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Who Are You, Mrs Walter Shandy, Aberratio Naturae?

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine the critically unacknowledged aspect of the canonical *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne: the authorial delineation and narrative management of the character of Mrs Shandy, who is a silent presence in the background even though the pivotal personal events for the narrator of this spoof-autobiography are his conception and birth. The novel, otherwise thoroughly structurally and thematically experimental, seems to be fossilized in the ancient and Christian philosophers' assumptions about the physical incompleteness of the "weaker vessel" and the malign influence of her disturbing physiology, which for centuries fed into the ontological concept of a woman as Nature's aberration, *aberratio naturae*. Mrs Shandy's muteness, a striking contrast to her husband's verbosity, her absence and exclusion from the affairs of the male dominated household seem to run counter to the novel's progressive form and linguistic audacity, the sociological shifts slowly taking root and medical discoveries made before and during this age of paradoxes.

ABSTRACT

Tristram Shandy is a challenging read. An example of "postmodernism before there was modernism to be post of,"¹ and a canonical work of nonsensicality, it abounds in experimental everything: conversational narration,

¹ A line from film adaptation of *Tristram Shandy*. Michael Winterbottom, dir. *A Cock and Bull Story*. UK, 2005.

nonexistent plot, authorial distancing, unaffected presentation of human idiosyncrasy, spontaneous rapidity of plot progression, its digressive retardation and relaxed meandering. After Defoe and Richardson it is a gratifying read. Sterne's lightness and apparent nonsensicality quicken one's imaginative step after his predecessors' puritan narratives, with their anchor in the unquestionable truth of the Scriptures and their flattened morality. Pioneering as their novels were, their moralistic precepts and didactic nerve tied their fantasy tight. And even though Richardson may be considered the first novelist to successfully draw forth the potential of the unseen, in comparison with Sterne both *Pamela* and *Clarissa* have a suffocating moralistic aura, which, among other things, forbids formal and thematic experimentation. Even Richardson's follower, Fielding, who peppered this newfangled genre with his Eton-acquired erudition, with theoretical preludes and with narrators who treat the reader as intellectual partner, still seems harnessed by principle and expectation. In the light cast by Sterne, Fielding is systematic, explanatory and overtly methodical. Realizing the limitations of the literary convention he adopts and the medium of communication ascribed to it, Sterne refuses to be constrained in any way and instead fuses various forms of artistic expression. As a result, his narrator resorts to doodles and asterisks, to a blend of languages, to descriptions of gestures his characters make and to songs they sing when language fails to sufficiently articulate thought and emotion.

Sterne has Tristram, his narrator, announce that "writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation" and that no writer who knows "the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all . . . but halve this matter amicably" and leave something for his reader to imagine (127). Tristram declares also that, provided he follows "along the line of his story,—he may go backwards and forwards as he will" (375).

Is it not a shame to make two chapters of what passed in going down one pair of stairs? for we are got no farther yet than to the first landing, and there are fifteen more steps down to the bottom; and for aught I know, as my father and my uncle Toby are in a talking humour, there may be as many chapters as steps. . . .

The deuce of any other rule have I to govern myself by in this affair—and if I had one—as I do all things out of all rule—I would twist it and tear it to pieces, and throw it into the fire when I had done . . . (282)

His thoughts are wayward, and so his narration appears to be, subordinated as it is to his inner impulses rather than to a conventional chain of cause-effect. On close examination, however, the novel's notorious anarchy is only skin-deep. Sterne's metafictional insertions, like those that

assert the supremacy of the narrator, reveal sense and structure behind choppy chaos. Under the facade of incoherent plot and disjointed digression emerges a narrator who may well be jovial and convivial, but who is in full control of both his slippery narrative and the characters who move within it—held precisely like puppets on strings.²

The novel is a fictitious autobiography of the character-narrator Tristram Shandy who, at the end of his life, revives his long-dead family members and friends in a process of narration and rejoices in their literary resurrection. Apart from Book VII, where Tristram recounts his journey to France, the novel centres on a domestic hearth, a typical country gentry household with its army of family members, friends, acquaintances and servants, and Mr and Mrs Shandy, who are at this whirlpool's core.

