MRS. TABITHA TENNEY (1762-1837) published in 1801 a novel modeled after *Don Quixote* and meant to be a warning against romantic fiction: *Female Quixotism: Exhibited in the Romantic Opinions and Extravagant Adventures of Dorcasina Sheldon*. Dorcasina has been reading too many novels ever since she was a young girl; as a result she has imbibed notions difficult to conciliate with the demands made on her by a normal existence among people not similarly influenced by novel-reading.¹

From the outset Mrs. Tenney’s heroine is predisposed to respond to all the dangerous influences that may be conveyed by fiction. Her romantic turn of mind² conditions her attitude toward novels and, through them, toward sober life. This peculiar receptivity of Dorcasina was of course purposely invented and exploited by Mrs. Tenney to achieve her didactic aim. It is this intention of hers, to expose the dangers of novel-reading, that is first to be considered.³ Her purpose is very much a reality throughout the book, however rewarding and enjoyable writing the burlesque may have turned out to be.⁴ Mrs. Tenney’s message may therefore be dissociated from its comic literary form, as indeed it must have been by the contemporary readers who welcomed her indictment of the modern novel.⁵ Her lustily exaggerated attack on fiction can easily be corroborated and supplemented by references to the writings and opinions of others more directly and sternly hostile to the novel.⁶

Mrs. Tenney dedicated her book "To all Columbian Young Ladies, who Read Novels and Romances" (i:iii).¹ Her heroine is, at the beginning of the novel, just such a young lady: the dedication, and the choice of the heroine, are not accidental or
mere matters of convention. It was the ladies who were commonly held to constitute the body of novel-readers, and especially the young ladies who had leisure and opportunity to read much fiction. Moreover, being young, they were liable to be strongly impressed and possibly lastingly influenced by their reading. Being ladies, they were per definitionem romantically inclined, that is, open to suggestions and appeals to the imagination, the fancy, the feelings. Being young ladies, finally, they were thought to respond with particular warmth to the subject of love, so much in the foreground of novels and romances.

Novels and romances were lumped together by Mrs. Tenney, as they were by most opponents of fiction among her contemporaries. There is no need for a detailed discussion of the terms here; it may be stated generally that the criticism of the novel took mainly the form of an attack against the romantic and sensational treatment of the theme of love in the fiction of the day, and that other strictures were subordinate to, and a consequence of, that fundamental objection. Mrs. Tenney's Female Quixotism clearly illustrates this attitude of disapproval.

The novels of the day were often declared by their authors to be based on truth. Mrs. Tenney did not miss her opportunity of making fun of the pretense. The story of Dorcasina is "a true picture of real life," "a true uncoloured history" (1:iii); at the same time Mrs. Tenney testified to the authenticity of her tale only by referring to a fictional precedent, the authority of Don Quixote. In other words, her book is as little a report from life as the writings of other authors who rely patently on literary models or on pure invention.

Just as Don Quixote set out to realize ideas and ideals fashioned out of the romances he had made himself so thoroughly familiar with, Dorcasina expects to find life a counterpart of the versions of it offered by the novelists. For her head "had been turned by the unrestrained perusal of Novels and Romances" (1:iv), and she is governed by the "Romantic Opinions" so acquired. How has this come about? Handicapped by the romantic inclination already referred to, Dorcasina is also the victim of circumstances beyond her power to control. She early loses her mother and is then brought up by her father in a remote
Pennsylvania village. Her mother's death is a crucial calamity: "At the age of three years, this child had the misfortune to lose an excellent mother, whose advice would have pointed out to her the plain rational path of life; and prevented her imagination from being filled with the airy delusions and visionary dreams ... with which the indiscreet writers of that fascinating kind of books, denominated Novels, fill the heads of artless young girls, to their great injury, and sometimes to their utter ruin" (1:5).16 Since Mrs. Tenney was speaking to young ladies and future mothers, her stress on a mother's educational role was an absolute necessity. It is also clear that Mr. Sheldon is found not to have attended to his duties properly.17 He has failed to make up for the maternal advice Dorcasina did not receive; he should have pointed out to his daughter not just her everyday duties but the part that novels are allowed to play in a girl's life. This specific error of Sheldon is accounted for, though it cannot be excused: a great reader himself, Sheldon reads novels as a relaxation from studying history. When his daughter follows his example, he does not make sure that she observes like himself the relative importance of the departments of instruction and entertainment. Dorcasina is quickly fascinated18 by novels and, as she later confesses, becomes quite incapable of more serious and informative reading.19

