his claustrophobic fantasy of English bourgeois ascendency in a wider Atlantic world. Read rejects the provincialism of Tyler or Washington, but she does not reject the idyllic fantasy of a safe and conservative US elite. As it turns out, Margaretta is an aristocrat by birth, lost to her English family by their own snobbish pride and misfortune. At the novel’s end, she finds her true family, her true love, and her true place ensconced among the (Federalist) US elite. In contrast to Margaretta’s impenetrable vision of a consolidated United States, in the final section of this chapter, I explore how and why Obadiah Benjamin Franklin Bloomfield instead ventriloquizes the many cosmopolitan and local varieties of romantic discourse proliferating in early national print culture.

Courting Heteroglossia: Representing Romantic Discourses in the Early United States

Published in Philadelphia and attributed to copyright holder Edward Franklin, *The Life and Adventures of Obadiah Benjamin Franklin Bloomfield, M.D.: A Native of the United States of America, Now on the Tour of Europe. Interspersed with Episodes, and Remarks, Religious, Moral, Public Spirited, and Humorous* (1818) is a text keenly aware of the ways that romantic practices are seen as evidence of national customs and shared national identity. More than this, though, *Obadiah* demonstrates how a cacophony of romantic discourses from the protoethnographic reports of marriage-rites anthologies to the melodrama of seduction fiction seek to locate an individual (male) subject within a nascent national romantic tradition. A key feature of Obadiah’s quirky self-fashioning narrative is his engagement with and literary imitations of Benjamin Franklin, his namesake, and British sentimentalist Laurence Sterne; I do not address these features of the text here as this chapter attempts a more narrow consideration of Obadiah’s prolific romantic discourses, including its fascinating scene of bungled bundling. Like Jonathan Corncob, Obadiah is a picaresque novel with little in the way of an organized plot. The novel follows the professional as well as the romantic ups and downs of its title character from his early manhood, as he strives to fulfill his father’s desire to hear him preach a sermon, to choosing a career as a medical doctor, and, finally, to obtain-
ing the wealth and status that enables his family to tour Europe (at which point the text concludes). Unlike the unreliable Corncob, Obadiah is a generally likeable fellow who unfortunately experiences many romantic difficulties, including a few premarital scrapes and three marriages. Even this brief summary suggests how, like Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749), Obadiah gradually matures from his early picaresque ramblings toward a kind of respectability, and how this respectability depends on the erotic, sentimental, and legitimating discourses of sex and marriage for achieving status in the Atlantic imperial world.

What makes Obadiah stand out from obvious male precursors such as Tom Jones or Tristram Shandy is the novel’s obvious yoking of its protagonist’s individual maturation with that of the new nation. Somewhat awkwardly combining the features of a picaresque ramble with the masculine novel of development—sometimes also called an apprentice novel—*Obadiah* strives for a cosmopolitan sensibility that connects its protagonist’s waggish romantic adventures to the book’s not altogether settled conclusion: for in taking his family on a tour of Europe, Obadiah proves himself still a rambler, though now a slightly tamer, cosmopolitan family man.