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Or are they? Walter Shandy, Uncle Toby, Corporal Trim, Yorick and Obadiah certainly are. Hardly a chapter passes without mention of one of them, a few of them, or all of them. Mrs Shandy, however, the wife and the mother, with the exception of but a few scenes, is merely alluded to, does not have a hobby-horse the way all the others around her do, or a definable personality, or any idiosyncrasies either. She is a shadow that passes without even a first name after she marries, ceasing to be “the said Elizabeth Mollineux” and acquiring a new identity, the one she is referred to throughout the novel, Mrs Shandy.

If the novel's chaos is only skin-deep and in fact carefully managed, its structure is likewise well organized. The multi-layered plot consists of three major time-planes in reverse chronological order: Tristram's fictional presence, his early childhood, and the account of the history of his family which, from Tristram's perspective, belongs to his pre-natal stage. In the same way, the spatial arrangement of the novel is dimensional too. The Shandy household falls into four major areas: the parlour, the upstairs bedrooms, the kitchen and the garden. The allotment and circulation of characters is strictly related to the topography of the house; segregation determines their belonging. Walter Shandy, Uncle Toby and his servant Corporal Trim, Pastor Yorick and Doctor Slop are about the only ones seen in the parlour, the kitchen is peopled by servants, and the garden is where uncle Toby relives the glory of his wartime past.

This is all very well, but where is Mrs Walter Shandy to be found?³

She is most likely to be encountered upstairs, as this is the domain of the ladies: Mrs Shandy and her maid Susannah. She is hardly ever to

² Compare Grażyna Bystydzieńska for a detailed analysis of movement and theatrical references in *Tristram Shandy* (72–79).

³ I would like to thank Dorota Filipczak for drawing my critical attention to the character of Mrs Shandy.

be seen, and never heard in the parlour, with the gentlemen. There is no disorder in Shandy Hall, no anarchy in the understanding of one's place; in comparison with his formal experimentation, Sterne appears surprisingly conventional in his determination to keep to the established patriarchal pattern of position and power.

This tightly woven patriarchal pattern specified that women's position was defined by their socially "constrictive" roles as "wives, mothers, housekeepers, domestic servants, maiden aunts" (Porter 36) and by their "relationship to a man" (Hufton 16). For centuries, European philosophical and theological thought was steeped in misogynist depreciation of women; ancient and Christian philosophers belittled woman as an "incomplete man," as the "weaker vessel" (Bogucka 123). Where philosophy and theology led, medicine echoed, in line with the ancients. Aristotelian philosophy perceived the female as an imperfect man and Galen posited that "the female body was only a turning inside out of the male" (Berriot-Salvadore 349). Plato exerted a malign influence with his view of the womb as an animalistic entity existing independently inside the female body (Bogucka 124). The image of this disturbingly powerful female organ "as a wandering animal within an unstable one" gave rise to a perennial debate about whether a woman should be regarded as a truly human being (Berriot-Salvadore 359). Renaissance anatomists and doctors perceived the female body as monstrous, as *animal occasionatum*, an accidental creature, and woman as *defectus naturalis*, Nature's mistake, and *aberratio naturae*, Nature's aberration, a mistaken creature (Bogucka 123).

We can detect the reverberations of this approach in Sterne. Trying to explain his sister-in-law's reluctance to admit a male doctor during delivery and unable to put it politely, Uncle Toby concludes that she "does not choose to let a man so near her *****" (120). Shocked at his brother's ignorance concerning matters of the other sex, Walter Shandy endeavours to clarify the basics of female anatomy and so embarks on an almost "dissectible" passage which reveals both a misogynistic objectification of the female body and a characteristic coarse humour. He urges uncle Toby to "at least, know so much as the right end of a woman from the wrong," at which the old bachelor fixes his eyes upon "a small crevice, formed by a bad joint in the chimney-piece." In a typically Shandean manner, Walter's divagations remain forever unresolved:

Now, if a man was to sit down coolly, and consider within himself the make, the shape, the construction, come-at-ability, and convenience of all the parts which constitute the whole of that animal, called Woman, and compare them analogically.—(121–22)

