Lost Boundaries: Carnivalizing Race and Sexuality in Tabitha Tenney’s *Female Quixotism*

“What she doin’ coming back here in dem overhalls? Can’t she find no dress to put on?”
—Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Though contemporaries, two authors could not be more disparate in political perspectives than Margareta Faugeres and Tabitha Tenney. Whereas Faugeres sought equality and often worked against the interests of the elite class into which she had been born, Tenney represents a more common example of an author who perpetuates a culture’s elitist and racist ideologies. While Tenney’s use of the picaresque allows her to challenge many boundaries of textual and cultural proprieties and even to argue in some ways for democratization, her identification of whiteness with superiority and privilege exposes an agenda that links her to the legal and political conservatism emerging at the end of the century.

An American Carnival

When Tabitha Gilman Tenney’s novel *Female Quixotism* was published in 1801, it joined a national voice of lament over the dangers of novel reading. The typical antinovel argument was that the genre’s romantic allurements would lead women away from the realities of their domestic responsibilities.
In *Female Quixotism*, however, Tenney used a comic, antiromantic stance in relation to novel reading to demonstrate the failed sense of democracy in the new republic. This debate about literary genres and content was part of the broader, volatile debates that emerged in the new nation at the turn of the century—debates over marketplace activities, free trade issues, national isolationism versus increased imperialistic endeavors, and the integration of private and public spheres that replicated models of national and international exchange. In *Female Quixotism* no element of citizenry escapes Tenney’s comic examination: “droll servants, earnest merchants, scheming scholars, and self-deluding gentry all get their fair share of ribbing.”¹ Tenney’s novelistic use of the carnivalesque exposes the realities of the new nation’s social order, especially as it oppressed and segregated its citizens by race, class, and gender. But there is also a bifurcated argument embedded in Tenney’s text—an argument that both exposes the failed sense of democracy in the new republic and simultaneously perpetuates the dominant culture’s encoding of racial and ethnic difference. In this seemingly paradoxical conflation of ideas, Tenney exemplifies the resisting/colonizer, the author who pushes boundaries for white women, exposing and challenging their oppression; yet she does so by denigrating women of color and individuals of the lower economic classes.

The significance of carnival in cultural studies is that, historically, it has always been linked to moments of social or political crises. It is not surprising, therefore, that carnivalesque images reemerge in post-Revolutionary U.S. literatures as the nation begins to define both its role in international affairs and the roles of its various citizens. In denoting the carnivalesque as a mode aligned with “the peculiar culture of the marketplace and of folk laughter with all its wealth of manifestations,” Mikhail Bakhtin argued that the carnivalesque in medieval and Renaissance literatures exposed the “two-world condition” of those cultures: officialdom and a world outside that officialdom, that is, a world of the people. This split between the elite and the masses was the discursive construct exposed by the Anti-Federalist, anticonstitutional faction in the volatile turn-of-the-century political struggles in the United States. It is important to note that while carnival resembles the spectacle, it is different in one significant way: “carnival . . . does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. . . . Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it. . . . During carnival time life is subject only to its laws.”² Freedom is embraced and all hierarchies are suspended; in its way, then, carnival is intended to constitute a truly democratic moment. Carnival is the surface landscape of Tenney’s novel. What lies beneath, as I will argue, is anything but democratic, and, wittingly or not, Tabitha Tenney captures a far clearer picture of the difference between theorizing democracy and its actualization.
Central to an understanding of the carnivalesque is its engagement with grotesque imagery, and Tenney’s main character in *Female Quixotism* may certainly, within her culture, be defined as a grotesque. She immerses herself in novel reading, deludes herself about a series of doomed romances, and, at the novel’s conclusion, opts for spinsterhood and contrition. She may be wiser, but she is still single; and in the new republic’s emphasis upon Republican Motherhood, that is a form of grotesque for the female sex. Yet it is important that in literature the carnivale-grotesque form evolved over time. In the era of Molière and Swift, this form functioned “to consecrate inventive freedom, . . . to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths.” In the late eighteenth century, however, a radical change took place. There evolved a movement away from the broader concepts of Rabelais and Cervantes to what Bakhtin terms “the new subjective grotesque.”3

Tabitha Tenney seems to have been well aware of the changes in the carnivale-grotesque; certainly, she contributed to its transformation. In the late eighteenth century the carnivale-grotesque became not an element of the people’s festival but rather “a private ‘chamber’ character. It became, as it were, an individual carnival, marked by a vivid sense of isolation.”4 In the years leading to the publication of *Female Quixotism*, the United States, under early Federalist rule, pursued an extreme isolationist ideology. The carnivalesque fit Tenney’s artistic needs, and it also engaged her political inclinations. What is crucial in this transformation of the genre is that the “principle of laughter which permeates the grotesque” (especially in relation to the bodily life) lost its regenerative power; the grotesque became an object of fear to be relayed by the author and assumed by the reader.5 One example of this change is the mask, which originally symbolized change and reincarnation and celebrated difference rather than uniformity. In the late eighteenth century, however, the mask became an instrument of deceit and secretiveness. The final change during Tenney’s time is that the carnival evolved into a nocturnal event, evoking all the themes of darkness, rather than embracing the symbolic implications of sunrise and morning as the earlier depiction of carnival had done.