Hyperaware of the competing conventions of romance in this period, *Obadiah* humorously moves between the expected objectivity of the marriage-rites anthologies and the sentimental and melodramatic expressions of courtship and seduction fiction with maximum ironic effect. For example, in the novel’s first chapter, Obadiah interrupts the story of his birth (à la *Tristram Shandy*) for a long diatribe on “Hottentot” courtship rituals. This ethnic group from South Africa known today as the Khoikhoi was frequently depicted in the racist language of the period as subhuman. Saartjie “Sarah” Baartman, the so-called Venus of Hottentot, was exhibited in freak shows across Great Britain and France; her body was the subject of prurient curiosity among European intellectuals and laypeople alike. Although the story of Baartman’s humiliating exploitation is well documented in contemporary scholarship, racist stereotypes about the “crude” customs of “Hottentots” were widely circulated well before Baartman’s exhibition, in part due to marriage-rites anthologies such as *Hymen: An Accurate Description of the Ceremonies Used in Marriage, by Every Nation in the Known World* (1760), discussed in chapter 1. In imitation of this genre and of the dialogues of *Tristram Shandy*, Obadiah describes “Hottentot” courtship in a dialogue with a curious female interlocutor. Much of the humor in this scene, racist as it is, relies on Obadiah’s use of the protoethnographic conventions of the
marriage-rites genre and its naïve Shandian female interlocutor for com
dic effect. The dialogue begins with the unnamed female asking, “Hot
tentot! Pray what description of people are they? I don’t recollect ever to have heard of them before?” To which Obadiah replies: “Your curiosity is a very laudable one, my dear, and I will cheerfully gratify it. You must know, then, that the Hottentots are a sort of uncivilized copper-colored folk, more remarkable for their personal cleanliness than the most true of all true musselman, or the French, or the Italians; insomuch as they make it an invariable rule—to bathe a dozen times a day—comb their heads a dozen times a day—perfume themselves a dozen times a day—and, in brief, to do every thing else which is done by human beings in the same ratio.” Initially focused on customs and habits, Obadiah describes Khoi
dikhoi peoples as excessive, even exaggerated, but in this respect they are not much different than similarly stereotyped representations of Muslim or French peoples. The last italicized phrase in the preceding quotation works as a bit of a wink, wink, nudge, nudge, verging on the borders of politeness acceptable in mixed company. Obadiah moves from customs to observations on Khoikhoi bodies, but his commentary works less to racialize Khoikhoi bodies than to satirize the inappropriate curiosity of the female interlocutor: “Moreover, they are made pretty much as we are, having heads, and legs, and arms, &c. procreate in the same manner, and worship gods of their own manufacture.” Not receiving the information she desires, Obadiah’s female friend asks more directly, “But you have not explained to us how they manage their love matters, which is a primary consideration to most ladies.” Obadiah proceeds to lampoon “Hottentot” lovemaking and his readers’ curiosity about “every thing else which is done by human beings” in his fictional protoethnographic account: “You are not to suppose, their extraordinary ablutions to the contrary notwithstanding, that they conduct in that all important and ticklish affair as we do.” In contrast to the “nonsense” of Western court
dship, “a Hottentot gallant” needs merely to “obtain his own consent and go a wooing, and he is certain of taking a wife to his bosom the self-same night.” In ever more ludicrous detail, Obadiah claims: a “[Hottentot] youth resolved to lie alone no longer, rigs himself out in his best attire, borrows the youngest infant which is come-at-able, repairs to the residence of the object of his choice, presents it with a grin, after making one of his very best bows, left foot foremost; and awaits in silence. If his addresses are agreeable, his flame takes the child, eagerly kisses [it] . . . smiles, nods her head, and then squats, body and all, as gracefully as does a hare when he is disposed to put the hounds at fault. The ceremony is now over.” With
invented phrases such as “come-at-able” and niggling details such as “left foot foremost,” Obadiah capitalizes on the exotic reports contained in the marriage-rites genre to satirize not just the “Hottentots,” but readers’ insatiable curiosity about other peoples’ sexual lives. Generalizing from a specific and obviously absurd instance, Obadiah’s report imitates the supposedly neutral protoethnographic language that, in fact, animalizes non-European others. However, the humor lies in recognizing these conventions as conventions particular to describing cultural others; and, of course, in the literalizing of a baby positioned between the nubile couples’ coupling.

