

“THE PRODUCTION OF A RATIONAL BEING”: *TRISTRAM SHANDY* AND  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN SATIRISTS

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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The eighteenth century saw the emergence of two primary literary forms aimed at influencing public life: the satire and the sentimental novel. While these two forms pursued similar goals, they were produced separately until Laurence Sterne’s mingling of the two genres in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. This text combines two previously gendered genres while also undermining male authority with its narrative false starts and symbolically impotent narrator. It also displays satirical and sentimental impulses with the character parson Yorick, who embodies both the Quixote figure and the philosopher-physician who “heals” him. Sterne’s collapsing of these gender and generic boundaries, I argue, would open a discursive space for women to enter the literary world as satirists, as this study will demonstrate using works by Charlotte Lennox and Frances Burney. Lennox’s *The Female Quixote*, which came before Sterne’s novel, will be considered for its satire of female readers of romances, while Burney’s play *The Witlings* will show how women engaged in satiric regulation of the public sphere post-*Tristram Shandy*. Sterne’s radical challenge to the male institutions of satire and the realistic novel, I argue, allowed women to engage in the

unprecedented production of satirical texts that tackle public as well as domestic concerns.

## Introduction

British literature of the eighteenth century, as many critics have theorized, was primarily characterized by two dominant strains: satire and the sentimental novel. Laurence Sterne's midcentury novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* marries these two seemingly incongruous modes of discourse, creating a work that calls the distinction between them into question. This digressive, playful book destabilizes preexisting ideas of what constitutes a novel, and in so doing opens avenues for female satirists formerly relegated to the sentimental subjects of private life, courtship, and domesticity, as this study will demonstrate using female authors who wrote before and after its initial publication in 1759. Rather than seizing Laertes' "speech of fire, that fain would blaze" (*Hamlet* IV.vii.190) Sterne adheres to Yorick's spirit of satirical merrymaking, as one of the main characters bears the jester's name. Preferring the proverbial flagon of Rhenish over a dagger through the arras, Sterne demonstrates a gentler approach to satire than had been previously observed in Pope and Swift's attacks on contemporary folly. In this way *Tristram Shandy*, as I will demonstrate, opens up a discursive space for female participation in satiric regulation. Openly flouting the notion of linear narrative, encouraging dialogue between author and readers (of both genders), and often gleefully disintegrating language itself, Sterne's novel radically questions the conventions that bind both fiction and society, the primacy of phallic authority in particular.

Before discussing *Tristram Shandy*, it is important to note the literary traditions in which it partakes, satire and the sentimental novel. Traditionally these forms were gendered male and female, respectively. It was the task of the satirist to regulate the

public arena, while sentimental novelists concerned themselves with espousing morality through the emerging category of sensibility. Cheryl Turner notes in her study *Living by the Pen* that among women writers there was a “growing expectation, even insistence, that didacticism should be a distinguishing feature of women’s fiction” (53). These novels were to act as conduct manuals for a society based on rationality and sensibility, and to express “exemplary sentiment” (53). Conversely, satirists were meant to be “exposers of vice” (51) regulating political and cultural life to which women did not have access. Sterne’s innovative combination of these two genres, I argue, would open doors for female writers that had previously been closed.

In order to demonstrate Sterne’s impact on women writers of his era I will examine a satire that came before it, Charlotte Lennox’s 1752 novel *Arabella, or The Female Quixote*, and one that appeared after it, Frances Burney’s unpublished play *The Witlings* (1780). Both these writers address female concerns and domesticity, but in Burney’s satire private concerns become public through satirical regulation. Satirizing gender relations and social mores, Burney takes up Sterne’s mantle of lighthearted satire and applies herself to improving conditions for women, as I intend to show. Moving beyond traditional themes of courtship and marriage, Burney attacks the pretensions of literary salons of her time, targeting men and women alike. This move, I argue, distinguishes her from Lennox, who dealt with the subject of women readers and the folly of the feminized romance genre. For example, Arabella in Lennox’s novel can be likened to Sterne’s country parson Yorick, himself a Quixote figure. Like the heroine of *The Female Quixote*, he “carried not one ounce of ballast; he was utterly unpracticed in the world; and . . . knew just about as well how to steer his course in it as a romping,

unsuspicious girl of thirteen” (*Tristram Shandy* 24). Sterne simultaneously elevates and denigrates Yorick in mock-heroic fashion, just as Lennox does with the romance-addled Arabella. I would argue, though, that Sterne finds in this “Cervantick” character an “opposition in his nature to gravity” (25) that is both laudable and lacking in polite society. This move goes beyond the somewhat cursory conversation in which Arabella defers to the authority of a “good doctor” of divinity on “whether life is truly described in these books” (*Female Quixote* 419). Lennox reforms her female Quixote into a conventional wife to her cousin Glanville, but Sterne resists this impulse. The churchman and the knight of La Mancha are fused in a single character in *Tristram Shandy*, and instead he honors “poor Yorick” with a wordless eulogy, the famous black page (itself an expression of the inadequacy of language, according to several critics). Sterne’s novel, then, represents the collapsing of previously stable boundaries, gender being one of them. While it would be tilting at windmills to find exact correspondences between these texts that would provide evidence of direct influence, *Tristram Shandy* is nonetheless worth considering for its radical reevaluation of gendered categories such as public and private, or satire and the sentimental novel.

Of course, it is problematic to assert that a male writer’s intercession was necessary to legitimize women satirists. After all, Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, and Charlotte Lennox all waded into the public arena long before Sterne offered his nine-volume satirical treatise to the world. The claim I am making is merely that *Tristram Shandy* reevaluates cultural values regarding systems of knowledge and social hierarchies, including the idea of determinism, and that a revision of then-current gender ideology is necessarily a part of that project. Sterne’s vision is at heart comic,

lighthearted, and self-negating almost to the point of self-effacement, but that is the point. *Tristram Shandy* laughs in the face of authority that attempts to impose structure on chaos, and invites its readers, male and female, to join in doing so. Instead of elevating women to the lauded status of “rational Being[s]” (5) which Tristram claims at the opening of his autobiography, Sterne prods the category Reason until it collapses like an infant’s nose under forceps.