Julia Kristeva has argued that carnivalesque discourse “breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest. There is no equivalence, but rather, identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official law”;6 however, we must embrace the carnivalesque with caution. As Mary Russo has noted, it can be employed as a panacea by a dominate culture rather than as a truly liberating vehicle.7 Carnival is a tool of authorities most often when the carnival is a ritual sanctioned by them. In *Female
Quixotism, it is precisely when Dorcasina Sheldon, the “private ‘chamber’ character,” stops reading and breaks with officialdom (in this instance, her father’s house) that Tenney depicts her as secretly engaging in the carnivalesque as a means of moving from the role of the subjected to that of the subject, to the position of reinscribing her world on her own terms. It is in the episodes that occur outside Mr. Sheldon’s house that Tenney interjects the issues of gender, race, and class, leading the reader into a recognition of how limited the so-called democratic reforms of the eighteenth century had actually been.

In Revolution and the Word, Cathy N. Davidson recognizes Female Quixotism as a picaresque novel. Typically, Davidson notes, the loose narrative form of the picaresque “allows a central character . . . to wander the margins of an emerging American landscape [and] to survey it in all its incipient diversity,” but since women’s mobility was severely restricted in the early Federal period, the female picara cannot meet this narrative criterion. Davidson asserts, therefore, that Dorcasina’s story does not challenge the status quo until the novel’s conclusion when she questions the nature of matrimony. I would argue, however, that the status quo for Anglo-American women is challenged throughout the novel—first, because the picaresque is itself a carnivalesque of the novel’s form, and second, because Dorcasina takes many “journeys” outside her domicile. Granted, these journeys may be only to an isolated grove or to a nearby town, but distance itself is insignificant in relation to the alternative experiences she encounters. In these journeys, the upper-class Dorcasina engages in relationships with members of every class of U.S. society, including her own Anglo-American household servants, African American “servants” whose domain lies within the Sheldon estate but not within the household itself, an Irish rogue, an enterprising prostitute, school teachers, and a barber. It seems far more radical to assert that this diversity lies within one’s own neighborhood than to assume that an audience will translate foreign experiences to a sense of the American polis.

In some respects, Female Quixotism foreshadows feminist and postmodern challenges to Enlightenment philosophies, especially the Enlightenment privileging of reason and science. In the era deemed the “Age of Reason,” Tabitha Tenney’s employment of the carnivalesque challenges cultural definitions of rationality itself, by both depicting the chaos that surrounds the aristocratic Sheldon domicile and exposing the class biases internalized in the celebration of “reason.” In the United States at the turn of the century, the voice of rationality was always deemed that of the white male aristocrat. Mr. Sheldon personifies this voice, and Dorcasina’s first love, Lysander, represents its perpetuation in the next generation of young, privileged males: “His person was noble
and commanding . . . and his address manly and pleasing. . . . His ideas of domestic happiness were just and rational.” Tenney depicts Lysander as the ideal of absolute patriarchy. She also satirizes the gendering of reason by Enlightenment philosophies. In contrast to Lysander, Tenney presents an alternative voice of reason in that of the Anglo-American servant Betty, Dorcasina’s lifelong companion. Throughout the novel, Betty’s intellectual, reasoning abilities are aligned not with issues of philosophy or overt politics but rather with her power to penetrate beneath the actions and the mask of propriety displayed by various characters in the novel. Rather than Dorcasina or Mr. Sheldon, it is Betty who discerns individuals’ “unmasked” natures and their degrees of reliability. It is Betty’s voice far more than Mr. Sheldon’s that Dorcasina needs to hear in order to escape her repeated cycle of misapplied love that results in emotional abuse and trauma. While the comic spirit of the carnival prevails, the pathos of Dorcasina’s repeated traumatic experiences suggests the very real consequences of the gendering of reason and the marginalization of women, even in their own homes and their own country.

Mr. Sheldon, an overindulgent parent, is never fully aware of his daughter’s beliefs and is rarely aware of her adventures. Betty, however, knows about Dorcasina’s actions, and she attempts to guide her away from self-defeating choices and toward a better sense of social reality. Tenney pushes the boundaries of rationality further, however, when she exposes the class-based consequences of Betty’s knowledge. The prevailing ideology of the Age of Reason held that rational thought and action would lead to the best possible political and social orders, yet despite Betty’s wisdom and social astuteness, her social class does not allow her to conquer prevailing misconceptions. The automatic devaluation of any expression by a person of her class is rendered both through her employers’ lack of adherence to her cautionary voice and, more explicitly, through a physical (bodily) suppression of Betty herself. In episode after episode, when Betty cautions her against a particular action, Dorcasina pursues her own desires—to her detriment, surely, but it is almost always Betty who must endure physical abuse for Dorcasina’s foolish actions. This abuse is rendered most explicitly when Dorcasina insists that Betty dress in Mr. Sheldon’s clothing and pretend to be Dorcasina’s lover. Betty had barely begun her impersonation when “she was interrupted . . . by the sudden appearance of Scipio, the gardener, Patrick, the boy, a white servant, and two or three labourers from the field,” all of whom chase her about the grounds, believing that she is “some evil minded person” who intended to steal Mr. Sheldon’s belongings. The episode ends when Dorcasina herself appears and exposes Betty’s identity, but Betty is left as the mortified object of her peers’ mirth, and she is seen at the end of the
scene “sinking with shame and vexation.” In other, similar episodes, Betty is repeatedly abandoned by Dorcasina in moments of physical combat that Dorcasina’s actions have created: several times Betty is beaten; in one episode her upper garments are stripped off her; and in another, the servant of Dorcasina’s latest lover “laid violent hands upon [Betty], pulled her hair, shook her, pinched her, and mauled her.” While there is always supposed to be a comic element to such scenes in the novel, the carnivalesque nature of these scenes exposes real consequences for the servant class due to antics perpetrated by the upper class. Dorcasina may be humiliated when she loses lover after lover, but it is Betty whose body is mauled and appropriated for her mistress’s use.

