

## **Martha Meredith Read's *Margaretta; or, The Intricacies of the Heart* (Introduction and Edited by Richard S. Pressman); Tabitha Gilman Tenney's *Female Quixotism* (Introduction by Mary McAleer Balkun)**

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Yet *another* small press? In this age of searchable on-line texts and instant electronic publishing, who needs another paper-and-print book publisher?

Regardless of these seemingly growing problems, what's old can be, if taught well, new again, and Early American Reprints has a place. Created by long-time CEA member Richard Pressman of St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Early American Reprints is a small press that aims to put into people's hands texts for which there is—or, arguably, should be—a demand. The result is a series of books that are not only a pleasure to hold in one's hands but that serve as critical editions, each with a scholarly introduction, ancillary materials, and extensive explanatory footnotes.

The market and literary profiles of the first offering from Early American Reprints, Martha Meredith Read's *Margaretta; or, The Intricacies of the Heart*, indicate Pressman's larger goals for the press: the novel has been out of print since 1807, yet it is mentioned in nearly all the relevant histories; many teachers use on-line versions that retain the text's sometimes-confusing original format (including archaic punctuation and dialog continuing throughout a paragraph without changing for different speakers); and the novel's less-than-canonical status means that critical response, as well as cultural context, is left to chance. This republication resolves these

problems. Plus, the volume is affordable and, moreover, typical for Early American Reprints: because the press is a not-for-profit venture, *Margaretta* is priced at only \$9.00 per book in person, \$10 if ordered in quantity for a course (to cover shipping), and \$12.50 if purchased through the mail.

That *Margaretta* has never been reprinted is a bit surprising, for it tells an intriguing tale from almost any point of view. The plot follows a beautiful country girl who is forced to travel from her home in Elkton (Maryland), to Philadelphia, Baltimore, St. Domingue (Haiti), England, and, at long last, the Susquehanna Valley. In addition to this unusual-for-the-genre wide geographical reach, she has the sorts of encounters with men that, overall, place *Margaretta* alongside other novels of seduction such as Susanna Haswell Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794) and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797). However, unlike Rowson's and Foster's heroines, Read's title character resolutely maintains her virtue, and in this crucial point lies Read's thesis that the purity tempered in the American Revolution cannot be violated by French licentiousness or British aristocratic arrogance. Rather, in Read's novel, the seducers are seduced into right values while the aristocrats are brought down a peg.

Beyond its interest on the level of literary genre, *Margaretta* pertains to a variety of political questions confronting early nineteenth-century America. Pressman's introductory critical essay is especially welcome in contextualizing the novel in this light, especially in how *Margaretta* herself may be taken as an idealized and traditional response of the Federalist Party stung by the recent election of the Democratic-Republican Thomas Jefferson. In light of the resulting "Federalist Fantasy" that he labels in his essay's title, Pressman observes,

Read imagined a world in which there simply are no contaminations, no slave revolts, no war, neither at sea nor on land, a world in which the British and the French are at peace and in which the threats to our feminized nation cannot "penetrate" our virtuous selves, in the person of Margaretta. In Read's imagined world, we Americans can *say* we are against slavery and for a strong, democratic work ethic, but in which we can *live* a cultivated, polite life of leisure provided, however indirectly in the North, by slave labor. She has imagined a world in which the virtuous—in morals and ethics—merit all they could desire simply *because* of their virtue. (31)

Of course, the fantasy was as illogical in its position about slavery as it was unrealistic in its philosophy about international relations, but today's reader is sure to find in this very problem a fascinating reflection of how the Federalists thought the new nation should be shaped.

In a related publication by Early American Reprints, another important novel of the period, Tabitha Gilman Tenney's novel, *Female Quixotism* (1801), is now available. Although this often-mentioned novel was reprinted by Oxford in 1992, it has long been otherwise out-of-print. Like *Margaretta*, *Female Quixotism* appears to be something of a Federalist fantasy, holding the line against social upstarts. The plot involves an heiress whose ideas of romance are jaded by obsessive reading of novels and who is pursued by one greedy "suitor" after the other, all of whom are foiled—but not by the naïve Dorcasina, who thinks every suitor the real thing. The result is that Dorcasina, in reaching the ripe age of 41 and now far from attractive, has her illusion shattered in the process of foiling a blunt-spoken fortune hunter. The lesson is a basic

Federalist idea: what is real is when people stay in their God-given social place, for those who attempt to rise are dangerous deceivers.

Finally, it must be noted that Early American Reprints has scheduled for some time later this year a third volume, Rebecca Rush's *Kelroy* (1812). For more information about series, visit [earlyamericanreprints.wordpress.com](http://earlyamericanreprints.wordpress.com) or email [rpressman@stmarytx.edu](mailto:rpressman@stmarytx.edu).