### Sterne as Literary Midwife

The catastrophe of Tristram's crushed nose is one of the central events of the story, such as it is, and will be dealt with in greater detail in due time. Much of the novel is concerned with the events surrounding Tristram's birth, and indeed it begins with the scene of his conception. As Robert A. Erickson has observed in his seminal book *Mother Midnight*, the novel itself is a kind of birth or ongoing labor, a "womb of speculation" (*TS* 91) where nothing is stable or to be taken for granted. Active engagement is required—Sterne expects critical readers to participate in the making (or begetting) of this artistic production. The novel happily rejects all systematic approaches to knowledge, including the "scholastick pendulum" of the "hypercritick" who would seek to measure the action of the novel in strict linear time; Tristram's narrative "abjur[es] and detest[s] the jurisdiction of all . . . pendulums whatever" (92). A clear refutation of narrow academic discourse, this line also recalls the phallogentric nature of such projects with Sterne's trademark bawdy humor.

Furthering the conception, if you will pardon the pun, of *Tristram Shandy* as a feminist text, Erickson compares the novel to the tradition of English midwife literature. He notes, "both Sterne and the midwives are . . . preoccupied with the mechanics of human sexual intercourse leading to conception . . . with the experience of birth" (201). Like Tristram himself, the book containing his life and opinions is a child brought into the world through a difficult labor. A self-perpetuating creation, *Tristram Shandy* posits the notion that "the act of writing is the act of living" (201). The novel eschews linear narrative, taking the form of a kind of knot, which, as Melvin New mentions in his note on the text, is "a euphemism for copulation" (*TS* 638). Bearing this image in mind, the



radical, freewheeling instability of the novel emerges as generative rather than merely destructive.

Knots form a recurring motif in the novel, notably at the scene of Tristram's birth in Book III. Manifesting the "cross purposes" (93) and meandering pathways of Sterne's playfully subversive vision, knots provide a useful image for representing Sterne's unusual narrative. He argues, "in the case of these *knots*, then, and of the several obstructions, which, may it please your reverences, such knots cast in our way in getting through life—every hasty man can whip out his penknife and cut through them.—'Tis wrong" (151). This observation of Tristram's provides perhaps the best example of the novel's central thesis with regard to creativity and its main metaphor in the text, midwifery. Tristram concludes that "the most virtuous way, and which both reason and conscience dictate—is to take our teeth or our fingers to them" (151), a solution rooted in the body, organic and dialogic. The problematic of the knot, with its strong sexual connotations, is not to be dealt with by a single phallic thrust of the penknife—another connection between masculinity and written discourse. Rather, the circular give-and-take of intersubjective, open communication is needed to bring the "child"—in this case the text—into the world.

This brings us to the midwifery controversy that was current at the time of *Tristram Shandy's* composition, which Erickson explains in *Mother Midnight*. The external regulation of natural processes mirrors eighteenth-century notions of science explaining and manipulating nature. If we agree with Erickson's assertion that "the secrets of nature . . . are a woman's secrets" (213), then women can be thought of as simultaneously generative and repressed, circumscribed by the patriarchal discourse of

science, in this case obstetrics. This is perhaps most obvious in the Shandy parents' disagreement about how Tristram is to be delivered. Mrs. Shandy desires the town midwife to supervise the birth, but Walter Shandy insists upon the "scientifick operator" Dr. Slop (41). An incisive commentary on gender roles, Sterne describes their argument as follows:

He . . . talked it over with her in all moods;--placed his arguments in all lights;--argued the matter with her like a christian,--like a heathen,--like a husband,--like a father,--like a patriot,--like a man:--My mother answered everything only like a woman . . . for as she could not assume and fight it out behind such a variety of characters, 'twas no fair match;--'twas seven to one. (45)

Here Sterne, with characteristic lightness and good humor, criticizes the limitations circumscribing women even in matters concerning their own bodies. Mrs. Shandy is cut off from the organic, inherently feminine process of childbirth by her husband the "compulsive theorist" (Erickson 214). Sterne also indicates the distinction between public and private spheres which affects gender relations; Walter has many public faces he can use to impose his will at home and in the world, while Mrs. Shandy has only her tenuous control over the domestic environment. Although Tristram informs us that they eventually resolve that "my mother was to have the old woman,--and the operator was to have licence to drink a bottle of wine with my father and my uncle *Toby Shandy* in the back parlour,--for which he was to be paid five guineas" (TS 45), the stage is set for Tristram's symbolically emasculating birth injury.

In his essay entitled "Good, Cursed, Bouncing Losses," James Kim theorizes that "*Tristram Shandy* formulates . . . developments in contemporary gender ideology as an episode of loss—specifically, as the loss of traditional forms of phallic authority and the encroachment of effeminacy on male identity" (6). Cultural anxieties had emerged

regarding a loss of masculinity due to the emergence of the bourgeois man of feeling figure in sentimental literature. One can easily read Tristram's botched birth and subsequent events that befall him as a response to the idea of imperiled male authority. As Kim puts it, "threatened with emasculation, Sterne emasculates himself; he fashions a new self that has already accommodated the threat of phallic loss, thereby making emasculation seem like just another part of the script, part of the role that the self is so expertly fashioned to play" (14). In a rather extreme instance of this phenomenon, passive Tristram goes from being a background presence in his own autobiography to disappearing almost completely as the narrative follows widow Wadman's courtship of his uncle Toby in the last two books. Tristram enacts his own obsolescence throughout the course of the novel, asserting his subjectivity even as he erodes it through what Kim terms "sentimental irony," a mutually constructive combination of satirical and sentimental elements.

The most dramatic (and literal) episode of Tristram's self-emasculation comes in Book V when Tristram is accidentally circumcised by a falling window sash. This unfortunate accident seems to upset the other characters far more than Tristram himself, who demurs, "'twas nothing,—I did not lose two drops of blood by it . . . Doctor *Slop* made ten times more of it, than there was occasion" (339). Later in the novel this sad happenstance for "poor Master Shandy" is related not in words, but in a series of asterisks (391), thus representing the literal operation by conspicuously excising it from the text. Just as Tristram's body has been compromised, so too has his ability to express what has happened in words. The text expresses bodily realities, as Erickson explains, but it is also linked with the body here and in other instances where its physical existence is

highlighted, such as the black page, the marbled page, and the blank page.

