

Tristram Shandy: a 21st-century reader's perspective

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Abstract

In the 18th century, Laurence Sterne (1713 - 1768) authored 9 volumes of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. The aim of this paper is to review the work from the perspective of a 21st-century reader who has no special knowledge of literature nor interests in the period during which the book was written. After outlining the publishing history of the 9 volumes, I then review and discuss the main characters appearing in them. I conclude with my impressions, as a 21st-century reader, of this work.

Key words: Laurence Sterne, Tristram Shandy, Comedy, 21st Century reader's perspective

Introduction

The purpose of this short paper is to review *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (*Tristram Shandy*) from the perspective of a 21st-century reader with no special knowledge of literature nor interests in the period during which the book was written, with the objective of trying to evaluate whether the book is of value and interest to casual modern readers. To keep this review as naïve as possible, I have scrupulously avoided the temptation of researching Sterne's life, other than referring to the overviews provided by Wikipedia,¹⁾ and the Laurence Sterne Trust.²⁾ I have also avoided referring to literary criticism of *Tristram Shandy* for deeper insights into the aspects of this work, and possible interpretations of the text. The exception to this being the introduction given by Cedric Watts in my edition of *Tristram Shandy*.³⁾

Outline

In the 18th century, Laurence Sterne (1713 - 1768) published 9 volumes of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. With the exception of the final volume which was published singly in 1767, the other volumes were published in pairs in 1759, 1761,

1762, and 1765. Prior to the publication of *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne had followed an ecclesiastical career. During that time he gained a reputation as a preacher of sermons, and it seems that when Sterne wrote *Tristram Shandy*, his experience in the pulpit led him to have at least one eye on the popular tastes of his audience.

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman suggests an autobiography written by Tristram Shandy - indeed, no other author is attributed - but the book opens with a comical bedroom scene in which Tristram is conceived, leaving the reader in little doubt that the account is fictional, and likely the author, too. The book is written in the narrative style, and Tristram often breaks off from the telling of his tale of the Shandy family of Shandy Hall, to chat about his health or domestic affairs. He also discloses to his audience the difficulties he has in presenting his story in a comprehensible and coherent manner. An excellent raconteur, he builds expectations, and when he suspects he has become boring, he recaptures our attention with a new development in the tale or a hilarious joke. Furthermore, he also occasionally uses other devices, to engage our imaginations to embellish

his tale.

As Tristram's account progresses, we realise that a more accurate title would be *The Life of Toby Shandy* (Tristram's uncle) and the *Opinions of Walter Shandy* (Tristram's father). "Gentleman" we cannot dispute, and it informs us that Tristram has inherited his father's estate. However, in the volumes themselves, there is no account of Walter's death, which suggests that the work may not have been complete at the time of the Sterne's death. Indeed, the final volume of *Tristram Shandy* is inconclusive. Most of it is concerned with Widow Wadman's courtship of Uncle Toby. Chronologically, this took place years before Tristram's conception. We can speculate over the author's intentions, but the leap back in time and the lack of finality or conclusive remarks from the author create an inconclusive ending to his tale.

Discussion

There are two aspects to Tristram's story: the biographical part is the story of his uncle and father, and the other is the constant chatter with which the author ingratiates himself with his audience. The story of his uncle and father mainly takes place at the family home, Shandy Hall. Tristram plays a role in his story, but as with his conception, his role is inanimate, much like a piece of furniture, and serves only to be the focus of some events, conception, birth, and accidental circumcision, which are treated with slapstick humour. It is notable that even when Tristram becomes old enough to speak for himself, he never once interposes in the story of Shandy Hall by speaking with his father, uncle or mother. He is there, an observer and a commentator from afar; but in the midst of his kin, he is mute. A further curious feature of *Tristram Shandy* is: Who is the Author? Of course, Laurence Sterne wrote *Tristram Shandy*, but in name Tristram is the author. In other words, is Tristram Shandy an alter ego of Laurence Sterne, or is the fictional Tristram Shandy a disintermediated medium who writes this tale. Ambiguity of language lending multiple meanings

to words and actions is a central feature of *Tristram Shandy*, and the question of authorship is further complicated by the presence of Parson Yorick (we are told he is deceased in Volume I), who is considered to be a caricature of Laurence Sterne himself. This invites the question, did Laurence Sterne have to 'kill' the persona of the cleric in order to allow Tristram Shandy to 'live'?

For the 21st century reader, the occupants of Shandy Hall are familiar - with their eccentricities and highly individualised characters they form the cast of a situation comedy. Here is Walter, Tristram's father, the armchair philosopher. He has powers vested in him by law, by title, and by social standing. He is the fall-guy. His fate is to be defeated in all aspects of his ambition. Here is Toby his brother, the 10-year-old who has never grown-up. Invalided out of the army by a wound to the groin (nudge, nudge, wink, wink), he recreates military campaigns in miniature with comical results in the garden. Here is Trim (the name is suggestive), uncle Toby's man-servant, and a melodramatic man of maudlin sentimentality. Here is Mrs. Shandy, whose entrance is usually a prelude to the delivery of a dumb blonde joke. Here is Obadiah, one of Walter's servants, a rustic yokel who serves as the butt of several slapstick calamities. Here is Susannah, another servant - a feisty girl, an agent of chaos. Here is Doctor Slop (the name is suggestive) ready to maim a patient (Tristram) in the name of science. Here is Widow Wadman a sexy vamp in search of a man (Toby) and her maid Bridget. And finally Parson Yorick, who by his clerical title and Tristram's description is a caricature of Tristram's ghost-writer, the true author, Laurence Sterne himself.