These episodes lead us to one of the most significant aspects of Tenney’s engagement with the carnivalesque in Female Quixotism. In an era of denial and suppression of female sexuality, the carnivalesque by its very nature allows for the exploration of sexuality. It is in this avenue of sexual exploration, too, that class and race distinctions are momentarily lost. The carnival is the time for cross-dressing and masquerading, and Female Quixotism is rife with instances of both activities which allow Tenney to explore themes of sexuality, themes that are banned in the father’s house and by the father’s law.

The Picaresque and the Sexualizing of American Women

While female sexuality was not a proper subject of public discourse by a woman in the early Federal period—indeed, women were still denied by many to have a sexual nature—the emphasis upon the conjunction of female sexuality and political disruption in the novel replicates an important aspect of Revolutionary and early Federal discourse. As Shirley Samuels has demonstrated, literary and pictorial images of the period’s national politics were played out on the bodies of women. In the years immediately leading to the Revolution, “the message of impending political violence is clearly conveyed through threatened sexual violence.” The message is most explicitly represented in the famous British cartoon “The Able Doctor, or America Swallowing the Bitter Draught” and in the shocking depiction of Mother England being sodomized while attempting to draw America back into the fold. Although the threat is against the colonists as a whole, in “The Able Doctor” it is played out on the body of the woman of color (“America” as figured in the native woman); in the cartoon, the doctor forces her to drink while another man pulls up her skirt and leeringly peeks beneath it. Both women are subjected to violation (Mother England at the moment of depic-
tion, and America by implication in the future alliance with France). Such depictions were rampant in the Revolutionary years and certainly impacted the early Federal period's movement to restore white women to inviolable status as icons of national honor through Republican Motherhood and True Womanhood ideologies.

Further, within scientific communities, another revolution took place in the eighteenth century: the revolution in views of sexuality. Republican Motherhood and True Womanhood ideologies controlled women's lives during the crucial years of national development because the ideologies were inculcated as “natural” and “proven” through scientific discourse, and that scientific discourse impacted legal considerations in this complex sense of the early Federal period's political anatomy. Between the 1750s and 1790s, scientists, especially anatomists, effected a “profound transformation in the views of sexuality and sexual temperament.” While there had been a longstanding focus on female genitalia by anatomists, a focus that posited the European male as the standard and female anatomy as man manqué, the late eighteenth century saw a “resexualization of the body” that moved from a description of sexuality as located only in the reproductive organs to a sense that sexuality pervaded the human body—muscles, nerves, and the skeletal formation itself. As noted in the introduction, while there was considerable potential in this reconsideration, it ultimately led to quite traditional conclusions: the female body, including the brain, was not as developed as was the male body and brain. For the first time, female skeletal drawings appeared, depicting differences in the sexes, but that difference inculcated cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity through variations in cranial structure. By the 1820s, this difference would be used to argue “that physiologically women resemble children, whose skulls are also large in relation to their body size.” Thus the age-old hierarchy of man’s predominance and woman’s alignment with children was reinscribed in the eighteenth century, with the male skull described as “superior” in development. Where women did excel, as Londa Schiebinger notes, was in the development of a large pelvis in relation to the rest of her body. In this era, “craniologists were quick to point out that the European female pelvis must necessarily be large in order to accommodate in the birth canal the cranium of the European male”; that is, “the superior female pelvis complemented the superior male skull.” Thus, once again, anatomy becomes fate: the examination of sexuality results in the idealization of the woman's reproductive capacities, which supports and is supported by Republican Motherhood ideology.