Her reading shapes her imagination according to definite patterns that are basic to romantic fiction but, from the point of plain common sense, mere "airy delusions and visionary dreams." Dorcasina's other faults combine with her romantic inclinations to render her particularly vulnerable: she is vain of her appearance and sensibility, and she is stubborn. It is due to her vanity that she likens her position and appeal to that of many heroines of romances (with whom she may well have in common the pathetic attribute of being motherless); her principal vision is that of being swept off her feet by a perfect lover. It is owing to her obstinacy that, when convinced of having met that ideal lover, no reasoning, and not even the evidence of her senses, can make her realize that she may, after all, be terribly wrong.

Having once envisioned herself as a young lady compelling love20 and merely waiting for the all-accomplished lover to turn
up, Dorcasina no longer heeds her very real qualities. Yet they are by no means negligible: "She had received from nature a good understanding, a lively fancy, an amiable cheerful temper, and a kind and affectionate heart" (1:6). This is confirmed by Mrs. Stanly, a neighbor and faithful friend, long after Dorcasina has started making a fool of herself by trying to translate her romance-formed notions of love into principles of practicable social behavior: "Miss Sheldon is possessed of an amiable disposition, and an excellent heart; and, on every other subject but one, her understanding is strong, and her judgment good; and in her youth her person was tolerably pleasing" (2:37).

Dorcasina's appearance is pleasing enough, though Mrs. Tenney could not keep from poking fun at the superlative beauties of the conventional novel-heroine:

Now I suppose it will be expected that, in imitation of sister novel writers (for the ladies of late seem to have almost appropriated this department of writing) I should describe her as distinguished by the elegant form, delicately turned limbs, auburn hair, alabaster skin, heavenly languishing eyes, silken eyelashes, rosy cheeks, aquiline nose, ruby lips, dimpled chin, and azure veins, with which almost all our heroines of romance are indiscriminately decorated. In truth she possessed few of those beauties, in any great degree. She was of a middling stature, a little embonpoint, but neither elegant nor clumsy. Her complexion was rather dark; her skin somewhat rough; and features remarkable neither for beauty nor deformity. Her eyes were grey and full of expression, and her whole countenance rather pleasing than otherwise. In short, she was a middling kind of person, like the greater part of her countrywomen; such as no man would be smitten with at first sight, but such as any man might love upon intimate acquaintance. (1:6-7)

The first part of this passage contains something like Dorcasina's own estimate of herself. But when her first lover comes, he sees her as she is in reality and conforms to the pattern of behavior predicted by Mrs. Tenney—which is to say, too, that he disappoints Dorcasina.

The poor girl feels all the more painfully let down as she has experienced contrasting emotions since she first heard of Ly-sander's coming. At first she was rather chilled at the businesslike
way in which their meeting was arranged for by their fathers: “She would, to be sure, have been better pleased, had their acquaintance commenced in a more romantic manner” (1:8). The reader, who does not know what the “more romantic manner” may be, will learn by reading on: he will then see Dorcasina respond most warmly to a handsome stranger playing the flute all by himself in Dorcasina’s favorite grove; he will find her moved and interested when discovering in the wood a letter addressed to her by an adorer she has not yet met; and he will see her fall in love at merely hearing that a gentleman has arrived at her father’s house, an officer wounded while fighting the Indians and unable to pursue his journey home.