Aristotelian and Platonic thought was so pervasive that over the centuries it resulted in the assertion of not merely the imperfection but also the treacherous weirdness, if not viciousness, of femaleness. Sexual dimorphism remained a mystery, and ignorance about the substance of the ovarian cycle led to the conjecture that the female temperament was too cold, too moist, thus causing “the man’s seed to rot.” Galen’s physiology fed into a theory of temperaments which labelled woman as unstable by nature. Scientific decrees proved fertile ground for superstition, and so, following the ancients, an unshakable belief persisted that a woman was “weak, quick to anger, jealous, and false, whereas man was courageous, judicious, deliberate, and efficient” (Berriot-Salvadore 352–4). Such bias reverberates in Tristram’s insistence on referring to the adversaries of life as “she”: Fortune, “the ungracious Duchess,” answerable for the calamities of life, and Nature, “that death-looking, long-striding scoundrel of a scare-sinner,” are both female. Unpredictable, inexplicable, they embody the qualities associated with a temperamental, ungraspable, evasive and therefore perilous femininity. For Walter Shandy, women are still aligned with the irrationality of Nature, seen as a part of, as one with, the elements, “fire, water, women, wind. . . . ‘Tis some misfortune . . . to have so many jarring elements breaking loose. And riding triumph in every corner of a gentleman’s house” (290).

However, any social history gives evidence that such theories on the female body dominated European medical discourse only until the late seventeenth century. Many sources confirm that with the Enlightenment came a steady elimination of the Aristotelian myth of the incomplete woman (Bogucka 143, Berriot-Salvadore 354). Throughout the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries female bodies gradually ceased to be perceived in terms of deficiency, and, in line with the teleological credo that “nature does nothing in vain,” were beginning to be examined as distinct entities (Berriot-Salvadore 356). So the examples quoted above are of a startlingly obsolete nature, already anachronistic by the standards of the eighteenth century, and Walter Shandy appears to voice pre-Enlightenment prejudices and sentiments. Therefore, if the novel is a masterpiece of subversion, a playful joke poking fun at everyone, everything, itself included, can the presentation of Mrs Shandy be taken at face value? Isn’t she an object of contentious scrutiny, and the way she is perceived, her narrative delineation, a satire?

The novel was published in an era of unprecedented advancement in anatomical research, and Sterne clearly displays awareness of the animated medical discourse of his time. Dutchman de Graaf had discovered and described the ovaries in 1672, thus annulling the long-held Aristotelian and Hippocratic view that woman was passive in the act of procrea-

tion. De Graaf's hypothesis gave rise to ontological discussions about the so-far unquestionable male supremacy in the sphere of reproduction, acknowledging a woman's role as its vital constituent. Her role in the process of gestation was elevated from that of a ship to which men brought their merchandise (Berriot-Salvadore 365). Advanced as these seventeenth-century medical discoveries were, many practitioners nevertheless determined to adhere to the Hippocratic pre-ovarian two-seed system well into the Enlightenment, asserting woman's passivity in accordance with the established divine and political hierarchy (Berriot-Salvadore 367). De Graaf's discovery was soon counterbalanced by the discovery of spermatozoids, which in the last decades of the seventeenth century "restored man's prestige as creator." This too, though initially welcome, soon met with criticism, mainly from physicians who "could not accept that humankind grew from a kind of worm" (Berriot-Salvadore 366). Considering the above facts, the opening passages of *Tristram Shandy* may shed light on Sterne's involvement in and attitude to contemporary medical discourse. The novel famously begins with the scene of conception, interrupted by Mrs Shandy, a moment which, according to her husband's theory, had a devastating impact on their son's future constitution, his "successes and miscarriages" (35). By mentioning the significance of the "homunculus," or miniature perfect human being, which long predates any theory of sperm, Walter, speaking through Tristram, shows blatant disregard of the enlightened practitioners' theory of spermatozoids. And his understanding of the mother's role in the act of conception would appear to demonstrate that he has not kept up to speed with a change in medical discourse: her active role remains unacknowledged, her contribution merely to remain mute and receptive, as all the "animal spirits" are believed to be carried by the homunculus. Her untimely yet innocent question to make sure her husband has wound up the clock is held responsible for scattering the animal spirits, and consequently for ever remains answerable for Tristram's oddities. It seems that when Uncle Toby and Walter Shandy speak of the "injury" done to Tristram, making the mother's diversionary enquiry the culprit for her son's misfortunes, Sterne is being playfully ironic about the presumed superior male role in conception. In keeping with the novel's tone, he cites and mocks a medical discourse in one go.⁴

⁴ Compare Robert E. Erickson's argument in *Mother Midnight. Birth, Sex and Fate in Eighteenth-Century Fiction (Defoe, Richardson, and Sterne)*. Erickson, too, notices inconsistency in Sterne's depiction of the intercourse scene; however, he attributes it rather to a change in perspective on the issue of pleasure in intercourse and, consequently, on "how to represent the act of human propagation" that took place in midwife manuals from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century (225).