Obadiah’s send-up of the marriage-rites anthology has particular purchase for a fledgling nation such as the United States, bent on articulating its own distinct national traditions. Obadiah’s marriage-rites satire questions the way these texts comparatively interpret particular details of courtship rituals as evidence of civility or savagery. Indeed, Obadiah renders the polite conventions of Anglo-American courtship such as attendance at balls and the writing of love letters into a kind of “drudgery,” the “nonsense of our own creation.” If, in Obadiah’s report, “Hottentot” courtship rituals are silly, so, too, are “our” customs. This sleight of hand does more than simply ridicule contemporary “love-making” practices, however. It overtly situates US courtship traditions among an unspecified “we” who are different from those “uncivilized” races of “Hottentots.” We, Americans, possess romantic practices; we use those practices as the basis for cultural comparisons; and we assert our civility through those comparisons.

Like the literalness of the “Hottentot” baby in the previous scene—a custom that strips away the “nonsense” of balls and love letters—humorous representations of bundling by Irving, Tyler, and others insist on the no-nonsense way Yankee bundlers try out a relationship before marriage. From this perspective, bundling simplifies sentimental novelistic conventions in favor of the practicalities of compatibility such as living and sleeping with another human being. However, the generic divide between satiric prose by Irving, Corncob, and Obadiah and sentimental fiction modeled after Richardson was deep. Perhaps another reason that it is difficult to find novels that deal with bundling was because it was so challenging to meld the satiric with the sentimental relations favored in this period. That both Jonathan Corncob and Obadiah draw on Sternean style suggests the ways these texts tried to meld the often crude sexual jesting of Sterne with the popular sentimentality he achieved. If Obadiah draws on familiar marriage-rites comparisons, he ultimately rejects the
evaluative goals of such comparison. Rather, our narrator adds a dizzying array of romantic practices and discourses to his narrative.

In true Shandian fashion, I have left my real target—bundling—standing all this while and it is high time I return to it. In yet another dialogic scene, this time between Obadiah and a curious “Yankey,” Obadiah begins a long-promised bundling episode with a teasing tautology: “In imitation of that great transatlantic luminary, George Alexander Stevens, . . . who learnedly observes in his profound dissertation on law—that—‘the law is the law’—I—Obadiah, junior, announce without fear of contradiction, to Jew and Gentile, Mahometan and Pagan, that bundling—is bundling!” In a tangle of words, ironically staged to free himself from contradiction, Obadiah explains that bundling “—is bundling.” The pause indicated by the dash brilliantly conveys the anticipation Obadiah protracts from his “Yankey” friend. Not surprisingly, the “Yankey” angrily retorts that he will not be “hoax[ed]”: “You promised us a chapter on bundling, and I will have my pennyworth—I guess as how I will.” Teasing still, Obadiah continues, “I can readily perceive by the contour of your phiz. my dear half Yorkshire—half Yankey friend, that you are dying to know what bundling is, and [are] considerably embarrassed thereat; because the wholesome practice is kept up in your Yankey state of Connecticut to this day.”54 Here’s a true delight, Obadiah seems to suggest, a Yankee “green” to the arts of bundling.

In lieu of a more direct definition, Obadiah circumvents the Yankee’s straightforward demand for information by using a personal anecdote; here, I let Obadiah tell his own story: “In my youthful days I set out on a visit of pleasure to New York, accompanied by a friend, much about my own age. . . . We were determined not to let so fair an opportunity of being eye witnesses of the manner in which the humbler class BUNDLE in that state.” Obadiah proceeds to relate how he and his friend journey on foot to a farmer’s house, “who was said to have some beautiful daughters”;55 they arrive about sunset and receive an uncertain welcome. Ingratiating themselves by paying a great deal for their dinners and throwing out compliments all around, they are finally invited to stay the night. The Yankee interlocutor’s suspense has reached such a pitch that he interrupts with little ribald replies in the story’s rising action:

There were but two rooms in the house. (Yankey. So much the better.) We were directed to sleep next to the chimney; the three girls next to the chamber, and the two young men, their brothers, in the centre; as a barrier betwixt us, I presume. The dame retired to the chamber with the younger chil-
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children, and was soon followed by her husband, after he had carefully outed the fire and candles, and apologized to us for the necessity he was under of requiring us to undress in the dark. And that is what is termed bundling!!!
(Yankey. True. And I guess as how you both walked in your sleep, ha, ha, ha. Author. That’s tellings!!!)\textsuperscript{56}