There is, in addition to the initial disappointment just mentioned, another feature about her designated fiancé that is unpleasant to Dorcasina’s sensitive nature: she surmises that, coming from Virginia, Lysander must be a slave-holder, and her humanitarian notions revolt at the very idea of the sufferings he must cause and tolerate. The idea of a young girl compassionately suffering with the slaves is not necessarily to be ridiculed; it soon becomes plain that Mrs. Tenney is not criticizing that particular emotional reaction but rather Dorcasina’s tendency to sentimentalize all subjects and to take herself too seriously in the role of the sorrowing sympathizer. The consequence of feeling in extremes is naturally a blunting and leveling of the emotions.21 When a clandestine suitor of Dorcasina is described as looking very much the worse for wear because of a drubbing he has received, the girl’s grief is therefore described as follows: “Dorcasina had taken to her bed, with marks of as great sorrow as ever was experienced for the death of a lap-dog, or favourite parrot” (1:67). Dorcasina’s maid Betty, a commonsensical creature who knows her lady quite well, is shrewdly aware of the heroine’s tendency to play her emotional roles. She quickly transforms Dorcasina’s misgivings at the prospect of marrying a withholder of freedom into the anticipation of turning into a giver of freedom herself: why shouldn’t she emancipate the slaves, once she has become Lysander’s wife?

So it is with high expectations restored that Dorcasina meets Lysander. Her hopes seem about to be fulfilled, for this is what
meets her eye: "His person was noble and commanding; his countenance open and liberal; and his address manly and pleasing" (1:8). What with her opinion of her charms, she now fully counts upon love taking its course, a course that she will outline on a later occasion: "...The man to whom I unite myself in marriage, must first behold me, and at a glance be transfixed to the heart, and I too sir, must conceive at the same time a violent passion for him. In short, our love must be sudden, ardent, violent, and mutual. Matches made upon this foundation can alone be productive of lasting felicity" (2:66). Events do not conform to this pattern, however. Lysander is formal and respectful but not ardent, and Dorcasina is at first so taken aback that she appears unduly reticent and laconic. Yet all is not lost. Dorcasina regrets her coolness, and in the course of his stay with the Sheldons, Lysander evidently falls in love with the girl. Dorcasina, an obedient daughter who loves her father truly, might now reasonably be expected to accept the offer of a young man who has much to recommend him. She is very eager to have his first letter, in which Lysander is sure to ask for permission to write to her as her accepted suitor. But the letter is another blow to Dorcasina’s image-making. It is true to the young man’s qualities: "His understanding was rather solid than brilliant, and much improved by education and travel. His ideas of domestic happiness were just and rational; and he judged from what he had observed, that an agreeable matrimonial connexion was much the happiest state in life" (1:8).

Dorcasina, who has been seeing and talking to Lysander for weeks, should by now know what he is like, but she does not because she relies only in part upon her observation and much more on the rules of behavior as taught by the romantic novelists. This reliance explains Dorcasina’s reaction to Lysander’s letter:

Upon the perusal of this letter, Dorcasina experienced but one sentiment, and that was mortification. She read it over and over again; and was, to the last degree, chagrined at its coldness. She compared it with various letters in her favourite authors; and found it so widely different in style and sentiment, that she abhorred the idea of a connexion with a person who could be the author of it. What added greatly to her disgust was, that
he said not a word of her personal charms, upon which she so much valued herself. Not even the slightest compliment to her person; nothing of angel or goddess, raptures or flames, in the whole letter. (1:15)

The girl clearly sets great store by the forms of courtship. Conventional clichés, expressions, and ideas are to her the sum of an emotion, and the closer they approximate the precedents of romance, the more genuine she judges them to be. The protestations of love have an absolute value; if those addressed to her are very much below par, that is an offense against love and an indication of inadequacy in her lover. Moreover, Lysander insults her personally by neglecting to flatter her.