The example he gives to justify Walter's theory, Tristram's unorthodox farting, is so trivial and crude that it cannot be taken as a legitimate response, but a parodying, subversive declaration revealing the absurdity of long-held views. Moreover, it is symptomatic that Uncle Toby enjoys the privilege of being introduced to the complexities of Walter's theories, most of which concern Tristram, but that his wife, the mother, does not; she is portrayed as for ever remaining in the dark, ignorant about the essence of the gentlemen's remarks. She is denied access to the real meaning of their argument, yet is evaluated on the basis of her understandably incompetent contribution to the discussion.

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My Tristram's misfortunes began nine months before he ever came into the world.

—My mother, who was sitting by, looked up,—but she knew no more than her backside what my father meant,—but my uncle, Mr Toby Shandy, who had been often informed of the affair,—understood him very well. (37)

In his history of the origins of the English imagination, Peter Ackroyd makes an observation about female travellers, among whom one of the earliest recorded examples was Margery Kempe, who paved the way for later eminent travellers. He proposes that their journeys were “fuelled by attitudes of discontent and sentiments of exclusion; the only way to escape the masculine world was, literally, to get away.” The essence of their rambling spirit lay in “the affirmation of individuality and individual experience . . . and their desire not to be chastened or modified by male preconceptions.” Mary Wollstonecraft and Lady Hester Stanhope, for example, both disdained the label of feminine powerlessness, and regarded travelling as a gateway to at least partial liberation. One of the first and most renowned literary expressions of this feminine yearning was Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, verbalizing the wish of women who “longen . . . to goon on pilgrimage” (Ackroyd 191–92). In this light, Mrs Shandy's attempts at breaking away from the masculine web that entangles her at home are restricted and pathetic; the only journey she is mentioned to have made is to the place she specified for the supposed childbirth. She was legally entitled to this right according to the marriage settlement, which stated that the very end of pregnancy, six weeks before childbirth, was the only time when she could act “as if she was a *femme sole* and unmarried” (67). Considering herself pregnant, Mrs Shandy avails herself of her granted right, determines to go to London, and enjoys a brief moment of freedom to act as an adult, independent individual. However, it turns out that she has put her husband to trouble and expense in vain, as this time she is not

with child. Returning from London, her husband is “in none of the best of moods,—pshawning and pishing all the way down,” and resolves that next time he will exercise a clause in their marriage settlement, added on the advice of Toby Shandy, which specifies that after an unnecessary journey made upon “false cries and tokens” Mrs Shandy should forfeit the right to such expeditions in future. Walter Shandy does not inform his wife of this resolution, and of the clause she might have been unaware only until she is properly with child. This single attempt of Mrs Shandy to follow her own will ends with a humiliating defeat when authoritarian male punishment commands her to lie in with her next child in the country to balance her husband’s previous unnecessary expenses.

This meditation on lack of personal liberty, precisely specified in the marriage settlement, illustrates an essential assumption of the time, namely, that the main purpose of marriage was understood as “the reproduction of the species.” Since children represented “the perpetuation of property,” a woman’s main role in adult life was reduced to that of procreator and mother (Hufton 34–5); “she was an heir-producing machine” (Porter 41). This passage is also a literary exemplification of the fact that, under common law, wives were subject to the will and disposition of the husband. Throughout the eighteenth century and beyond, as Sir William Blackstone put it, “In marriage husband and wife are one person, and that person is the husband” (Porter 38). In polite society a woman’s “first duty was to obey her husband” (Porter 43). Hence Mrs Shandy is present in the novel only in relation to matters concerning her role as Tristram’s mother; her whole life, the government of her body included, is totally under her husband’s jurisdiction.

Walter Shandy is the one who determines the frequency of their intercourse. Being a methodical man, he performs the act once a month, having before performed his other regular responsibility, winding up the grandfather clock. There is little spontaneity or pleasure for either spouse. Walter Shandy treats the procedure mechanically, approaching the “animal mechanism” of his wife with judicious precision (Erickson 227). The question Mrs Shandy asks shows that she too perceives coition in terms of a contractual obligation she is burdened with on the first Sunday night of every month.