Here we see a breaking of boundaries between stated and unmentionable, mirroring the domestic/public binary which Tristram symbolically eradicates by urinating out a window, causing his accident. As Jonathan Lamb maintains, “his satiric enterprise . . . involves his engagement with the public sphere on terms that emphasize not the satirist’s monitory guardianship of society’s rules and norms, but the importance of an individual’s eloquence in determining the power relations that govern both the private ‘world’ of Shandy Hall and the world at large” (154). Indeed, it is very apt to characterize *Tristram Shandy* as “an unstable series of seized initiatives” (154). Lamb finds that Sterne disarms our preconceptions, forcing us to read characters like pedantic Walter and flighty Yorick as individuals rather than types. In this way, although it is a satire, the novel does not indulge in facile exaggeration; rather, the target is the generalizing impulse “to judge them against an objective criterion” (Lamb 157). Sterne instead encourages us to suspend judgment and to avoid the uncritical categorization of his characters, comic though they are.

Kim explains that Sterne’s novel “transforms a standard device of eighteenth-century satiric irony into one of sentimental irony: disproportion in the service of blame becomes disproportion in the service of sympathy” (17). *Tristram Shandy* combines satire with the sentimental novel, producing a new kind of satirical mode in keeping with the novel’s obsession with procreation, “making new books out of old ones” (Erickson 207) even as the old (read: patriarchal) order must be erased to make room for a newer, more balanced worldview. Kim provides some clarification of this notion when he mentions other figures of male authority in the novel:

Indeed, Toby and Walter arguably represent sentimentally ironic re-workings of masculine ideals that would most likely have seemed distinctly antiquated by the time Sterne began writing *Tristram Shandy*: the man of martial valor who fulfills his manhood through combat, and the stoic man of reason who does so through restraint of his sexual passions—both of which were being gradually displaced by the figure of the civilized man of heterosocial conversation. (9)

Both Walter and Toby, embodying the traditional archetypes of scholar and soldier, respectively, are shown to be ineffectual voices of authority because they are so consumed with their ruling passions they have lost touch with the rest of the world; they are “old men grappling with their obsolescence” (Kim 9). Tristram-as-narrator is also guilty of similarly blinkered vision, pouring various knowledge and impressions into his magnum opus with no regard for the conventions of narrative in order to show off his wide reading and frustrate his audience. To explore the implications of slipping male authority, it would perhaps be useful to examine a few instances of Tristram’s contingency as a constantly self-revising narrator.

The first notable accident that threatens Sterne’s hapless narrator, after the incident with Dr. Slop’s forceps of misapplied science, is the naming gone awry. Walter Shandy believes that “there was a strange kind of magick bias, which good or bad names . . . irresistibly impress’d upon our characters and conduct” (*TS* 47), and that “of all names in the universe, he had the most unconquerable aversion for TRISTRAM” (50). Of course, it falls out that the maid Susannah proves a “leaky vessel,” so the grand name Trismegistus is shortened to the loathed Tristram, thanks to the impatient curate’s interjection “there is no *gistus* to it, noodle!—’tis my own name” (258). In this way, the country curate perpetuates his name by blindly adhering to custom. Additionally, the use of the term “*accoucheur*” in reference to Dr. Slop the man-midwife calls to mind the importance of labeling, specifically as it relates to distinctions of gender (99). This

recalls the midwifery controversy which Erickson delineates in *Mother Midnight*, contrasting the “boasted erudition of men” implied by the French term with the “uniquely feminine mastery of ‘touching’” (212). Language is unstable and contingent, relying on arbitrary signs to convey meaning, and imperfectly at that. This implies that Sterne wishes to call our attention to the constructed nature of both language and narrative, explicitly linking the two with figures of patriarchal puffery like Walter Shandy and Dr. Slop. Mr. Shandy’s blinkered empiricism in particular is often lampooned as a dead end or fruitless pursuit—for example, in Book IV for his abortive educational program the *Tristrapoedia*—a heavy charge in a work so focused on the faculties of reproduction.

Underpinning the text’s relentless subversion of Tristram-as-author’s authority is an attack on language itself, as the repeated emphasis on the pitfalls of naming would indicate. The most obvious instance of language’s inadequacy is probably the black page that memorializes parson Yorick in Book I. As Kim states, “Haunting in its strangeness, Sterne’s famous black page offers a particularly dense example of . . . irony and sentimentality placed in a mutually constitutive, dialogical relationship” (3). The black page is singularly arresting, a void that is hyper-infused with meaning despite its literal depiction of a lack which resists being filled with text. This complicated depiction of the unspeakable (hence unable to be written) reality of death “savagely ironizes the Enlightenment notion that public argumentation inevitably produces the truth” (3). Here, Sterne’s surplus of ink merely muddies the waters to the point of opacity. The only possible reaction to this textual black hole, Sterne’s depiction of the utter absence of meaning or explanation that follows the epitaph “Alas, poor Yorick” (30), is to laugh.

Yorick represents the Cervantic hero, being expressly linked to him several times.

Jonathan Lamb notes that the narrator mentions “his patron’s ‘withered stump’” (106) in his Invocation to Cervantes, linking him with Cervantic bawdy humor as a means of self-emasculatation. Tristram is likewise rendered symbolically powerless in the window sash episode which results in his accidental circumcision at five years of age. Lamb locates an explicit link between text and author, noting that “the book is curtailed, narratively speaking, as its hero” and that this “mutilation in the book gives the child the opportunity of reconstituting himself by supplying the missing fragment” (106). In Tristram’s case, the missing pieces tend to be multiplied or displaced rather than healed when transposed into autobiographical form. His compromised body is fragmented in the text, reflecting a failure to achieve wholeness through inscription.

Although he is plagued by “sexual and autobiographical impuissance” (Lamb 106), Tristram manages to apply these seeming disadvantages to the destabilizing project of the book. Freed from the demands of narrative unity or “masculine” control over his life’s telling, he presents a deconstructed story and “figurative reconstructions encouraged by the fragmentation of texts” (107). Drawing our attention to the futility, and, indeed, vanity, of the autobiographical impulse, Sterne encourages us to fill the conspicuous gaps in the text, for instance the imaginary chapter on buttonholes, with our own observations, saying “a great MORAL might be picked handsomly out of this, but I have not time—’tis enough to say, wherever the demolition began, ’twas equally fatal to the sash window” (341). This passage alludes to Corporal Trim’s gradual dismantling of Toby’s house to provide materials for his fortifications. In another instance of authorial “unmaking,” the house is undone to build a model of the siege of Namur, just as Tristram’s body is compromised to provide “material” for his own ultimately futile life

narrative construction.