The Lysander episode is dealt with in the first two chapters and sixteen pages of Female Quixotism, which runs to twenty-six chapters and nearly four hundred pages. The twenty-year-old Dorcasina is there shown renouncing common sense with regard to love and marriage. We are to understand that she could, by marrying Lysander, easily have overcome her passion for novel-reading, though at a later age than most. Instead, she appears to have confirmed her belief in her attractiveness and in her role as a novel-heroine in the walks of ordinary life. Her whole life from now on is governed by reliance on the etiquette and ritual of the romantic novel. The flute-playing Irish adventurer O'Connor, the schoolmaster and practical joker who calls himself Philander, and the wounded officer Barry successively win her favor, each one merely on the grounds of the circumstances of their first meeting. Other phases of romantic love-making play a part in the deceptions to which Dorcasina submits, among them actions which a sensible girl like Harriet Stanly would easily recognize and consequently reject as morally wrong. The girl "whose head had been turned," however, takes them in her stride, maybe with emotions flattering to her vanity, but with little show of surprise.

One plan for an elopement she almost assents to (1:69); another is carried out but fortunately breaks down (2: chap. 5). Twice carried off by force (1:chap. 17, and 2:chap. 15), she is hardly less thrilled the second time than the first. If she is not ruffled by such intended or actual happenings, no wonder that
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she considers jealous lovers or an irate rival normal, if somewhat exhilarating, concomitants of a love-suit—particularly when the rival is considerate enough to use the style sanctioned by fashionable novels: "...You shall not go on thus practising your devilish arts, with impunity. Your basilisk glance shall not thus rob every man of his heart, and every woman of her lover or husband. Those bewitching eyes, that cause mischief, wherever they are seen, I will tear them from their orbits" (1:136). To be expected, too, in a lover's career, are misunderstandings and difficulties of all sorts. When Dorcasina is completely taken in by O'Connor, she is all too ready to explain away circumstances unfavorable to him as the result of slander and envy. Nor is it impossible for her to console herself when her father is against the match, however grieved she may be at his attitude: "...Dorcasina retired to her closet; and turning over her favourite authors, she found numerous instances of persecuted lovers, cruel parents, and tyrannical guardians. To find herself precisely in the situation of many sister heroines afforded her more consolation than, in the present juncture, she could have derived from any other source" (1:94). She is blind to the evidence of O'Connor's crooked nature because in novels it is a customary thing to see the hero-lover temporarily suspected of the greatest villainies, only to be spectacularly exonerated in the end. O'Connor's leaving the inn without paying his bill cannot be interpreted by Dorcasina in any other way than as a result of distraction by grief. So obsessed is the heroine with her view of things that even the public whipping of O'Connor, which she is made to witness, does not undeceive her completely. It is only after she has shamefully been ridiculed by the schoolmaster and the barber that she is quite sobered.

Even as an old maid, Dorcasina does not give up the hope of romantic bliss she has been cherishing since her youth. Captain Barry, who was hoping to meet a pretty young girl, recoils at the sight of her; this she construes to be a symptom of bashfulness and thus lays herself open to another victimization. The ignorant John Brown in her household must needs be a gentleman in disguise secretly in love with her because Roderick Random furnished a precedent when serving in Narcissa's house
as John Brown. Finally, when her friends have her taken to Stanly's farm to keep her out of mischief, she cannot help being pleased at what to her is just another proof of her charms. Her claim of having been abducted by a passionate admirer, however, meets with skepticism among her new acquaintances, for Dorcasina is by now a white-haired, wrinkled, toothless old maid. One of them says, "I thought... that the poor lady talked wildly, when she told about her sweet-hearts, and her being carried off for love" (2:171). Everything about Dorcasina's deportment proves that Mrs. Stanly was right: "Dorcasina certainly labours under a species of derangement, which renders her incapable of listening to reason" (2:155).