Tabitha Tenney uses the freewheeling nature of the picaresque/carnivalesque novel to expose how the violence of political discourse and the sexual differen-
tiation of the period implicate women’s lives. Popular literature at the turn of the century had already incorporated these scientific agendas, and the scenes in the novel that allow the issue of sexuality to be raised most often depend upon the eighteenth century’s shift from open, daylight carnival celebrations to dark, surreptitious couplings—and this shadow-culture, as it were, allows Tenney to explore racial and class “crossings” as well. In one instance, Dorcasina unwittingly finds herself in the summer house and in the arms of Scipio, the African American gardener, whose own partner, the African American servant Miss Violet, is at the same moment being embraced by Dorcasina’s white Irish lover, Patrick O’Connor. Both couples are quite delighted in their sexual explorations—until their true identities are exposed and their recognition of racial difference forces them to consider the false strictures of their usual “intercourse.” In another instance of masquerade, a prostitute presents herself as Dorcasina, and—rather than the expected narrative suggestion that no one could mistake a prostitute for an upper-class white woman—the women are easily mistaken for each other by people in the neighborhood. Other scenes of cross-dressing titillate the reader with images of women loving other women in overt sexual play which masks and then unmasks sexual difference: the cross-dressing represents heterosexual interactions, but when unmasked the characters are often same-sex partners. For instance, Dorcasina insists that Betty dress as Patrick O’Connor and imitate his sexual play with her, and later the very proper Miss Harriot Stanly dresses as a young officer, Captain Montague, and secretly takes on the part of Dorcasina’s lover. These cross-dressing episodes are significant for their exposure of women’s sexual desires and equally for their breaches of gender stereotypes. Harriot dresses as a captain; one of Dorcasina’s later lovers is also a captain, who has his servant masquerade as himself; and the servant/captain is accepted by Dorcasina as her lover. The cycle of this episode is completed when Harriot later marries the captain whom the servant was imitating. If the reader becomes lost in this chain of masqueradings, that is precisely the point. The failure of language to distinguish the cyclical recasting of characters exposes the false bases of social hierarchies and of gender stereotypes. Tenney had a real-life example of a cross-dressing woman whom she could be assured her audience would recognize: Deborah Sampson Gannett, the Anglo-American woman who had dressed as a soldier and fought in the American Revolution. Gannett’s true identity had been revealed before the publication of Female Quixotism, and in 1802 she would convert her story to live performances on the Boston stage. The public attention on Gannett, and the careful presentation of Gannett as a domestic woman who had acted extraordinarily in an extraordinary time, authorized Tenney’s explorations of gender-bending in a novel meant for a promiscuous but largely female audience.
What the carnivalesque allows Tabitha Tenney to do, ultimately, is twofold: it allows her to expose the gender biases rampant in a nation that depicts itself as the ideal of democracy, and it also enables her to address the suppression of white female desire. This is decidedly the late-eighteenth-century version of the carnivalesque; however, the ending of the novel does not depict radical social or political change—in many ways Dorcasina is left “in the dark” in the final chapter of *Female Quixotism*. Although she chooses to remain single and, importantly, to reclaim her nonromanticized name, Dorcas, she is left at the novel’s conclusion as a self-described isolate: “I am now, in the midst of the wide world, solitary, neglected, and despised.”

She is, by her culture’s standards, a grotesque. As a single woman, her experiences cannot lead her to the *regenerative* (reproductive) power once linked to carnival participation. No social freedom has been attained; all of officialdom’s laws remain intact. Dorcas Sheldon thus represents the woman who has turned from romantic visions to reason—but her fate is not that of her male compatriots who have made the same transition. Like Betty, she is not elevated to the realm of philosopher or statesman. Yet Tenney’s conclusion emphasizes the fact that Dorcas has gained two important features: self-knowledge and an ability to inscribe herself as subject. These features are rendered through carnivalesque discourse as Kristeva defined it, acting as a social and political protest through its damning indictment of the American republic’s falsified representations of equality.

“*her snowy arms . . . encircled [his] ebony neck*”

The challenges in *Female Quixotism* to the novelistic pattern of Anglo-American women’s marital servitude should not be ignored or belittled. Such challenges were necessary steps in the prelude to the women’s rights movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet neither should we ignore the fact that Dorcas Sheldon’s carnivalesque conversion is dependent not only upon hierarchical structures of sex and class but also upon acts of racial and ethnic oppression. Though Betty manifests the figure of the wise woman throughout the novel, and though we see Dorcasina transformed from the fool into the isolate-sage, no such status or transformation is afforded the African American characters in the novel.

The carnivalesque is a means of disrupting the symbolic order—the production and representation of reality according to the law of the (Founding) Fathers. Tenney’s narrative achieves that disruption and exposes “reality” as an ideology that must be perpetuated in order to sustain the realm (here, quite
literally, the house) of the Father. While Female Quixotism succeeds in its disruptive practices in relation to the central Anglo-American female character, it reinscribes the dominant ideology in terms of class and race and does so especially with women characters and upon women’s bodies. Thus Mary Russo’s warning about the recolonizing potential of carnival becomes especially astute in relation to this aspect of the novel. What appears in Tenney’s conclusion to be a “feminization” in fact aids in the perpetuation of patriarchal hierarchies by dividing women rather than articulating difference and by creating class and race conflicts—thereby limiting resistance to the real source of domination, which is male hegemony itself. That Tabitha Tenney cannot fully write Dorcasina into a “happy ending” suggests her recognition of this dilemma.

In The Conquest of America, Tzvetan Todorov emphasizes the significance of predetermined conceptualizations in the colonizer’s interpretation and representation of the “Other.” For all that Dorcasina is willing to experience the world anew—to discover “new worlds” for herself—her prior conceptualizations of class and race privilege are, like those of the Enlightenment scientists and philosophers, never abandoned. As she seeks to decolonize herself from the control of her father and from patriarchal conventions, she does so through a process that recolonizes all nonwhite and/or non-upper-class individuals. That Betty and Miss Violet are most forcefully recolonized exposes the privileged woman’s preconception of “other” women as dangerous. Mary Louise Pratt has exposed the processes by which “frontier” propaganda literature acts as a “normalizing force . . . [that] serves, in part, to mediate the shock of contact on the frontier.”18 For Dorcasina, the novels she has been reading are the normalizing force through which she (mis)represents to herself her adventures in the grove-frontier. Every experience she has outside her father’s house is read through her preconceived expectations formed from novel reading. Thus, ironically, while Tenney presents novel reading as dangerous, she elides the normalizing force not only of the texts Dorcasina reads but of her own imaginative text as well. The power of preconceptualization is evident in its subsequent and multifold misrepresentations in Female Quixotism. On the one hand, preconceived ideas lead Dorcasina to misinterpret her own demeaning experiences as romances while, on the other hand, it allows her to continue to read herself into a location of “positional superiority” over white servants and all people of color in spite of her own repeated foolish actions and subsequent humiliations. Indeed, the recovery of her sense of self against the normalizing forces surrounding gender in a patriarchal society is dependent upon her learned conceptions of race and class.