Bearing in mind eighteenth-century aesthetic notions of the sublime, it is useful to examine *Tristram Shandy* in light of this idea of imperiled authorship at once asserting and negating itself, constantly rewriting a narrative “confounding . . . life with *Life*” (Lamb 105). The text recognizes the futility of erecting a fictional edifice by simultaneously tearing it down. The novel emerges as the object of its own mockery; Sterne thus takes Lennox’s criticism of fiction a step further by unraveling it as he writes. Tristram enacts the imperiled masculinity he dramatized in the window sash and birth episodes, this time as the anything-but-omnipotent narrator. Recognizing this conflation of the ridiculous and the sublime renders the act of reading simultaneously pointless and liberating. Sterne exposes the didactic impulse in the sentimental novel to the scrutiny of the rational and engaged “gentle reader.” Our reaction to this absurd “Shandean sublime” (to borrow Lamb’s phrase) is, of course, to laugh.

Laughter is a major concern in Sterne criticism, and John Allen Stevenson contributes to the lively discourse on the meaning of the novel’s comic elements in “Tristram Shandy: The Laughter of Feeling.” He tells us that “[Sterne’s] work is not a vehicle for a lesson; rather, his novel is valuable simply because it is entertaining” (67). Free of overt moralizing, *Tristram Shandy* frees the novel from the necessity of transmitting a moral message that supports the rational, liberal status quo. Instead the “salubrious power of laughter” is recommended to heal society. Laughter entails recognition of the absurd, often in the form of social or moral conventions. Considered “vulgar or (in a word they might have used) ‘low’” (68), laughter therefore is a marginalized form of expression. It is transgressive act, showing that systems of power



are vulnerable to attack by excluded others.

To elaborate on the idea of margins in *Tristram Shandy*, it is useful to think of both the printed text itself and the marginalized or “othered” characters portrayed therein. Women, for example, are marginal arbiters between life and death, which is shown most notably in the figure of the midwife. Tristram also encourages “Sir” and “Madam” to dispute him, or answers anticipated arguments they might have. As he maintains, “writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation” (*TS* 96). This indicates a desire on Sterne’s part to reach *beyond* the text; what is inscribed on the page is finite, but through dialogue infinite possibilities can be accessed. The novel practically forces its reader to interpret beyond the words on the page, dragging us into the margins in order to escape the distinctly patriarchal dictates of “great wigs, grave faces, and other implements of deceit” (182).

This passage indicates Sterne’s ongoing suspicion towards hierarchies, and the necessity of examining them through a critical lens. As Erickson and others have noted, Sterne empowers marginalized people to oppose tradition, and the spirit of gravity that accompanies it. Sterne’s ambiguity regarding satire and the sentimental novel is also gender ambiguity. Reading *Tristram Shandy* is a dialogic process which collapses the barriers between gendered forms of writing, allowing women to enter the public sphere in the capacity of satirists in a proactive, not merely reactive sense. For instance, earlier female satirists such as Charlotte Lennox and Lady Mary Wortley Montague responded directly to masculine attacks on the supposed superficiality or artifice of women, whereas later authors Burney and Austen dealt with social and economic concerns not merely limited to feminine experience.

It is also in the physical margins of a printed text that the reader provides a running commentary, and the interjections, real or imagined, of “Madam” and “Sir” show Sterne’s acknowledgement of his book as one half of a dialogue. For example, during the episode of his infant self’s crushed nose and Walter Shandy’s violent reaction to it, Tristram interjects, “I won’t go about to argue the point with you . . . and I am persuaded of it, madam, as much as can be, ‘that both men and women can bear sorrow, (and, for aught I know, pleasure too) best in a horizontal position’” (194). This brief, playfully bawdy “reply” to the female reader’s supposed disputation knocks Tristram from his authorial pedestal, forcing him to engage the reader on her own terms. Interruption and commentary from “marginal” characters (in the sense that they reside outside the text) form the soil from which the book’s meaning grows, which can be readily observed in Mrs. Shandy’s notable interruptions that both commence and close Tristram’s sprawling Cock and Bull story.

### The Comic Abject

Part of the project of *Tristram Shandy* is staging a confrontation with the fact of the body and the mortality that accompanies it and encouraging a reaction of laughter rather than horror or revulsion. Laughter is abjected, therefore sublime, because it is beyond language, as Julia Kristeva explains in her famous study *Powers of Horror*. One moment in the text that can be explained in terms of the abject is the black page. Here the corporeal body limned with very finite time becomes a joke—laughter purifies the abject, to use Kristeva’s terminology, into something that expresses what the narrow confines of phallogentric language cannot. Tristram writes in Book IV that his book is “wrote . . . against the spleen; in order, by a more frequent and a more convulsive elevation and depression of the diaphragm, and the succussions of the intercostal and abdominal muscles in laughter, to drive the gall and other bitter juices from . . . his majesty’s subjects, with all the inimicitious passions which belong to them, down into their duodenum” (270-71). This passage, humorously mimicking medical discourse, outlines the stated purpose of Tristram’s meandering life narrative: it is a cure for what ails us. By defining laughter in terms of its physical manifestation, Sterne explicitly links it with the body. He never allows the embodied condition of humanity to be forgotten, an idea which carries important gender implications. By rooting subjectivity squarely in the physical, Sterne privileges the body, and with it the abjected feminine.

Kristeva explains the system by which language operates thusly: “the archaic economy is brought into full light of day, signified, verbalized. Its strategies (rejecting, separating, repeating/abjecting) hence find a symbolic existence, and the very logic of the symbolic—arguments, demonstrations, proofs, etc.—must conform to it. It is then that

the object ceases to be circumscribed, reasoned with, thrust aside: it appears as abject” (*Powers of Horror* 15). It is Sterne’s project to celebrate the abject, to make a mockery of symbolic logic by subverting it throughout *Tristram Shandy*’s countless byways and digressions. As Tristram states at the opening of Book VIII, just before the widow Wadman mounts her assault with “Love-militancy” (501), “notwithstanding all that has been said upon *straight lines* . . . I defy the best cabbage planter that ever existed . . . to go on coolly, critically, and canonically, planting his cabbages one by one, in straight lines, and stoical distances” (491). His narrative disrupts attempts at linear, logical thought, while simultaneously calling into question the power of language to describe it.