Above I noted that Tristram is mute in his sitcom role, but as the raconteur of his tale he is loud and ebullient, regaling his audience with personal anecdotes, asides, or diversions that are wholly unrelated to the story of Shandy Hall, as well as

ignoring the catcalls. Yes, I did say audience, because we the reader are not alone. Tristram frequently addresses "Sir", "Madam", "your worships", "your reverences", as if we are one of a small number. He also describes the tricks he plays on us as an author, as well as discussing with us the difficulties he experiences in composing his work. Through these digressions and commentaries we become acquainted with Tristram Shandy in much the same way as we 'discover' our colleagues and friends. We learn that Tristram is a man of poor health, but desires to live life to the full. We learn that he is a man with a great breadth of knowledge and reading, but also one who can tell and enjoy a bawdy joke. We become wary of the traps he sets for us, and the traipses down the garden path. The steady drip of personal revelations, comments, diversions, and rhetorical discussion give shape to Tristram's character, until we cease to regard him as an author, and come to view him as a companion, a confidante with whom we are sharing an intimate friendship. From this perspective, despite the tenuousness of his literature existence, Tristram is reborn in the mind of every new reader - Life is short; Art is everlasting!

I have described Walter Shandy as the fall-guy. Man proposes, God disposes is the nature of his predicaments. He is interrupted by his wife (sexually humiliated, actually) while performing the marital duties that conceive Tristram. He calls Dr. Slop to attend his wife (she prefers a midwife) when she goes into labour, but Slop damages the newborn's nose (phallically misrepresented) with his forceps. Walter determines his child should be named after Trismegistus, "the greatest (Toby) of all earthly beings", but the newborn has a fit and looks set to die, and Walter caught in his nightgown has to entrust Susannah to repeat the name to the curate in an emergency Baptism. Susannah unintentionally mangles the name into "Tris-something, Tristram-gistus" which the curate interprets as Tristram. The list

of Walter's woes could continue. In addition to these examples of frustrated aims there is another aspect to Walter's impotence, or rather lack of potency, and that is although he is master of his house and Lord of the Manor, he lacks the intangible qualities that confer natural authority. His wife pays no attention to him, nor, in the matters of coach and horses does his servant Obadiah (though on this account, the fault may well be with the master), but more tellingly, when the countryside is ablaze with incorrect gossip that Toby lost all of his marriage tackle at the siege of Namur, and (chronologically later) that Tristram was castrated (rather than circumcised) by a falling window, he is powerless to suppress or refute these untruths. This description may cut Walter as a rather pathetic figure, but he is not; he has one redeeming quality, and that is the great equanimity and dignity with which he accepts his misfortunes - his anger is short-lived, he blames no-one, and bears no grudge.

The childish simplicity and innocence of Toby Shandy all contrive against the idea of him being a soldier. Nevertheless, Captain Shandy was a soldier in the Nine Years' War, and though a harmless naïf at Shandy Hall, perhaps we should reflect on the amorality of 10-year-old soldiers. Toby's innocence is virginal: "To think, said my father [Walter], of a man living to your age, brother, and knowing so little about women!—I know nothing at all about them,—replied my uncle Toby." His simplicity cannot fathom the philosophising of Walter, but he never offers to answer "by any other kind of argument, than that of whistling half a dozen bars of *Lillabullero*." Toby's antics in the garden, "his Hobby-Horse", constructing models of battles and sieges, provide amusement from the spectacle of an adult behaving like a child. He further contributes to the comic nature of the book by farcically misconstruing possible ambiguities with meanings that the users had plainly not intended. This climaxes when the heir-desiring Widow Wadman asks the suitor Toby about the wound to his groin, "And

whereabouts, dear Sir, did you receive this sad blow?" "You shall see the very place, Madam," replies Toby to an astonished Widow Wadman and sends Trim to fetch the map! This is not to say Toby is an irritating character; he is not. His childish innocence and wisdom - out of the mouth of babes - both amuses us and mocks our worldly guile.

No mention of Toby is complete without a description of his man-servant, Trim. Although Trim is nominally Toby's servant, the pair are like two inseparable 10-year-old friends, and the relationship is synergistic. Without Trim, Toby's recreations of past campaigns would never be realised. Trim is Toby's facilitator. Like Jeeves and Wooster,⁴⁾ we are posed with the question of who is the master, and who is the servant. Compare this partnership, though, with Walter, who has no aide-de-camp, and his thwarted aims. Trim, like his master is an invalid of war, though his war-wound was to the knee, and therefore unlikely to generate inquiry about his virility. As well as being an enthusiastic partner in Toby's boyish pursuits, there is another facet to his character, that of a maudlin ham actor, a melodramatist who can perform loquacious soliloquies, especially on the topic of his unjustly imprisoned brother, and whose eloquence can make the other servants cry.