An examination of the masquerade, an integral feature in the production of the carnival, exposes Tenney’s disruption of the patriarchal symbolic order
as a disruption accessible only to the upper-class white woman and then only to a limited degree. Luce Irigaray exposes the vast plain of female desire behind what she terms “the masquerade of femininity.” Desire with no adequate means of expression determines Dorcasina’s life. As Irigarary observes, “[T]he masquerade has to be understood as what women do in order to recoup some element of desire, to participate in man’s desire, but at the price of renouncing their own. In the masquerade, they submit to the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain ‘on the market’ in spite of everything. But they are there as objects for sexual enjoyment, not as those who enjoy.” Ultimately, the masquerade (like the dominant culture itself) cannot posit viable difference—and Tenney’s apparent discomfort is exposed at a crucial point in the narrative, during the summerhouse escapade when the lovers mistakenly embrace members of another race.

The scene in the summerhouse is an example of the bifurcated argument Tenney presents. Early in the text, she has Dorcasina mouth an antislavery position that reflects the changing attitudes in the northern United States. Although Dorcasina initially desires marriage to Lysander, she laments, “[W]hat gives me the greatest pain, is, that I shall be obliged to live in Virginia, be served by slaves, and be supported by the sweat, toil, and blood of that unfortunate and miserable part of mankind. . . . slavery and happiness are, in my opinion, totally incompatible; ‘disguise thyself as thou wilt, still, slavery, thou art a bitter pill.’” As with most Northern Anglo-Americans in this period, being antislavery did not preclude being racist (and Dorcasina has no qualms about using and abusing her northern “servants”). Thus while Tenney challenges many cultural assumptions about race and gender in the summerhouse scene, her representations of African Americans are often complicit in those assumptions, especially in terms of the African American woman.

In this era, the dominant culture racially encoded the African in specific ways that helped to perpetuate and justify a slave society. To unpack the complexities of the encoding is to understand its cultural tenacity as well. Africans were depicted as at the bottom of the human evolutionary chain—as “primitive” in all facets of their lives—and this primitivism was conjoined with the assertion that Africans were sexually uninhibited. In the scientific anatomical studies of the period, there was no debate about the overall superiority of the European male. There was some controversy among scientists, however, as to whether the African male or the European female was superior. Virtually all anatomists, however, agreed that the African female was at the bottom of species-ranking in relation to skull size and below European females in relation to pelvis size. Thus racial hierarchies were scientifically
maintained in the same pattern as sex hierarchies. It is important, too, to realize the pervasive nature of these constructions. In this “Age of Reason,” reason itself was defined in relation to written discursive abilities; therefore, the African’s oral rather than written language traditions were deemed evidence of a lack of ability to reason. Further, reason was equated with selfhood, and since, as the perverted syllogistic reasoning unfolded, Africans could not reason, they were not therefore individuals and could not have status as Self or engage in a process of agency. It is not difficult to comprehend the necessity of such reasoning in order to perpetuate the extraordinary system of abuse against African Americans inherent in slavery. Further, the racialized and gendered definition of vice became an integral aspect of defining national identity. John Adams defined vice as the “vicious and luxurious and effeminate Appetites, Passions, and Habits.” The editor of the Boston Evening Post confirmed Adams’s ideas and called for the banishment of “the syren [siren] of LUXURY.” While scholars have typically emphasized the definition of vice as luxury in this period, I want to focus on the use of “effeminate” and “syren,” that is, on the gendering of vice that is also indicative of the period.

If vice is made feminine, how do women of the new republic assert their virtue? Tenney’s answer—for white women, at least—seems to be that they distinguish themselves through the transposition of vice onto the body of the black woman, represented in the novel by Miss Violet. The Naturalization Law of 1790 required immigrants to live in the United States for two years, after which they were required to prove in a common law court that they were persons of good character. Significantly, requisite to the definition of good character (to being virtuous) was that the person be Caucasian. Thus the Naturalization Law “explicitly linked race to republican nationality” and to distinctions of vice and virtue. While Tabitha Tenney exposes the integral presence of African Americans in U.S. society, something that few of her contemporary novelists acknowledged, she perpetuates a discourse of racist difference that elides the necessity of addressing change over time in the characterizations of Scipio and Miss Violet and, indeed, that erases their presence from the end of the novel.