The signifying act, according to Kristeva, is “like a crucified person opening up the stigmata of its desiring body to a speech that structures only on condition that it let go—any signifying or human phenomenon, insofar as it is, appears in its being as abjection” (*Powers of Horror* 27). Kristeva’s characterization of the act of speaking/writing calls to mind the inexpressible lack which language strives to fill and continually fails to adequately express, as the black page dramatizes. Sterne foregrounds this lack at the heart of language with his repeated references to his narrative as a constructed story, omitting and adding elements throughout, and constantly addressing the reader as “Sir” or “Madam,” as the case may be.

Acknowledging that meaning dwells in the spaces between words is Sterne’s contribution to a novelistic tradition that often relied upon omnipotent authorial voices. As New maintains, “the strategy of interpretation is significant, placing the sentence into dialogue, judging its meaning based on the response it elicits. It is, for Sterne, a key to understanding human communication, for in his fiction meaning is shown to inhere in the

space between speaker(s) and auditor(s), a mutual and balanced exchange between two or more voices” (70-1). It is true that Tristram’s helplessness in the face of his own comically distended narrative gives a sense of the narrator’s impotence rather than the immaculate control of, say, Fielding. It is possible that Sterne is responding to the precision and omnipotence of the narrator of *Tom Jones*, deconstructing the craft of the narrator because it had reached its apogee. Tristram is a kind of anti-Fielding, fostering dialogue throughout his pages rather than filling them with undisputable proclamations. This is a conscious strategy though, as Sterne encourages us to challenge the scatterbrained narrator throughout the text. The novel underscores the notion that gaps in the text are in fact generative, that they offer opportunities for interpretation that is collaborative.

Stevenson tells us that the “coitus interruptus” that instigates Tristram’s life and narrative “implies the premature reappearance of temporality (and its attendant, mortality)” (81). It is precisely this *memento mori*, in a wonderfully Shandean paradox, that allows us as readers to suspend our own temporality with a laugh. Noting that “our laughter in that moment between tick and tock is deeply ambivalent,” Stevenson calls attention to the tension between time and eternity, birth and death, that animates “the stage of this dramatic work” (TS 18). In laughter, one realizes the lack of an inherent connection between signifier and signified.

The inherently empty linguistic sign is like the connection Mrs. Shandy draws between sexuality and clock winding, “an unhappy association of ideas which have no connection in nature” (9), but to which Mrs. Shandy assigns her own idiosyncratic significance. It is at the moment of her (anti)climactic utterance “*Pray, my dear . . . have you not forgot to wind up the clock?*” (TS 6) that Mrs. Shandy becomes a speaking

subject, engaged, as it were, in two simultaneous forms of dialogue. Additionally, her first speech act is both an interruption and a question, lending some clue as to the role of female interlocutors in the world of *Tristram Shandy*. Women puncture systems of meaning-making, interrupt empty discourse, and pull down fortifications.

New maintains that the novel “refuses to reduce oneself or one’s world to a single hypothesis” and that Mrs. Shandy embodies the “true Shandy spirit,” reserving judgment in favor of maintaining possibilities” (75). In contrast, Walter’s fiction is “a kind of phallocentrism” (76). Likewise, his idea that names define and determine future is very patriarchal, an idea which opens a discourse on definition. Sterne is an “ardent explorer of alternatives . . . ever resistant to the temptations of absolutism, ever aware as well of the human proclivity to both dominate and succumb” (New 71). As Kim explains about the black page, “he also brings together a contradictory set of historically specific cultural associations, for the eighteenth century assigned the qualities of mind necessary for composing satire . . . to the masculine domain, those necessary for producing sentimentality . . . to the feminine. Indeed, the black page constitutes a particularly noteworthy moment of gender instability in a text riddled with gender instability” (3). If the text “willfully generates egregious quantitative mismatches between signifier and signified . . . destabilizes ‘the equality of words to things’” (16), then the black page dramatizes this lack of meaning.

The figure whom the black page eulogizes, Yorick, also embodies characteristics sometimes thought of as feminine. Like his spiritual forebear Don Quixote, he seems to be out of step with the material world, occupying a liminal space between the divine and the mundane. This quality of liminality, I argue, is one of the values Sterne upholds

throughout the various convolutions of *Tristram Shandy*.

In another nod toward repudiating systems of knowledge (religious and medical discourse in particular), Sterne's narrator rhetorically asks himself, "is it but two months ago, that in a fit of laughter, on seeing a cardinal make water like a quirister (with both hands), thou brakest a vessel in thy lungs, whereby, in two hours, thou lost as many quarts of blood; and hadst thou lost as much more, did not the faculty tell thee—it would have amounted to a gallon?" (495). This moment, occurring as Tristram commences his story of the widow Wadman and Uncle Toby's courtship in Book VIII, is a near-perfect encapsulation of what could, expanding on Lamb's formulation of the Shandean sublime, be termed the Shandean abject. Faced with the absurdity of an image (the urinating cardinal) that so explicitly collapses the boundaries between bodily and divine, Tristram responds with a laugh. The violent carnality of this response, ironically, endangers his life by aggravating a lung condition. Just as laughter punctures the church hierarchy Tristram exposes as a sham, so too does it imperil him. As Stevenson notes, "in laughing at one another we must also laugh at ourselves" (83). In a very literal sense, Tristram realizes his own mortality at the same time as the meaninglessness of the church hierarchy is brought home to him. Laughter affirms, but it affirms what is dangerous and chaotic, that which is abject. The reactions of disgust and laughter are very closely linked if we follow Kristeva's formulation of confronting the abject: "mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion that, to be sure, is inscribed in a symbolic system, but in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects" (*Powers of Horror* 3). *Tristram Shandy*

causes us to confront the fact of mortality through its emphasis on the body, and to laugh at the debased body, recognizing it as sublime.