Walter Shandy is the one who determines not only where his wife is to lie in but also who is to deliver the baby. Because childbirth is to take place in Shandy Hall, Mrs Shandy is benevolently granted the right to be attended by a country midwife, but when problems emerge, Walter Shandy intervenes with Doctor Slop, the man-midwife, “a man of science.” The scene becomes a two-storied battlefield for power between the ladies upstairs and the gentlemen downstairs, mediated by the servants running

to and fro. Below are Walter Shandy—the master, the husband, the cerebral father—and Dr Slop, familiarized with all the “Improvements . . . in all branches of obstetrical knowledge, but particularly in that one single point of the safe and expeditious extraction of the foetus” (159), who initially arrives “unarmed,” without his newly-invented forceps, crotchet, squirt, and other “instruments of salvation and deliverance.” Above are Mrs Shandy, the wife, the mother in painful labour, undergoing breech delivery, confined to country-house childbirth against her will, assisted by the old midwife. The sloppiness of Dr Slop is not only titular; the cuts on uncle Toby’s hands, the result of demonstration of the forceps on his fists, are a potent metonymy for Mrs Shandy and Tristram’s injuries. For most of the childbirth scene Dr Slop is downstairs, untying the green bag containing his instruments, then demonstrating them, then in a debate on whether what the midwife sees is the child’s hip or head, and when he finally does get upstairs his ineptitude causes permanent damage to Tristram’s nose. He belongs with Walter Shandy and his fellow erudites, glittering their exchanges with Latinate diction, and proving completely ineffective in the hour of need. After several hours, when cooperation between midwife and doctor is indispensable, Susannah reports that:

. . . my poor mistress is ready to faint,—and her pains are gone,—and the drops are done,—and the bottle of julap is broke,—and the nurse has cut her arm,—(and I, my thumb, cried Dr Slop) and the child is where it was . . . and the midwife has fallen backwards upon the edge of the fender, and bruised her hip as black as your hat . . . (195)

and Dr Slop is summoned upstairs. Tension between him and the midwife becomes palpable; all he has to say is that it would be proper if she came downstairs. The whole incident is a demonstration of power: professional, of doctor over midwife, but also patriarchal, of man over woman, resulting in neglect of the woman in labour. Here, Sterne is winking at the conflict between the traditional approach of female midwives, relying almost solely on their experience and “their innate and uniquely feminine mastery of ‘touching,’” and the new phenomenon of male midwives, equipped with the forceps designed by Dr Smellie, a controversy that raged around the time of *Tristram Shandy*’s publication (Erickson 212). The second half of the eighteenth century certainly saw improvements in obstetrics, such as an advancement of version, that is, turning the infant’s body in the womb so that it comes out preferably head, or at least breech, first (Stone 59). Dr Slop demonstrates unpardonable ignorance on this matter when he blatantly declares “Pshaw! A child’s head is naturally as soft as the pap of an apple . . . and besides, I could have extracted by the feet after” (198). For

Walter Shandy, too, the upstairs bedroom, serving as delivery ward, is a “gar- rison . . . in the mutiny and confusion” (195). He is preoccupied with the unobstructed delivery of his child, ensuring intactness of its main organs, that is, its brain and genitals. He summons all the best philosophers, “of all ages and climates,” to go against Nature and “the nonsensical method of bringing us into the world by that part foremost.” Therefore, for the sake of avoiding the “force of the woman’s efforts, which, in strong labour pains, was equal . . . to a weight of 470 pounds averdupoise acting perpendicularly” upon the bones of a child’s cranium, causing “havoc and destruction” to the “infinitely fine and tender texture of the cerebellum,” he wants his child to be delivered by Caesarean section or, at least, have it turned “topsy-turvy” to be extracted by the feet, so that “instead of the cerebrum being propelled towards the cerebellum, the cerebellum, on the contrary, was propelled sim- ply towards the cerebrum where it could do no manner of hurt” (165). The whole chapter is absurd, yet it serves as a perfect example of Shandean convoluted logic. Both Dr Slop with his army of tools and Walter Shandy with his philosophers and gobbledygook are in a no-win position either with the forces of Nature and Fate, or with the directorial narrator, who makes them marionettes for satire. They lose against the silent, upstairs presence of the “upright, motherly, notable, good old body of a midwife,” a “woman of few words” whose only tools were “a little plain good sense” and many years’ experience (41–42).⁵