Tenney’s depiction of Scipio as a careful and talented gardener is diminished by her depiction of Miss Violet as the stereotypic lazy and promiscuous person of color. The latter characterization, however, also reveals the Anglo-American woman’s fear of disruptions to assumed race and class superiority. The rendering of that fear through the female figure (literally and representatively) further reveals and complicates her text’s embodiment of cultural difference. As in any good carnival, all characters in the novel play the fool at some point. It is when the masks are removed and the carnival ends that we
note Tenney’s process of differentiation. During the scene in the summerhouse, Scipio is comically rendered, but his depiction is less characterization than it is simply functioning as a tool necessary to forward the narrative transformation of Dorcasina Sheldon. In that, his role as slave or tool to the white masters is narratively rearticulated. Scipio has fallen asleep; when Dorcasina enters the darkened summerhouse, she assumes that he is her lover, Patrick O’Connor, and is able to realize her desire for physical contact before he awakens: Dorcasina “approached him softly, sat down by his side, and, putting one arm round his neck and resting her cheek against his, resolved to enjoy the sweet satisfaction which this situation afforded her, till he should of himself awake. This liberty, in his waking hours, her modesty would have prevented her from taking; but, with a heart thrilling with transport, she blessed the accident, which, without wounding her delicacy, afforded her such ravishing delight.”25 The comedy of the scene is dependent upon the reader’s shock at the contact between a white woman and a black man, as Tenney explicitly records their racial difference: “with her snowy arms, she encircled Scipio’s ebony neck.”26 Tenney also makes explicit Dorcasina’s shame at such contact when she discovers the truth: “Her delicate mind could hardly bear to reflect on her familiarity with her father’s servant.”27

The issue of “familiarity” between the races had been subject to considerable public debate by the leaders of the new nation. Dr. Benjamin Rush, in addition to his medical conclusions that Negroes’ skin color was a disease derived from leprosy, asserted that Negroes were insensitive to pain and that they were carriers of especially resistant venereal diseases. By having Dorcasina leave the “promiscuous” environment of the summerhouse and return alone to her room, Tenney has enacted the separatist colonizing process that Rush felt was necessary for white Americans to be a virtuous people.

When Scipio awoke and discovered O’Connor sneaking into the summerhouse, he immediately darted forth and cuffed the intruder several times; that is, he performed his legitimate duty of protecting the grounds from intruders. In Tenney’s description of Miss Violet, however, we are exposed to an extended representation of uninhibited sexuality and primitiveness that encapsulates the racial coding of those white men whose inscriptions of women’s lives Dorcasina is supposed to reject in order to effect her own transformation from fool to sage. When O’Connor sees Miss Violet enter the garden and head for the summerhouse, he assumes that it is Dorcasina. A reader today might assume that this failure to distinguish identity is intended to expose race biases in the same manner that biases surrounding class and female sexuality were exposed through the confusion of identity between
Dorcasina and the prostitute. However, we are told that “O’Connor, seeing a person in white advancing towards him, thought, naturally enough, that it could be no other than his mistress.” The racial coding here is evident: whiteness signifies sexual purity.

When O’Connor met Miss Violet and mistakenly assumed that she was Dorcasina,

he dropped on one knee, and poured forth a torrent of words in the usual style, blessing his supposed angelic mistress, for her goodness and condescension, in thus favouring him with an interview. Miss Violet was at first struck with astonishment, and could not divine the meaning of those fine compliments; but, perceiving by his manner and address, that it was a gentleman who thus humbled himself before her, and having a spice of the coquette in her disposition, she had no objection to obtaining a new lover; but, being totally at a loss what to reply to such a profusion of compliments, delivered in a style so new to her, she very prudently remained silent.

This passage exemplifies the racial encoding of the era. In spite of Tenney’s previous satirization of Dorcasina as a foolish and easily duped woman, she is depicted here as “angelic” in contrast with Miss Violet’s sexual indiscrimination (“a spice of the coquette”). That an African American woman could not be deemed “angelic” is generalized through “his supposed angelic mistress.” Further, the failure of language is predominant. Because, as an African American, Miss Violet is assumed to have no reasoning ability, she cannot “divine the meaning” of O’Connor’s compliments; his words constitute “a style so new to her” that she is rendered silent.

It is not enough that Miss Violet be rendered mute; her sexuality is explored and implicated in this scene repeatedly. We are told, for example, that after Scipio tosses O’Connor out of the garden, Miss Violet does not lament the loss of her new admirer. She simply excuses her behavior to Scipio so that she may regain his attention, because she “could as easily change a white lover for a black, as receive the addresses of a new one.”

Thus while Dorcasina is in her room, giving “herself up to sighs, tears and lamentations” over her mistaken liaison with Scipio, Miss Violet is depicted as promiscuity personified. Indeed, as the figure of willful sexual discovery in the garden, Miss Violet becomes the body onto which the blame for Eve’s indiscretions is transferred. Since Eve was the figure most often cited by religious and civil leaders in this period as the reason for women’s subjection to men, it is a significant transformation: the blame for womankind’s
fate is now placed on the black woman while the white woman is redeemed through her shame and repentance.

That we are intended to note this sexual and racial difference between Dorcasina Sheldon and Miss Violet is made even more pointed by Tenney’s alternative use of the masquerade to break the silence about female desire in a positive manner—through her characterization of Dorcasina’s young, white contemporary, Harriot Stanly. Whereas Miss Violet becomes the racially stereotyped figure of sexual promiscuity, Miss Stanly becomes the female figure in control of her sexuality, who can use it to her benefit and who is rewarded with marriage at the novel’s conclusion. Dorcasina’s lack of a mother’s influence is designated in the opening pages of *Female Quixotism* as the cause of her near-fatal attraction to novels. In contrast, Harriot had an attentive mother and—emphasizing the very grave failure of Mr. Sheldon—she was afforded a proper female education that guided her away from Dorcasina’s failings.