### **Aesthetics of Lack and the Mock Epic**

Throughout its pages, *Tristram Shandy* demonstrates what might be termed an aesthetics of lack, repeatedly drawing our attention to conspicuous absences. For instance, one could examine the hypothetical chapter on buttonholes, which Sterne rather suggestively calls “a maiden subject” (261). Sterne’s bawdy reference is also a gesture towards a vaginal site of meaning-making, Kristeva’s semiotic realm beyond the language binary. The aforementioned chapter dealing with buttonholes does not actually exist, although Tristram alludes to his intention to write it. The chapter is conspicuously absent, a hole in a narrative pocked with them.

Like the mock-heroic, it makes discursive gestures using accepted epic tropes and terms toward decidedly mundane, trifling, or “low” subjects. As the discussion of Kristeva’s language theory shows, Sterne satirizes not only the subjects at hand, but the entire system of binary linguistic relationships—A is no longer A, therefore the whole of linguistic signification is cast into doubt, and the either/or proposition of gender roles along with it. We can no longer trust language to convey meaning, a dangerous notion that simmers beneath the festival surface of Sterne’s strange, quixotic novel.

Before Sterne’s dismantling of language and the gender ideologies it expresses, however, Lennox introduced her own Quixote figure in the person of the naïve Arabella. Like Sterne’s Yorick, she displays “unwary pleasantry” (*TS* 27) towards those who wish her ill, such as her cousin Miss Glanville. Lennox’s mock-courtly heroine also lacks the judgment to distinguish between innocent travelers and “ravishers.” Both characters are out of step with the society around them, and fail to adopt its criteria for distinguishing between friends and enemies. Unlike Lennox, however, Sterne presents Yorick as a

heroic figure rather than the object of ridicule. He is a spiritual healer while Arabella remains a patient due to her gender and education.

Mentioning Charlotte Lennox's writing in light of the mock-epic tradition of *Don Quixote*, Kim writes, "Charlotte Lennox's *Female Quixote* places sentimental and satirical energies in a ludic, self-reinforcing dialog whereby the text's will to espouse sentimental doctrine displaces its impulse to deploy satiric ridicule, which in turn undermines scenes of sentimental bathos." (Kim 5). This is very much in keeping with Sterne's simultaneous satire and earnestness, which Kim terms sentimental irony. Negotiating between these two impulses, Lennox gestures toward a new form of satire in which the sentimental and satirical elements mutually reinforce one another in an ongoing dialogue, but ultimately Lennox chooses to revert back to the gender status quo. The reformation and the reinscription of gendered boundaries after Arabella's brief transgression are the two things that mark this text as a pre-Sterne attempt at dissolving the gendered generic boundaries of fiction.

When reading *The Female Quixote*, an important image to bear in mind is the veil its heroine customarily wears in public (9). It can be thought of as a metaphor for apologia in women's fiction from Lennox to Burney, evoking Moll Flanders's "modester words," for example, an instance of patriarchal restrictions on female expression. The genre of romance itself can be conceived of as a "veil" preventing women from experiencing the "naked truth" of realistic fiction as realized in the novel. That which simultaneously discloses and hides, the veil represents the dissembling process at work in women's writing, which must assert female subjectivity while simultaneously denying or downplaying its own value. This rhetorical move can be seen in both *The Female*

*Quixote* and to some extent, *The Wivings*. Women writers of the period walk a fine line between assertion and denial of their own subjectivity, mirroring Sterne's sentimental irony as explained by James Kim. It is this very liminality, the veiled quality of the work that at once exposes and obscures the subjectivity of the female author, that lends the novel an ambiguous vitality. Written several years before the publication of *Tristram Shandy*, Lennox's novel reflects a deeply ingrained awareness of the distinction between "masculine" and "feminine" writing, and grapples with this perceived difference. She adopts the traditionally male voice of the satirist and realistic novelist, and uses it to comment on female education through the popular feminine genre of romance. While crossing into the masculine domain of satire, however, Lennox leaves its boundaries intact. Her self-positioning is akin to a male author; Lennox observes Arabella from without rather than sympathizing with her. She does not collapse satire and the sentimental novel after the manner of *Tristram Shandy*, although she crosses traditional gender lines to take up her satire of romance and female education.

Sharon Smith Palo says of Lennox's Arabella: "her satirical representation of romance reading becomes the vehicle for a serious examination of concerns that proved central for proponents of advanced learning for women. Chief among these concerns is the powerful and often stymieing influence of social custom" (204). Palo argues that Lennox uses her heroine to examine the idea of female education, finding positive potential in women reading novels. Often taken as a critique of frivolous readers of romances, Lennox's novel, in Palo's view, instead champions the cause of women's education. This reading, however, ignores the novel's ending, which seems to reaffirm the patriarchal, bourgeois notions Arabella had initially rebelled against. Romance

reading is a hobby-horse of Arabella's, changing the way in which she views and interacts with the world around her. Because she sees what might be justifiably termed frivolous romances as "books from which all useful knowledge may be drawn" (52), Arabella is, like one of Sterne's characters, hobbled by her hobby-horse.

Another important aspect of Arabella's favored romances is the gender implications they carry. Palo notes that Lennox uses contemporary novelistic, male discourse surrounding romances to comment on the state of female education (204). Because women are encouraged to read this less substantive matter, Lennox implies that their natural talents are squandered in "whimsical study." This is much the same argument Mary Wollstonecraft would make in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Maria*, although Lennox's engaging satire makes her feminist argument an easier pill to swallow. As Turner notes, "improvements in education produced literate but inadequately educated young women for whom the novel was a potent mixture of romantic escapism and moral guidance" (15). Lennox's heroine, naturally, conforms to this stereotype of the young woman brought up on inferior literary matter. Lennox stops short of the outright condemnation of romance reading, however ridiculous it sometimes makes Arabella appear. Palo argues that, rather than reproofing the reading of romances outright, Lennox shows that this "education" has actually improved Arabella, who is "morally and intellectually superior to the other female characters in the novel" (205). Her obsession "broadens and complicates an otherwise narrow and uneventful existence" (208). Thus Lennox critiques the chauvinist assumption that women's romances are somehow "beneath" realistic fiction, while seeming on the surface to adopt this very same position and mode of expression. This doubleness in Lennox's novel shows a

similar narrative self-unraveling to Sterne's in *Tristram Shandy*, but it lacks the latter's self-consciousness. Reforming Arabella into a respectable wife allows Lennox to indulge her capers before retreating back into the role of realistic novelist. Although Arabella transgresses the boundaries set by her father and her fiancé, Lennox avoids crossing the line between gendered genres that Sterne would leap over with *Tristram Shandy*. Her double-voiced narration fails to disrupt the pre-existing confines of genre because the satire/sentimental novel distinction had yet to be collapsed.