In contrast to the Yankee’s dialect and vulgar interjections, Obadiah’s mostly urbane self-presentation shows him to be more cosmopolitan, but also more calculating. Even if his bundling is bungled, Obadiah presents himself as an adventurer in pursuit of sexual escapades. As such, he is less like the bumbling Jonathan of Thomas Fessenden’s “Jonathan’s Courting” and more like Fielding’s likeable rogue, Tom Jones. However, Obadiah’s bundling episode also achieves—precisely through its stock characters, regional dialect, and particular country customs—a limited form of local color, which precisely distinguishes it from competing British novels. Bundling signals our waggish protagonist’s connection to a productive, prosperous, and “indigenous” colonial American culture.

Thus far I have argued that bundling functions in early national US writing as one particularly resonant example of a distinctive US romantic practice. Of course, bundling was neither local to New England (as it was adapted from the Dutch practice of queesting) nor representative of the entire United States. However, by repeatedly citing bundling as “native,” local culture authors such as Tyler and Irving infuse bundling with the mythic national status they sought to establish. Anything but simple, the bundling references traced here resist Old World claims of America’s supposed degeneracy by insisting on the (re)productive powers of local customs such as bundling to generate an “authentic” American culture. These references actively reverse the colonial logic that locates civilized romantic culture exclusively in the metropole, demonstrating how colonial courtship practices could emphasize romantic compatibility and intimacy over the supposedly mercenary motives of Old World marriages. In each case, US writers claim bundling as a site of American difference; even satiric bundling scenes could be opportunities for developing a distinct US literary mode.

In bungling nationalist attempts to trope bundling as an “authentic” American custom—this Yankee doesn’t even know about bundling—Obadiah reveals a more complex consideration of US decolonization as a slow process that requires trial and error and a good sense of humor. The nothingness of this bundling episode suggests how early national authors groped in the dark, imitating, multiplying, adapting, and impro-
vising their way toward what Joseph Roach calls “full-blown myths of legitimacy and origin.” What *Obadiah* does instead is slot bundling next to satiric marriage-rites entries, exposés of “dark houses,” and Obadiah’s three sentimental marriages. The novel revels in what Bakhtin names one of the distinctive features of the genre, its heteroglossia, or “many-voiced” perspective. Obadiah’s many narrative intrusions, jokes, and plot disruptions might seem to work against it, but this rowdy celebration of proliferating romantic discourses simultaneously undercuts the ideological structures of gender and sexual normativity implicit in these discourses simply by illustrating their competing conventions and aims. No coherent male subject could emerge from such a cacophony, *Obadiah* seems to argue. The pleasure this novel takes in its ostentatious mocking of all romantic conventions makes *Obadiah* a positively queer text. Ranging from the protoethnographic to the erotic to the sentimental, *Obadiah*’s complicated interweaving of competing romance conventions provides its protagonist with a story of the difficulties in obtaining married respectability.

Historians argue that after the revolution, the founders replace the parent-child metaphor so useful for describing the relation of empire to colony with a marital metaphor to describe its citizen’s voluntary union and contractual consent. Courtship and marriage are seen as “a training ground of citizenly virtue”; intimate family bonds and the experiences of governing a family would, it was thought, prepare men for the more abstract allegiances and political duties owed to the nation. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon argues that in this same period, “marriage functions as both an intensely private relation and as a form of public ratification” that consolidates the liberal subject’s identity through the community’s approval of his or her private decisions. The paradox that Dillon uncovers is how “making the correct choice means exercising individual consent in relation to socially constructed norms.” If courtship novels in this period inevitably end in marriage and, generally, in marriage founded in mutual affection and consent, the events leading up to marriage track the young person’s development from dependence and immaturity to mature, married adult. The courtship plot serves as a kind of education narrated as development, with a telos not only of obtaining a respectable partner, but of having properly performed one’s gender so as to acquire a suitable partner. As Dillon argues, early national marriage is a “gendering machine: the discourse of marriage and marital passion produces differently sexed bodies—it masculinizes men and feminizes women in an increasingly significant fashion.” The plots and characters of court-
ship novels serve as romantic scripts in this gendering machine, but as Dillon explains, the results of this discourse operate differently on men and women.