Walter Shandy is the one who determines the way their son is to be educated. Philosophers are summoned to provide ample evidence that “the offspring . . . is not so under the power and jurisdiction of the *moth- er*.” And even though Yorick objects: “But the reason . . . equally holds good for her,” Walter Shandy retorts: “She is under authority herself” (383). Thus, in line with book-won precept and convention, the father embarks on the production of Tristra-paedia, the system of education for his son. The speed at which this work is composed also illustrates Tris- tram’s narrative quandaries about dissonance between the passage of real and fictitious time. Again Walter Shandy’s procedural approach becomes

⁵ One contemporary scholar expresses a stance in a manner which seems to reverberate with these 18th century debates, elevating men midwives over old-fashioned unequipped females. He attributes the fact that a high child mortality rate abated in the mid-18th century to positive changes in the medical profession, who “at last began to take the problem seriously.” As a consequence, “male midwives appeared, who possessed stronger hands and who pioneered two extremely important technical advances . . . version . . . and the slow development of efficient forceps, the use of which would extract the infant without killing it in the process” (Stone 59). Porter seems to approach the problem more open-mindedly, and while, too, paying attention to the fact that “traditional female midwives were chal- lenged by the fancy new male *accoucheur*, armed with forceps,” he also notes that “forceps, if dirty, or clumsily handed, did more harm than good” (294).

his own snare: the pace of his writing is slower than the passage of time, and as a consequence Tristram cannot benefit from his father's educational designs but is "all that time totally neglected and abandoned" to his mother (368). Sterne is speaking in an age that witnessed an attitude change to familial emotion; more overt affection between spouses and between mother and child are noted in the late eighteenth century. A new quality of mothering, especially in the infant and toddler stage, was coming into vogue (Porter, Stone). When Tristram talks about being "abandoned" to his mother, again we are in the realm of irony: he mimics and parodies the sentiments of his father, who time and time again champions the still-prevailing misogynist inflexibility.

Walter Shandy is also the one who determines when their son is expected to change from "his vest and tunics" into more boy-like gear—"breeches." The conversation between the spouses here is a farcical enactment of expected female subservience:

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—We should begin to think, Mrs Shandy, of putting this boy into breeches.—

We should so,—said my mother.—We defer it, my dear, quoth my father, shamefully.—

I think we do, Mr Shandy,—said my mother. . . .

—They should be of leather, said my father. . . .

They will last him, said my mother, the longest.

But he can have no linings to 'em, replied my father.—

He cannot, said my mother.

'Twere better to have them of fustian, quoth my father.

Nothing can be better, quoth my mother. — . . .

I am resolved, however, quoth my father, . . . he shall have no pockets in them.—

—There is no occasion for any, said my mother.—(422–23)

Even though a dark-age view on female physiology was swept away by the Enlightenment, pessimism about female rationality remained openly voiced. Intellectual inferiority continued to be perceived as the stamp of femininity. Walter Shandy thinks and acts according to his maxims: "*That women are timid.*" And 'tis very well they are—else there would be no dealing with them" (564). Mrs Shandy becomes what women are expected to be and continue to be for generations to come, "practically . . . completely insignificant . . . in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell, and was the property of her husband" (Woolf 38). Her timid views are "quenched in the flood of his views" (Woolf 83).

There are moments, however, when Walter Shandy finds his wife's inability to voice her own opinion debilitating.

It was a consuming vexation to my father that my mother never asked the meaning of a thing she did not understand.

That she is not a woman of science, my father would say—is her misfortune—but she might ask a question.

My mother never did.—In short, she went out of the world at last without knowing whether it turned *round*, or stood *still*.—My father had officiously told her above a thousand times which way it was,—but she always forgot. (452)

Both Mr and Mrs Shandy are ensnared here: she is not as limited as Tristram depicts her, nor as brainless as her husband believes. He, despite the acquired expectations of what a wife should be, longs for an intellectual companion and is irritated by what he perceives as his wife's intellectual limitation.

Now she had a way . . . and that was never to refuse her assent and consent to any proposition my father laid before her, merely because she did not understand it, or had no ideas to the principal word or term of art, upon which the tenet or proposition rolled. . . .

This was the eternal source of misery to my father . . . (584)

Both Mr and Mrs Shandy fall prey to convention and gender-ascribed expectation, telling him to subordinate her legally, intellectually and emotionally, telling her to be subservient. They perform their correct gender roles throughout: he sees a brainless heir-producing housewife in her, she learns quickly a simple marital truth, the one that Jane Austen will soon aptly verbalize: “imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms,” as men desire nothing “more in woman than ignorance” (Austen 71).