It is on the assumption that she is insane that the scoundrel Seymore plans to marry her: once in possession of her fortune, he will have her locked up in an asylum (2:chap. 17). His plans are frustrated, and he spitefully tells Dorcasina the truth about herself. His words sink in, and as if by magic, the spell worked by the "fascinating" novels is broken. Dorcasina comes to her senses again, realizing at last what she has so long allowed herself to do, to feel, and to think, and (more cruelly) what she has failed to be and to achieve. She knows now that she has crimes more serious to repent of than occasional cases of disobedience to her father or impatience with well-meaning friends: "...Instead of being a matron, rendering a worthy man happy, surrounded by a train of amiable children, educated in virtuous principles, and formed by our mutual cares and examples to virtuous habits, and of promoting and participating the happiness of the social circle, in which we might be placed, I am now, in the midst of the wide world, solitary, neglected, and despised" (2:211). Truly repentant, Dorcasina considers ways of atoning for her wasted life. She can devote part of her time to charitable activities; she can offer her own story as a warning, for there are others that run the same risks she thought she could defy: "My fate is singular; and I sincerely wish it may serve as a beacon to assist others, of similar dispositions, to avoid the rock on which I have been wrecked" (2:210).

One thing, however, Dorcasina is not willing to do: she is not going to give up novel-reading. Why should she? She has
learned what she did not know when she first read fiction. Life, fact, and reality which we experience are one thing, but life, fact, and reality as presented in the pages of novels are quite another thing. Knowing this, she can no longer be harmed by novels and romances: "I read them with the same relish, the same enthusiasm as ever; but, instead of expecting to realize scenes and situations so charmingly pourtrayed, I only regret that such unallayed felicity is, in this life, unattainable" (2:212).25 Mrs. Tenney's contemporaries, who were suspicious of the common novel, perhaps found her oblique way of pointing out a path to a usable fiction rather unsatisfactory. In an age of uncertainty as to the true function and possible misapplication of fiction, they may have preferred direct denunciation to satire.26 Undoubtedly, however, they understood what Mrs. Tenney's novel demonstrated: that fiction could be put to didactic uses and that a satirical treatment could possibly succeed with some subjects.

1. The distrust of novel-reading is of course just one manifestation of the distrust of imaginative literature. Josiah Quincy, looking back upon his student days at Andover about 1815, remembered that *The Pilgrim's Progress* was the only "work of imagination" that could be read (see Jay B. Hubbell, ed., *American Life in Literature* [1949], 1:221 [hereafter cited as Hubbell, *American Life*]). Novels being so much in the ascendant in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in America, they were assailed with particular venom.

2. **Female Quixotism**, 1:6 and 2:210. All page references are to the first edition; they will hereafter be included in the text.

3. For a discussion of *Female Quixotism* as a work of fiction rather than a lesson, see below, in the chapter entitled "Fortune's Football."

4. It is plausible that Mrs. Tenney at first did wish to teach a lesson and did not know how enjoyable the writing of Dorcasina's story might be. In this sense she appears related to Mrs. Rowson, in whose work, incidentally, there are a few minor Dorcasinas (Meriel, Lady Mary). It is perhaps significant that Mrs. Tenney's first publication was an anthology, *The Pleasing Instructor*, containing "pieces which...tend either to inform the mind, correct the manners, or to regulate the conduct" and selected with the aim "to blend instruction with rational amusement" (*DAB* 18:374). Other writers who profess to illustrate a moral through an entertaining tale seem, above all, to be apologizing in anticipation of any criticism of their use of fiction and their literary talents. Thus Mrs. Wood had the message of *Julia* spelled out on the title page; and the title page of her *Dorval* pleads for leniency, since her "intention is good, though the performance be deficient." Cf. Mrs. Read, *Monima*, title page and preface.

5. Mary S. Benson mentions a reader who approved of Mrs. Tenney's model *The Female Quixote*, by Charlotte Lennox, because it could teach one
to avoid excessive reading of romances; see Women in Eighteenth-Century America (1935), p. 45 (hereafter cited as Benson, Women).