With the exception of Susannah, the women of *Tristram Shandy* are by and large two-dimensional caricatures. This is particularly true of Widow Wadman, the seductive widow desperate for an heir - another character in the tale with legacy issues! Mrs. Shandy as already noted is also cast as a stereotype. However, the comments of Walter, who is often exasperated by her behaviour, add flesh to the two-dimensional picture, and the initial two-dimensional caricature gradually develops into a sketch of a woman who serenely sails a set course, uninfluenced and undisturbed by the activities of those around her. Susannah, on the other hand, is a real person. She

bridles at Walter's suggestion that she won't be able to remember the name Trismegistus, but inevitably does. She flirts with the curate and with Trim. She is thrilled at the prospect of receiving Mrs. Shandy's wardrobe, when the death of Tristram's elder brother is announced. Yet, bursts "into a flood of tears" on hearing Trim's eloquence on death. She spreads gossip and embellishes it. She flees in panic from the scene of Tristram's circumcision, in which she is an accidental accessory. She quarrels with Dr. Slop, and accidentally, but petulantly sets his wig ablaze with a candle. She acts, and the consequences ripple through the story.

It is difficult to disagree with Cedric Watts' assertion that the central theme of *Tristram Shandy* is "threatened potency".³⁾ Another central theme of the book is male relationships. There is the paternal relationship of father and son, Walter and Tristram, albeit mostly described from Walter's perspective. Walter appears to have little love for Tristram - is this a reflection of his intellectual detachment, or a statement of his emotional isolation? - and his relationship with his son seems to be driven by the desire to leave a legacy to the world. Walter's work on a *Tristrapædia* for the education of his son is an example of this. By Tristram's account, it is another frustrated ambition. It appears to have been neither completed nor used, not even in part. There is the fraternal relationship between Walter and Toby. Walter is duty-bound to provide for his brother, but they are as alike as chalk and cheese. Nevertheless, while neither would choose the other as a companion in society, the ties of family bind in an affection that would not be granted to others. There is the antagonistic relationship of Walter and Dr. Slop. This is a relationship governed by the norms of society. The Doctor's title demands Walter's respect. It seems that this respect blinds Walter to the observation that Slop is not a good practitioner. Moreover Slop is a Catholic, a fact which does not sit well with Walter - but the rules of society require that he hold no prejudice against him, though he also enjoys the

company of Slop, as he uses him as an intellectual whipping post. Finally, there is the relationship of Toby and Trim, which I have described in some detail above. An additional question for the 21st century reader is Toby's sexuality in this relationship. "My uncle Toby loved the man." Tristram Shandy is replete with double entendre. Later, when Toby professedly falls for Widow Wadman, Mrs. Shandy speculates on the prospect of children, but her husband apparently scorns the idea: "——Lord have mercy upon me,—said my father to himself—— * * * * * " We subsequently learn that despite the wound, Toby is physically intact; so, how should we reconcile the implications of these apparent contradictions?

For the 21st-century reader, Laurence Sterne's florid prose and archaic style can be quite intimidating, and his digressions can be boring - sermons and shaggy-dog stories, Slawkenbergius's Tale, are not a staple of modern novels. However, the aspect of the book which gave me the greatest difficulty was the dialogues. Sterne, or writer's in the 18th-century, did not use quotation marks and the modern print conventions for dialogue, and I found some of the dialogues difficult to follow. As illustrated above, dialogues begin and end with "——", and when there are multiple exchanges, it requires the reader's interpretation to decide who is saying what, as a remark by a different speaker is not given a new line.

I have already described *Tristram Shandy* as a situation comedy, and it is as a comedy that the book retains its appeal to the modern reader. Indeed, reading the book, invites speculation on how much it has influenced modern writers of television comedy. Laurence Sterne appears to have had more than a passing interest in the theatre. He lays Parson Yorick to rest with a quotation from Shakespeare's Hamlet, a still-repeated schoolboy joke: "Alas, poor Yorick!" The actor, David Garrick, is mentioned more than once, suggesting an interest in theatre that transcends flattery, and Sterne's sympathetic portrayal of Trim as

a ham actor further underlines his apparent interest in theatre.

Finally, as modern readers, we have to wonder how authentic the characters of *Tristram Shandy* are. Were 18th-century gentlemen as colourful as Walter, Toby, or Trim? Or are we being presented with stylish caricatures, that were recognised as such even in the 18th-century. Modern mass communications give us a broad perspective of what is considered 'normal' behaviour. However, in the 18th century, social conduct outside the home would have been guided by religious instruction and etiquette guides. In that environment, it is quite possible that eccentric behaviour was more widely tolerated (and respected) than it is today. A visit to Erddig⁵⁾ invites comparisons of its 18th-century occupants with the characters of Shandy Hall, suggesting that in the 18th-century, the characters of Shandy Hall may not have been as far-out as they appear to us.

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- 5) Erddig: an 18th-century country house owned by the National Trust
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