Tenney’s introduction of explicit sexual desire into the characterization of a young woman is notable. Indeed, the novel borders on erotica via scenes of cross-dressing, sexual play, Betty’s bared torso, and the sexual titillation of the summerhouse episode. A good number of eighteenth-century Americans, like their English and European counterparts, read a wide variety of texts featuring erotica: novels, poetry, plays, scientific treatises, and quasi-medical treatises, many of which included illustrations to emphasize the erotic nature of the contents. Knowing so little as we do about Tenney’s life, it is impossible to discern the breadth of her reading, though we might expect that she had read English picaresque novels. That she would have read the more explicit erotica of the period is doubtful, yet *Female Quixotism* exceeds boundaries of propriety by reversing the sexual aggressor in erotica from the common-stock figure of the black male to the white female in the summerhouse scene. Though Tenney ultimately pulls back from the titillation of the interracial love scene, she forges ahead in quite explicit and unapologetic ways in terms of female sexuality. Indeed, what is notably absent in the cross-dressing scenes is the cultural anxiety so rampant in the interracial love scenes. Cross-dressing was a familiar literary and theatrical vehicle; as Marjorie Garber has argued, cross-dressing creates “an enabling fantasy.”

This fantasy world is the heart of carnival’s acceptance of masquerading, and through masquerade Harriot can express sexual longings under the guise of teaching Dorcasina a lesson about the folly of romanticizing relationships. Harriot’s actions move far beyond mere titillation: while in disguise as a male, she “threw her arms round Dorcasina’s neck, and almost stopped her breath with kisses, and concluded by biting her cheek so hard as to make her scream aloud.” This scene occurs at night, again observing the transformation of
the carnival in the late eighteenth century to a nocturnal event, and the “bite” and consequent “scream” may be read as a metaphoric climax to the sexual play. When Harriot later marries a real-life captain, we might be tempted to see this alliance as both a comic moment—a (masked) captain marrying another captain—and as a regenerative moment; but Tenney challenges the idea that heterosexual couplings are any more transformative than was the embrace between the masked Harriot and the duped Dorcasina. When Dorcasina visits Harriot (now Mrs. Barry) at the novel’s end, the novel shifts from carnival time back to “real” time. After having observed Harriot’s married life for a few days, Dorcasina remarks:

“I find that, in my ideas of matrimony, I have been totally wrong. I imagined that, in a happy union, all was transport, joy, and felicity; but in you I find a demonstration that the most agreeable connection is not unattended with cares and anxieties.” “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. . . . Yet, strange to tell, I have suffered more than I ever did before, in the whole course of my life.”

Thus Tabitha Tenney exposes the disenfranchised status even of upper-class white women in the new republic. In important ways, Tenney critiques the gendered nature of existence in the assumed new democracy and condemns the nation’s failure to properly educate and employ its female members.

Yet at the same time, she exposes her own ironic alliance with class and racial prejudices. Her contemporary Thomas Jefferson also struggled with such issues, arguing in *Notes on the State of Virginia* for the creation of laws supporting a combination of slave emancipation and distant colonization. Similarly, Tenney casts Betty as the privileged Dorcas’s supportive and wise but “naturally” inferior servant-friend, and she follows Jefferson’s ideal to its “logical” conclusion by removing the African American characters from the last portion of the novel: that act of removal/erasure is, of course, the very real effect of “distant colonization.” As Dana Nelson observes, the failure of Jefferson’s text to accomplish “‘rational management’ of the issue of slavery is a signpost to the Enlightenment philosophers’ profound inability to master the incongruity between slave system and legal contract, between arbitrary power and ‘natural’ authority.” Similarly for Tenney, the inability to create a narrative that fully allows the disruption of the social order intended through the depiction of carnival or to rationally manage the reining in of carnival by the privileged class leads to *Female Quixotism’s* failed conclusion. Tenney cannot write into her own text a full vision of democracy.
“hordes of Wild Irishmen”

This ultimate failure to inscribe democracy is true in relation to Tenney’s ethnic depictions as well. That she is (perhaps unwittingly) aligned with Jeffersonian ideologies concerning race is particularly ironic, considering her Federalist political alliances. Tenney’s political views are rendered through her depiction of immigrants in the novel, most notably in the characterization of the disreputable and dangerous Irishman Patrick O'Connor, who wants to marry Dorcasina only in order to have access to her wealth and privilege. In the years during which Tabitha Tenney wrote *Female Quixotism*, her spouse, Samuel Tenney, was a Federalist senator in Washington, D.C., representing their home state of New Hampshire. During the volatile election of 1800, the extraordinary power of the Federalists was diminished under charges of unconstitutional use of their powers and, most notably, of the intentional suppression of political dissent. Of special concern to the party was “foreign subversion.” In 1798 alone, the Federalists enacted the Naturalization Act, the Alien Enemies Act, and the Sedition Act. These legal enactments are of special significance in relation to *Female Quixotism*. The Federalist position was bluntly clarified by Harrison Gray Otis, who cautioned that the United States should not “invite hordes of Wild Irishmen, or the turbulent and disorderly parts of the world, to come here with a view to distract our tranquility.”37 Behind this attack was an attempt to decrease members of the Democratic-Republican Party, to which the majority of party-affiliated immigrants belonged.38