Simultaneously validating her work as a female novelist by lampooning ridiculous romance tropes and defending her quixotic heroine, Lennox presents herself, like Arabella, through a veil. As a female author, she is constantly validating her own foray into the hetero-patriarchal literary establishment by dismissing Arabella as “the most ridiculous creature in the world” (88). As Turner demonstrates, women writers often found themselves in a position of having to legitimize their own work by writing within a male tradition, in this case satire and the realistic novel. The historical moment in which women novelists became prevalent was one in which “contemporary notions of femininity . . . were subjected to changing social and economic pressures, and therefore to constant questioning and redefinitions” (Turner 41). As liberal humanism stressed rationality as the desirable intellectual aspiration, women were increasingly excluded from the public sphere. Turner notes that “enlightenment thinking was progressively confining them to [the domestic] sphere whilst enhancing their moral status within it” (43). At the same time, “‘natural’ feminine attributes were being identified . . . as opposed to rationality and objectivity; the elements of sensibility were being assembled” (43). The gendering of sensibility as an essentially feminine quality is something female

satirists struggle against, because satiric regulation necessarily entails stepping outside the bounds of domesticity. Writing slightly before the late eighteenth-century codification of sensibility, Lennox has a modicum of freedom when it comes to addressing society with a satirical voice. Another element working in her favor is the apparent target, an upper-class woman who has transgressed the bounds of female education by reading “dangerous” European romances. As Palo mentions, it is the “‘fine Lady’s Education’ enjoyed by most of the other female characters in the novel . . . that proves truly useless” (205). She notes that Miss Glanville is less intellectually accomplished than Arabella despite the latter’s lack of social graces to support the claim that Arabella’s eccentric reading habits have done more good than harm.

While there is evidence of Arabella’s accomplishment through romance reading as noted by Palo, it resides mostly at the level of subtext. The knowing reader is able to laugh at the heroine’s naïveté when she thinks “bestowing favours” on a man means “giving a scarf, a bracelet, or some such thing, to a lover, who haply sighed whole years in silence” (99), but Lennox is not being entirely sardonic when she calls Arabella’s sentiments “heroic.” She is above the grasping materialism of Miss Glanville and other characters who follow the forms of polite society. When her cousin counters “I see no reason why a lover should expect a gift of any value from his mistress” (98), her monetary understanding fails to comprehend the courtly implications of Arabella’s meaning. Likewise, the mental gymnastics required for Arabella to incorporate new information about contemporary society into her self-conception as a romance heroine also demonstrate that she is highly intelligent, although her intellect has been ludicrously applied.

Arabella's obsession with romance, while temporarily thwarting the patriarchal project of her intended marriage to Glanville, also allows Lennox to explore the notion that women are "authored" by books. Putting pen to paper is a risky proposition for eighteenth-century women, as Cheryl Turner has shown in her study of eighteenth-century women writers. Becoming a producer rather than a consumer of literature, which in a sense is what Arabella does by living out the books she has read, is an act that is both "autonomous and subversive" (11). Through her own work Lennox subverts this notion; she simultaneously lionizes and lampoons the courageous (but misguided) Arabella, who resists the patriarchal authority of her father through enacting the tropes of chivalric romance, "withdrawing from a tyrannical exertion of parental authority, and the secret machinations of a lover" (*FQ* 38). Of course, Lennox alludes to the ridiculous assumptions her female Quixote entertains, such as imagining every man she encounters to be secretly in love with her, but the threat of losing her liberty in marriage is very real. Her father is "resolved to bestow her upon [Glanville], together with all his estates" (34) indicating that Arabella is a part of her father's estate with no agency of her own. It is her powerlessness that causes her to adopt the persona of the romantic heroine, whose lack of power or spurs her into action rather than curtails her freedom.

Performativity, then, is as much a part of Charlotte Lennox's authorial persona as Arabella's self-styling as a romantic heroine. Adopting the role of censorious novelist and "Cervantick" wit allows the author to examine the role of romance in female education very subtly. Although she appears to condemn these frivolities, Lennox presents Arabella with a female mentor in the countess she meets in Bath who in her youth shared the female Quixote's passion for tales of romance. Arabella is "healed" by

the ministrations of the “worthy Divine,” reformed into a proper wife for Glanville, but Lennox problematizes this act, as I will demonstrate by examining the passage in which she is “cured” of her delusions.

Rendered chattel by her father, who dies early in the novel and cedes authority to Glanville, Arabella finds a kind of paradoxical empowerment in her objectification through co-opting the forms of romance. For instance, when she declares in an imperious letter to Glanville, “I disclaim any empire over so unworthy a subject” (43), she adopts the role of heroine, using her body and self-presentation as a means of escaping the mundane realities of life as a mid-eighteenth-century woman. Arabella becomes a prop in her own drama rather than passively allowing herself to be passed from father to husband. Of course, there is no indication from Lennox’s narration that the female Quixote is aware of her performance while she delivers it; Arabella simply knows no other feminine mode of being due to her limited education. As Kim mentions in his discussion of sentimental irony, “the theatrical self is condemned to reinstate the very anxieties it seeks to overcome. Self-fashioning is therefore always self-subverting” (14). She is constantly performing the role of the romance heroine for an audience that is neither aware nor appreciative of her efforts, but in enacting this role Arabella undermines her social position and potential for advancement. For instance, Glanville “had no notion of his cousin’s heroic sentiments,” and since “he had never read romances, he was quite ignorant of the nature of his offence” (36) in venturing to ask her for a private conversation. Although no one else is aware of her obsession, enacting the scripts of romance allows Arabella to experience some form of control through exaggerating and dramatizing the loss of liberty she faces in “real” life. Since she is



subject to the authority of her father and cousin, she flees into the perversely empowering world of chivalric romance, where she says, “many others of [her] sex . . . have fled to death for relief . . . and if Artemisa, Candace, and the beautiful daughter of Cleopatra, could brave the terrors of death for the sake of the men they loved, there is no question but I also could imitate their courage, to avoid the man I have so much reason to hate” (59). This melodramatic declaration prompts her father to try to burn Arabella’s collection of romances, while also showing how far she is willing to take her performance. It is interesting as well that she claims willingness to die not for a lover, but for her freedom to decide her own marriage partner. Although she inscribes herself with the label of “romantic heroine,” Arabella uses this identity to claim personal liberty which she would not otherwise have been afforded.