*Obadiah* suggests that before marriage and social responsibility, a man might be allowed a little romantic adventuring. We have seen Obadiah rather unsuccessfully attempt a bit of bundling; another adventure draws on the conventions of seduction fiction even as it reformulates those conventions. After a round of preaching on the Methodist circuit where Obadiah has been secretly training in order to fulfill his father’s desire to hear him preach a sermon, Obadiah stays the night at a simple farmhouse and becomes infatuated with the farmer’s daughter, Mary. Like Mary Magdalene, this Mary prepares to wash Obadiah’s feet, stirring up inappropriate desire. Obadiah coyly dodges Mary’s intentional expressions of desire as “accidental” rather than practiced, and his own excitement at the encounter obviates any serious consideration of Mary as sexual agent: “I retired to my apartment, leaving the door open.—Mary soon glided through, and latched it after her—accidentally, no doubt, for she did it without noise. She is upon her knees before me—I can now look upon her without dread of detection.” The odd shifts between verb tenses heighten the sexual tension as Obadiah—presumably in the act of writing—imagines Mary in the present tense “upon her knees before me.” In the heat of the moment, he acknowledges his feelings of guilt and attempts to dodge them: “The icy heart of a hermit of ninety would have been thawed, and he would have conceited himself nineteen.” No one can blame him for what follows, he suggests. The rest of this scene recalls Sterne’s teasing conclusion to *A Sentimental Journey* when Yorick breaks in mid-sentence as he catches hold of the Fille de Chambre’s [———] as Obadiah interrupts his description with a series of dashes reminiscent of Sterne’s evocative groping conclusion: “—The washing proceeded but slowly.—It was a boisterous night—a sudden blast found its way through the pine logs whereof the house was built—and—the—candle—was—extinguished!!!”

Like Sterne, who is explicitly named in the opening “Advertisement” as a literary influence, our narrator leaves us to imagine the ensuing scenario for ourselves by promptly concluding the chapter. The scene perversely implicates the reader for its erotic content as he or she imaginatively fills in the dark space created by the extinguished candle. The suspense mounts when, on turning the page, the reader discovers an entirely unrelated chapter titled “The Enchanted Hat.” Written from an completely separate point of view, the story of the enchanted hat follows a rogue
English sailor who swindles two Jewish brothers by leading them to purchase his “enchanted” hat. As a standalone piece that is not referred to again, the story seems inserted purely to delay the conclusion of the Mary affair. Only reading between the lines can we tie the not-so-enchanted hat to Obadiah’s guilty sexual conquest. He tells us, when he resumes the narrative, that far from tarnishing Mary’s virtue, he discovers that she has “washed the feet” of several other Methodist preachers. Thus, he absolves himself of the crime of seducing an innocent woman. Obadiah’s disillusionment with an “enchanted” object spares him the guilt required for the act of seduction. Obadiah teases readers attuned to the usual melodrama of the seduction novel by infusing the narrative with the eroticism of that genre while rejecting its harsh condemnations of premarital sex. Mary does not “fall”; Obadiah does not waste his energy on unnecessary regrets.