Two famous New England trials of 1799 may also have influenced Tenney’s class and ethnic characterizations: the trials of David Brown and Luther Baldwin. Both men were working-class individuals who criticized the Federalist government. Opposed to the centralized government established by the new constitution, Brown asserted that the only goal of government was to steal from its citizens and to claim the new nation’s western lands for the Federalist leaders’ personal wealth. Brown was tried under the newly established Sedition Act and found guilty. The Sedition Act, considered one of the most unconstitutional legal actions of the period, not only made it illegal to write or utter “false, scandalous and malicious” assertions against the government, but, significantly, it also outlawed any writings, printings or utterances “with intent to defame the said government.”39 David Brown was fined $480 and sentenced to eighteen months in jail; since it was impossible for a working-class individual to pay such a fine, the sentence inevitably resulted in continual imprisonment for speaking against the government. It was only after the Federalists were defeated in the election of 1800 that
Brown was freed. A satiric comment against President John Adams by Luther Baldwin—rendered orally, unlike Brown's pamphleteering—also resulted in a conviction for sedition, with fines and imprisonment. The Jeffersonians picked up Baldwin's case and used it to expose what they deemed the Federalists' abuse of power and antidemocratic actions.

It is precisely such nationalistic and classist attitudes that pervade Tenney's depictions of the characters surrounding Dorcasina. Otis had explicitly aligned the Irish with "vicious[ness]," as "disorganizing characters who cannot live peaceably at home," and who would therefore seek to disrupt American society as well. In the aftermath of the 1798 XYZ Affair, the fear was that the anti-British attitudes of the Irish would affect the neutral stance toward both France and Britain which the Federalists wished to maintain. President Adams's nephew and private secretary William Smith Shaw wrote to Abigail Adams in 1798 that "[t]he grand cause of all our present difficulties may be traced . . . to so many hordes of Foreigners immigrating to America." When O'Connor appears in the novel, we are told of the power of Mr. Sheldon's word: "It had always been her pleasure to conform, in every instance, to the wishes of her parent, whose mild commands had ever been to her a law." And the law of the father at the turn of the century, as with the Federalists, is isolationist. When Dorcasina persists in her love of O'Connor and rejects Lysander, an "American" and her father's preferred mate for his daughter, Mr. Sheldon admonishes her, "Alas, my dear! I grieve to see you thus infatuated. Will you persist in giving less credit to one of your own countrymen, whose character for probity is well known and acknowledged, than to a foreigner, whom nobody knows, and who has nothing to recommend him but his own bare assertions?" That Tenney aligns nationalism with patriarchal values is evident when Dorcasina finally accepts her father's views and rejects the Irish "foreigner." Her father's reward is expressed explicitly in terms that return her to the father's house: "Thank you, my dear, you are now again my daughter." She is given the only means of "enfranchisement" available to women: the protection of the "fathers" or, legally, feme covert. This is the issue that Tenney cannot reconcile in Female Quixotism. She seeks to challenge the erasure of difference in the new republic, but she depends upon the acceptance of difference in order to effect what changes do occur in Dorcasina Sheldon's struggle for subjectivity.

It is in the juxtaposition of Dorcasina, Miss Violet, and Harriot Stanly that Tenney most overtly reveals her own complicity with certain elements of patriarchy. If she characterizes Dorcas at the end of the novel as rejecting the limited role of the True Woman in turn-of-the-century America, Tenney maintains most heartily the encoding of racial difference. In fact, there is a
necessary hierarchy of women in her vision. Harriot may not have a perfect life, but she does have significant status as conveyed by the title of “Mrs.” In comparison, Dorcas “found herself alone, as it were, on the earth. The pleasing delusion which she had all her life fondly cherished, of experiencing the sweets of connubial love, had now entirely vanished, and she became pensive, silent and melancholy.”\( ^{45} \) She has rejected her former ways and turned from romance to realism, but she is self-condemning: “I have not charms sufficient to engage the heart of any man.”\( ^{46} \) Her transformation is, at best, one of repentance. Yet Dorcas Sheldon’s ostensible transformation at the novel’s conclusion is, in turn, dependent upon being contrasted not only with Harriot but also with Miss Violet. Whereas the African American woman has been depicted as indiscriminately gliding from man to man and is ultimately silenced by her status—and thereby easily erased from the text itself—Dorcas Sheldon has risen above the dominant culture’s expectations of her as a woman. Because she remains single, she may be considered a grotesque by her culture, but she can still claim a certain status in the community because of her wealth (that is, she is productive if not reproductive). She uses her money for “acts of charity,” thus gaining the status of Good Woman if not of Married Woman. It is Miss Violet who ultimately is cast as the inherently and unredeemed grotesque figure through the negative depiction of her sexuality and ultimately through her textual elision. What began as a novel notable for its exposure of the diverse nature of difference in turn-of-the-century U.S. culture descends into an unresolved fracturing of narrative perspective. Ironically, when the carnival ends and Tenney seeks narrative closure, she cannot put all the pieces back together again. She cannot manage to fully liberate Dorcas from patriarchal strictures precisely because the decolonization process meant to be effected by the instigation of carnival has been predicated upon a return to colonialist measures.