6. Two names may be singled out to represent the opponents of the novel. Samuel Miller’s chapter “Romances and Novels” in A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century (1803), 2:370-99, accuses fiction of all possible offenses against common sense, morals, and social institutions. Miller judged that less than one novel out of a thousand could be considered “innocent and amusing” and therefore be allowed to be read (2:395). Timothy Dwight’s condemnation of modern fiction, in Travels in New-England and New-York (1821-22) (hereafter cited as Dwight, Travels), may have been written only a few years after Miller’s. In a few pages (1:474-77) Dwight sketched the frustrations of a girl not unlike Dorcasina, stressing in particular the tendency to religious indifference resulting from too much novel-reading. Miller and Dwight both zealously opposed the theater on the grounds of its immoral and irreligious foundations and effects. Their authority may be tacitly assumed to support all the individual criticisms of the novel mentioned in this chapter; many of their views are echoed as late as 1887 in Howells’s essay “Pernicious Fiction.” For criticism of prose fiction in England, see, e.g., Joyce M. Horner, The English Women Novelists and their Connection with the Feminist Movement (1688-1797) (1929-30) (hereafter cited as Horner, English Women); and John Tinnon Taylor, Early Opposition to the English Novel: The Popular Reaction from 1760 to 1830 (1943). Walter Francis Wright, Sensibility in English Prose Fiction, 1760-1814 (1937), quotes a revealing passage from Charlotte Smith’s Desmond (p. 77).

7. As exemplified earlier by the “first” American novel, The Power of Sympathy, the young ladies of America are addressed as the natural and immediate audience of any American novel-writer, with the additional implication that they must be kept free from the vices that might be spread by foreign authors. In this context a passage from Mrs. Foster’s The Boarding School is relevant; it is often quoted to belittle the early American fiction, but the speaker being a rather light-headed young thing, the irony of her statement is really aimed at herself and her enjoyment of foreign novels: “They have attained to a far greater degree of refinement in the old world, than we have in the new; and are so perfectly acquainted with the passions, that there is something extremely amusing and interesting in their plots and counter-plots, operating in various ways, till the dear creatures are jumbled into matrimony in the prettiest manner that can be conceived! We, in this country, are too much in a state of nature to write good novels yet. An American novel is such a moral, sentimental thing, that it is enough to give any body the vapours to read one” (pp. 156-57).

8. John Neal dedicated his first novel to them (Keep Cool [1817]). John Davis spoke of the obvious design of Caritat’s library to meet the wishes of his lady readers (Travels of Four Years and a Half in the USA [1803], pp. 186-87 n.); cf. also Raddin, Library, which studies the 1804 stock offered by Caritat. Paul Kaufman, commenting on English circulating libraries, has questioned the idea of an almost exclusively female clientele (“In Defense of Fair Readers,” A Review of English Literature 8, no. 2 (1967):68-75.

9. “The free access which many young people have to romances, novels, and plays, has poisoned the mind and corrupted the morals of many a promising youth...” (Enos Hitchcock, Memoirs of the Bloomsgrove Family [1790], 2:185-87 [hereafter cited as Hitchcock, Bloomsgrove Family]).

10. “Nothing can have a worse effect on the mind of our sex, than the free use of those writings which are the offspring of modern novelists. Their only
tendency is to excite romantic notions..." (Mrs. Bloomsgrove to some girls, Hitchcock, *Bloomsgrove Family*, 2:82).


12. There are occasional attempts at distinguishing between the romance and the novel. Mrs. Foster, Miller, and Isaac Mitchell restrict the former to the Scudéry-type of fiction; they consider it inferior to the novel, in the age of enlightenment, as well as morally harmless. See *The Boarding School*, p. 17; *A Brief Retrospect*, 2:373; *The Asylum*, pp. xi-xii. The *Port-Folio* (2, no. 18[1802]:141-42), humorously establishes a line of descent from the romance to the novel and seriously judges the novel to be too realistic and coarse in some ways.