The eighteenth century, which embraces *Tristram Shandy*, was an age of paradoxes. Locke affirmed that man and wife form a “conjugal society” by a “voluntary contract,” yet have different “understandings” and “wills.” Therefore, since it is “necessary that the last determination, i.e. the rule, should be placed somewhere, it naturally falls to the man’s share, as the abler and the stronger” (Locke). His “conjugal society” may be read as conjugal subordination (cf. Le Doeuff 187). But Locke on education was much more egalitarian, more so than Rousseau for example, and he advocated that education for girls should be fundamentally the same as for boys. Samuel Johnson too. On the one hand he said: “Sir, a woman’s preaching is like a dog’s walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprized to find it done at all.” But on the other hand, he argued for better education for women, better conditions of living for the underprivileged ones, and criticized social constraints which drove them

to prostitution (Johnson). In the mid-1750s he declared that: “In former times, the pen, like the sword, was considered as consigned by nature to the hands of men.” But the eighteenth century saw more harbingers of feminine creativity in literature (for example, the Fair Triumvirate of Wit: Behn, Manley, Haywood), rousing Johnson to conclude that “the revolution of years has now produced a generation of Amazons of the pen, who with the spirit of their predecessors have set the masculine tyranny at defiance” (Ackroyd 363). Even though these voices sound shot through with dictatorial benignity, bowing to segregation and prejudice concerning the “fair sex,” and even though woman often remains an object in this masculine discourse, they also reveal a gradual shift taking place in the male-dominated Age of Reason.

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In Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*, Le Doeuff finds “the figure of women responsible for their own subjection,” which results from the idea that the husband’s intellectual superiority grants him power in the family. Since marriage in Locke’s understanding is based on consent, “a woman’s marriageability is judged by the consent she gives to domination by male intellectual superiority.” In other words it was “necessary for woman to have a diminished intellect, to place herself outside reason and to recognize a masculine character in every mental product” (Le Doeuff 188). This certainly is the way Sterne delineates Mrs Shandy; the male household she inhabits perceives her as a character “of no deep reading,” as “not a woman of science.” But since Walter Shandy’s bookishness and philosophizing is parodied throughout, so too is his perception of his spouse and the whole “female lot.” His arrogance and ineffectiveness go hand in hand with his impotent, impractical, unnatural theories, which also include those relating to females, and consequently to the distribution of power in the family. Consenting to a woman would, in his opinion, “infallibly throw a balance of power, too great already, into the weaker vessels of the gentry,” and since they already have many other “usurped rights,” in the end it would “prove fatal to the monarchical system of domestic government established in the first creation of things by God.” Mr Shandy advocates “paternal power” and grieves over the fact that for a century it has been gradually “degenerating into a mixed government” which “seldom produced any thing . . . but sorrow and confusion” (75). Analyzing another man’s behaviour, two hundred years later, Virginia Woolf will comment on such an attitude: “He is protesting against the equality of the other sex by asserting his own superiority” (83).

Correspondingly, Mrs Shandy’s own understanding of compulsory dutiful female “imbecility” is not to be taken at face value. If Sterne, a formally audacious writer, chooses to present any character with narrative rigidity, suspended like a puppet, unheard, hardly seen, “halved,” that character certainly is Mrs Shandy. As a married woman Mrs Shandy agrees to

place herself outside reason and decision. But to compensate, she develops survival strategies. When her husband fusses after their unnecessary and costly trip to London—which was her attempt to exercise authority over her own body, if only for a few weeks—she seems to have learnt her lesson: subdued, she yields and resolves “to sit down quietly, and make the most of it” (71). Having acted against the designs of her husband, she so exposes herself to his humours, vexations, disquiet and fretting—which, as she complains to Uncle Toby, “would have tired out the patience of any flesh alive” (70)—that she resolves to avoid any such commotion in future. When Tristram recounts his family’s grand tour through France, he mentions that he is accompanied exclusively by male companions: the father, Uncle Toby, Trim and Obadiah. All of the family go, except the mother. Her ostensible reason for staying behind is to finish knitting her husband “a pair of large worsted breeches—(the thing is common sense)—and she not caring to be put out of her way” (489). But this can be seen as an act of free will under cover of marital duty, a peculiar subversion of the idea of a journey, a journey, so to speak, within her own household, where for a few weeks she may exercise untrammelled power and inhabit her own downstairs parlour, otherwise the domain of the gentlemen.