While the complicated plot continues to twist, turn, and digress, Obadiah’s sexual adventuring with Mary as well as the aforementioned bundling scene suggests the episodic picaresque nature of his romantic ramblings. Obadiah’s encounter with Mary is merely a placeholder on the seemingly inevitable path to marriage. However, Obadiah’s progress toward maturation occurs in a series of fits and starts as he marries three times: first, the sensual and sentimental Louisa, who unfortunately dies in childbirth; next, the passionate Maria, who turns out to be an adulteress; and finally, Sophia, a worthy partner for the now steady and respectable Obadiah. Tried and tested, first by grief and then by cuckoldry, Obadiah proves himself a worthy partner with unfortunate luck in love. But the plot’s digressions tend, in Tristram Shandy fashion, to divert us from the seemingly inevitable respectability of marriage toward an acknowledgment of the work that a variety of social conventions, including novels and other discursive traditions, play in this gendering machine, to use Dillon’s term.

Over the course of the novel, Obadiah confesses to impetuous sexual desire, attempts to make amends for his early faults, and faithfully and lovingly performs his duties as a son, a husband, and father. Obadiah is not a bad guy, but his frequent ramblings and romantic digressions suggest that he is blown off course as easily as he switches between romantic discourses. Shaped by the gendering machine, Obadiah helps his readers to see its tools, especially in the form of conventional literary language. By the novel’s conclusion, Obadiah is a man with an independent fortune, a successful career, and a male heir. He has become a respectable male citizen, but that path has not been straight.
Obadiah walks a fine line in the way that it acknowledges and even pardons women’s sexual passions. Whereas it dismisses Mary as unworthy of any real guilt, it sanctions Obadiah’s initially adulterous relationship with his soon-to-be first wife, Louisa, because her first husband is an abusive scoundrel who quickly dies through no fault of either Obadiah or Louisa. All loveliness itself, Louisa is not a victim of Obadiah’s lust, nor a wicked wife. Rather, the text suggests that Louisa very much deserves love and Obadiah is the answer to her prayers. That she finds herself pregnant a little earlier than the wedding does not prove a cause for concern. Although she does die in childbirth, the novel does not make Louisa’s death a form of punishment for sexual sins. From Obadiah’s perspective, it is simple human tragedy. If the novel’s moral code condones Obadiah’s initial adulterous relationship with Louisa, it explicitly condemns Obadiah’s adulterous second wife, Maria, to a life of “dark houses” and, finally, death. Lacking the excuse of an abusive husband, Maria’s sexual crimes are compounded when she is caught in the act, then denies the entire business and engages her brother to duel for her supposed honor. When the truth comes out, Maria flees to New York, reduced to working in a “dark house” (something like a brothel) before Obadiah finally finds and forgives her on her deathbed. After all this loss, the reader feels that Obadiah deserves a lasting love. Although Sophia’s family initially rejects Obadiah because he is a poor tradesman’s son, they are soon persuaded of his worth and willingly consent to Obadiah’s third marriage. Successful in his career, in his friendships, and now in love, the plot appears, finally, to favor Obadiah—until rumors circulate that Obadiah’s second wife Maria has returned to sue him for bigamy. This last attack on Obadiah’s respectability actually lands him in prison, but Obadiah successfully proves this woman is an imposter.

With his marriage to Sophia back on firm legal terms, Obadiah prepares to take his whole family and a close friend to Europe, a trip that demonstrates both his wealth and his properly developed cosmopolitan taste. Weaving together popular early national romantic discourses in a queer narrative of personal development, Obadiah suggests that early national US romantic traditions are complicated acts of appropriation and reconfiguration, drawing on local, regional, multicultural, and transnational sources and styles. Not limited to the local, not adrift in a vague world of Atlantic seduction, full of cultural comparisons, bridging the ethnographic with the personal, Obadiah celebrates the cacophony of conventions past and present that comprise early American romantic sen-
sibilities. At times raucous and at other times sentimental, *Obadiah* is a text alive to the diversity of early American experiences. Studying its meanderings provides a necessarily different and, I hope, welcome perspective on the intersection of local and global romantic geographies in early US print culture.