13. The attack on the novel superimposed itself upon the basic distrust of fancy and fiction, resulting from both Calvinistic and Common Sense School conceptions; see Terence J. Martin, *The Instructed Vision* (1961). Since the sentimental love story relied heavily upon the responses of a romantic imagination, it was sharply censured as a threat to the rule of reason and, in addition, to morals. Mitchell's view was that "in most of our modern novels, seduction forms the prominent feature... The language glows with the 'sorcery of sentiment,' the scenery with meretricious voluptuousness..." (*The Asylum*, pp. xiv-xv); see also the *Port-Folio* 2, no. 14(1802):106, and Alexander Cowie, "John Trumbull Glances at Fiction," *AL* 12(1940):69-73, which examines a very conservative statement of Trumbull (1779). The modern novel is also singled out for reproof by Noah Webster, *A Collection of Essays* (1790), esp. p. 29, and Hitchcock, *Bloomsgrove Family*, 2:82, 88. In a number of instances fiction is simply lumped together with all reading "for mere amusement" (Mrs. Foster, *The Boarding School*, p. 26) and as such frowned upon more or less in earnest; see, e.g., Tyler, *The Algerine Captive*, quoted above (p. 4), and Hitchcock, who opposes the profitable reading of "history, biography, travels, voyages, memoirs" to "romances, novels, and plays" (*The Bloomsgrove Family*, 2:89, 186-87). Cf. also *Polyanthos* 9(1813) 172-73.

14. Mitchell prefaced *The Asylum* with the remark, "If any should object to it as a work of fancy, the author informs them that this is not, exclusively, the case...the principal characters...are still living...witnesses yet remain" (p. xxiii). In this study 34 titles are included under the heading of "The Love-Story" and 29 under "The Novel of Adventure." Of these, 17 and 20, respectively, state or imply on their title pages and in their prefaces, that they are largely based on fact. Such designations as "novel," "tale," and "romance" occur in 15 and 11 cases, respectively. Only nine out of the 63 titles use both the term "novel" and the guarantee of authenticity: it was obviously held unwise to mix up fact and fiction. The conventional claim of authenticity was sarcastically commented upon by a reviewer of Mrs. Read's *Monima*: "To increase the interest which the writer has endeavoured to excite, the reader is informed that the story is founded on fact. Under this impression we must be careful not to impute the numerous absurdities and improbabilities connected with the tale, to the want of judgment or ingenuity in our fair author..." (*American Review and Literary Journal* 2, no. 2[1802]:164-65). Another dig at the convention of the true tale is found in William Ray, *The American Tars in Tripolitan Slavery*. Into his autobiographical narrative Ray introduced a story neither wonderful nor English but "very nearly" true (p. 47).

15. "Unrestrained" reflects both upon the quantity and varying quality of novels. The figures and catalogues of booksellers and libraries prove that the
number of novels and novel-readers was considerable. This quantity was de­
ployed explicitly; this is implied in the seriousness of tone and in the frequent
repetition of the warnings against fiction. It can also be read out of the conces­
sion made by some novelists that there were indeed objectionable novels, a
concession that would hardly have been made if the genre as such had not been
firmly established. (Naturally such admissions also served as puffs for the
particular novelists' work, saying in effect, "Be sure to read only good novels
such as mine." ) The critics of fiction were willing to concede that there were
harmless and even commendable works of fiction, but they insisted that it was
necessary to prevent uncontrolled "free access" to fiction because its addicts
"devoured" it (Bloomsgrove Family, 2:186) "promiscuously" (A Brief Retrospect,
2:397) and "indiscriminately" (Boston Weekly Magazine 1, no. 13[1803]: 53. Timothy Flint's statement about the Mississippi region in the
1820's seems to prove that the warnings were ineffectual (quoted in Harvey
Wish, Society and Thought in Early America [1962], p. 239).

16. In Female Quixotism "indiscreet" refers mainly to Dorcasina's romance-
inspired love code. An association with "Jacobinism, atheism, and illumina­
tism" (2:202) does not seem too farfetched, since this love code and the new-
fangled notions of "French philosophy" might have the same effects upon
"that much-suffering, and insulted sex, all of whom the morals, and the
manners, and the pursuits of the atheists, and the jacobin-spoilers of the
present day, are incessantly labouring...to turn over, as poor, wretched,
forlorn victims,—to shame, and remorse, and anguish, and tribulation, and
barren sorrow, and irretrievable destitution" (Monthly Register 2[1807]:265).
Writers such as Sterne, Godwin, Rousseau, and Goethe were thought to spread
various kinds of "indiscreet" notions: see, e.g., The Boarding School, p. 205;
A Brief Retrospect, 2:382; Port-Folio 1, no. 17(1801):134; Dwight, Travels,
3:21-23; Mrs. Rowson, The Inquisitor, 3:172; Mrs. Read, Monima, p. 368;
Benjamin Rush, Essays (1798), p. 82; Literary Magazine 6(1806):451. Werther
in particular is connected with the suicides in William Hill Brown, The
Power of Sympathy (1789); The Hapless Orphan (1793); Relf, Infidelity; and
also John Davis, Letters of Ferdinand and Elizabeth (New York, 1798). See
Frank G. Ryder (1952).