Other literary works of the period can be read as similar, though often unintentional, commentaries on inequality of the sexes and its consequences in the domestic sphere of life. Wollstonecraft devotes a whole chapter of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to such writers who “have rendered women objects of pity, bordering on contempt” (150). This can be, at least partly, attributed to what Adrienne Rich called “the omnipresent patriarchal bias” (40). It hushed women, denied them access to education and, as Wollstonecraft recognized, sacrificed their potential to “libertine notions of beauty” and instead offered them petty accomplishments, employment “contract[ing] their faculties” to such domestic activities as needlework, embroidery or parlour music (147). Thus Richardson—probably inspired by the circle of women with whom he surrounded himself, called “the female senate”—endows the eponymous Pamela and her benefactor, Lady B, with outstanding erudition, but when this otherwise outspoken Pamela agrees to marry Mr B, she is made to comply with the 48 rules proposed by him, such as: “2. That I must think his Displeasure the heaviest thing that can befall me.... 6. That I must bear with him, even when I find him in the wrong” (Richardson 448). Smollett makes the female characters of his *Humphry Clinker* an illiterate Tabitha Bramble and a naive and superficial Lydia, her niece, whereas the gentlemen, Matthew and Jerry, are both Oxonians, sophisticated and observant letter-writers.

Women were schooled in reticence. Mrs Shandy chooses to be silent. But isn’t her silence a manifestation of wisdom in a household enveloped in

a plethora of verbal nonsense, voracious for theoretical speculation, ruled by a man who brings abstruse argumentation to the marital bedroom? If the novel is parody and satire, Mr Shandy—the most outspoken of its characters, “a philosopher in grain, speculative, systematical,” together with his single-minded outlooks and mechanical sex-consciousness—is certainly its target. What seeps into *Tristram Shandy* is a subtle suggestion that an ideal stance is a blend, an equilibrium of male and female elements, a truly “male-womanly mind,” and world, to extend Virginia Woolf’s proposal. This is achieved by the ability of the male narrator to divulge his “female” sentimentality, understood here as an ability to love and feel for his characters, display a humane understanding of each of their idiosyncrasies, notice trivial details about their demeanour and incorporate them as essential factors which constitute them as human beings—a quality which allowed Woolf to classify Sterne as an androgynous writer, together with Shakespeare, Coleridge and Keats (85). Above all, however, this male-female amalgam is traceable in the delineation of Uncle Toby, the most memorable and likeable character, the one who is remembered by Tristram to have had female sensitivity and “the modesty of a woman.” Praising Uncle Toby, Tristram avails himself of the opportunity to address the “Madam” reader and elevate “That female nicety . . . and inward cleanliness of mind and fancy, in your sex, which makes you so much the awe of ours” (90).

Analyzing *Tristram Shandy* as a Midwife Book, Erickson comes to the conclusion that for Tristram, the narrator, “Woman and the feminine is a far more complicated and problematical subject than for his father” (204). The interpretative key to Mrs Shandy is certainly not to be found in her husband, fogged as he is by Platonic philosophy, mechanical reason and ill-informed convention. Tristram-the-narrator narrates his mother the way his father perceived her. But Tristram-the-character sees women with a double perspective which encompasses not only the troubled vision of his own mother, a wife, a woman wed to and tied by her social position, but also his own reflection, untainted by marital experience, his own idea of socially unrestrained, potent femininity which inscribes the universe. This encompasses his images of other women—like his great Aunt Dinah, who married a coachman, or his dear, dear Jenny who “looks at her outside” whereas he, Tristram, “at her in—. How is it possible we should agree about her value?” (375)—but also his uneasy vision of the essences of the universe, often personified as female. Nature is not only a “scoundrel of a scare-sinner” but is also praised for making “everything so well to answer its destination.” It “seldom, or never errs, unless for pastime, in giving such forms and aptitudes to whatever passes through her hands.” Creative power, digression, Fancy, Wit, Pleasantry: in Sterne they are all feminine in nature.

Uncle Toby is the character whom Nature “formed of the best and finest clay—had tempered it with her own milk, and breathed into it the sweetest spirit” (597). He is the one who professes a truly humane vision, retaining a perceptiveness Walter does not have. With Nature, whatever creature she models “you are sure to have the thing you wanted,” yet, it remains forever inexplicable why she should “so eternally bungle it, as she does, in making so simple a thing as a married man” (596).

Who are you, Mr Walter Shandy, *Aberratio naturae*?

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