17. "...He who regards the welfare of a child will be as anxious to with­
hold from him the view of many natural and lively descriptions of vice, as to
keep him from the company of those who are really vicious" (Miller,
A Brief Retrospect, 2:396). Samuel Woodworth stated that the reading of Peregrine
Pickle at the age of fourteen (about 1798) at once threatened "all the lessons
of morality and religion" he had been taught. ("The Influence of Juvenile
Reading," in Taft, Minor Knickerbockers, p. 63.)

18. Cf. the statement of "Betsey Thoughtless": "I have Novels on my toilet,
Novels on the table, Novels on my chimney place, Novels in my chairs, Novels
all over my chamber. I would prefer a new Novel to a new gown, and had
rather lose my dinner than break off from a tender love-scene. In Novels I
find all the nourishment of food, all the refreshment of sleep:—with my Novels
I am most happy; without them I should be miserable" (Boston Weekly
Magazine 1, no. 23[1803]:94).

19. According to The Boarding School "reading what can yield no instruc­tion" is a waste of time, while novel-reading "dissipates the ideas, relaxes the
mind, and renders it inattentive to the more solid and useful branches of
literature" (pp. 26, 161). Cf. Benjamin Silliman's remarks about novels in

20. Both Mrs. Foster (*The Boarding School*, p. 17) and Dwight (*Travels*, 1:474-77) condemned novel-reading as encouraging vanity. Of the addict he was depicting, Dwight said: “If her imagination is to be trusted, she is to be romantically rich, and romantically happy” (475). Dorcasina is however very much aware that final happiness is attained only after many ups and downs (2:86).

21. Rush, Miller, Dwight, and others distrusted fiction because they thought it liable to direct compassion toward imaginary instead of real objects.

22. “At best novels may be considered as the toys of youth; the rattle boxes of sixteen” (Webster, *A Collection of Essays*, p. 29). Cf. *Monthly Anthology and Boston Review* 5(1808):499. It is not irrelevant to recall that many novel-heroines of the age are about sixteen and get married or seduced at that age. Dorcasina appears retarded, for it is only at eighteen that she feels she must adopt a romance-like name, and changes plain Dorcas to Dorcasina.

23. Mitchell said of novels, “The most important objection to these productions, is their immoral tendency” (*The Asylum*, p. xiii), and Miller pronounced them either “contemptibly frivolous” or “positively seductive and corrupting in their tendency” (*A Brief Retrospect*, 2:393). Cf. *The Boarding School*, p. 17.

24. A novel addict who was cured at an earlier age and could readjust herself to a normal existence is described in William Wirt’s *The Old Bachelor*, pp. 24-25.

25. Dorcasina might have agreed with a “lady in Jamaica” who wrote in the *Columbian Magazine*: “I am now sixty-three, yet I can enjoy a good novel, as I never exclude any species of reading that I can comprehend, and which has a moral tendency” (5[1791]:142). Less favorable opinions on novel-reading in the same magazine appeared in the issue of October, 1792 (6:215-26, 262).

26. Perhaps some such regret that *Female Quixotism* could not be taken quite seriously was expressed in the *Monthly Anthology*: “Many of us have doubtless dwelt with great sympathy on the pathetick story of the unfortunate Dorcasina Sheldon, and have been inclined to believe that the ingenious author had almost out-quixoted Don Quixote” (5[1808]:499).