Arabella’s self-conception as an imperiled heroine of romance also affects her relationships with other women. She is supported in her delusion by her maid Lucy, who acts as a courier for her increasingly ridiculous *billet-doux*, such as the rejection she sends her admirer Mr. Hervey, to which Lucy objects, “fearing lest she should alter [the letter] in such a manner that the gentleman should be at liberty to die if he chose it, conjured her lady . . . to let it remain as it was” (18). This melodramatic self-image often causes her to ignore the forms of polite society, as when she sends for the servant of her acquaintance Miss Groves in order to learn and sympathize with her “tragic” history. The rather mundane story of “the ruin of Miss Groves” (which Arabella describes as “much to be lamented” and goes on to compare with Cleopatra’s affair with Julius Caesar (85-6)) moves her to tears. Mrs. Morris, the servant, is surprised that Arabella “seemed so little sensible to the pleasure of scandal, as to be wholly ignorant of its nature” (86). Her

imagination transforms Miss Groves into a noble, wounded lover and Mrs. Morris into a trusty servant with only her mistress' best wishes at heart. Of course, both these notions are wrong, but Arabella lacks the capacity to distinguish between literary archetypes and real people because she has no experience of public life outside her father's estate, which further illustrates her quixotism. The veil she unconsciously wears also obscures her vision of the world around her.

Arabella uses her romances as conduct guides, enacting the role of romantic heroine in her daily life due to her "education" in these matters. If didactic sentimental novels teach moral sensibility, then Arabella's romances allow their readers to attain an outmoded nobility. In the age of bourgeois social domination, Arabella's "heroic sentiments" (36) are echoes of a lost world.

One of the best examples of Arabella's heroism is her flight into the river to escape perceived ravishers, during which she exhorts her companions, saying, "the Destinies have furnished you with an opportunity of displaying . . . the grandeur of your courage, to the world. The action we have it in our power to perform will immortalize our fame" (404). From this climactic episode, it is apparent that Arabella views herself as a dramatic heroine acting out her role on an ever-evolving stage. Indeed, her plunge into the Thames is described as a "horrid spectacle" (404), emphasizing her awareness of herself as the object of an audience's gaze. For all Arabella's dramatic flourishes, her more "reasonable" foil Miss Glanville also acknowledges that femininity involves some degree of dissembling, as when she wears Arabella's customary veil as a disguise for her own romantic intrigue.

After her rescue from the near-fatal dive into the Thames, Arabella undergoes what Geoffrey Sill refers to as a “cure of the passions.” Over the course of their long conversation, she engages the doctor in a reasoned argument on the veracity and value of romances. He believes these tales:

disfigure the whole appearance of the world, and represent . . . everything in a form different from that which experience is shown . . . A long life may be passed without a single occurrence that can cause much surprise, or produce any unexpected consequence of great importance . . . You must not imagine, madam, continued he, that I intend to arrogate any superiority, when I observe that your ladyship must suffer me to decide, in some measure authoritatively, whether life is truly described in those books: the likeness of a picture can only be determined by a knowledge of the original. (*FQ* 419)

This passage suggests that Arabella must submit to the authority of the spiritual doctor’s greater experience of the world in order to gain a sense of the distinction between fact and fiction. Noting the novel’s earlier introduction of a healer character with the Countess, Sill maintains, “for the cure to be credible, it had to be accomplished by a ‘doctor,’ and the doctor had to be gendered male” (22). The female mentor Arabella encounters at Bath is characterized by her “universally acknowledged merit” and “the deference always paid to her opinion” (*FQ* 360). She has several polite conversations with the Arabella which make her realize she is “absolutely ignorant of the present customs of the world” (364). Although the Countess sympathizes with Arabella and engages her on her own terms, she exits the book very quickly once the heroine makes her way to London. Although in dismissing this female physician the novel “fail[s] . . . to rise above the gender categories that prevailed in its time,” the Countess nonetheless provides significant insight into “her patient’s semiotic world” (Sill 22). Due to a shared reading in romances, the Countess and Arabella forge a bond, however briefly, that is based on mutual understanding of the values and symbols current in European romance.

To counter the ill effects of the “diseased” literature to which she has been exposed, the physician offers better literary matter for Arabella’s moral education, saying: “truth is not always injured by fiction. An admirable writer of our own time, has found the way to convey the most solid instructions, the noblest sentiments, and the most exalted piety in the pleasing dress of a novel, and to use the words of the greatest genius in the present age, ‘has taught the passions to move at the command of virtue’” (417). As the editor notes, the philosopher-physician is referring to Richardson, *Clarissa*, and the author of *The Rambler* respectively; this passage illustrates the prevailing literary trend towards reforming the sufferer of passions into a reasonable member of society. The doctor’s role is “to bring about a cure of a disturbance of the spirit so severe that it has endangered the physical and mental being of his patient” (Sill 21), and this cure is accomplished through reasoned discourse.

Arabella gains moral sensibility and consideration for others as more than mere props in her self-aggrandizing fantasy, but at the expense of her idiosyncratic, independent worldview. It is also worth noting that Sterne does not try to reform his Quixote to suit the whims of society; rather, he is held up as a model for the healing power of laughter as an antidote to the ills of a society too beholden to what he calls “gravity.”

This is another useful contrast between Arabella and Sterne’s Quixote figure, Yorick, who is himself an agent of the patriarchy as a churchman. She is pathological while Yorick is presented as a spiritual healer, however. Lennox finds value in Arabella’s seeming “madness,” which is linked to a medical discourse of controlling the passions, as seen in the passage relating Arabella’s cure. Sterne does not endeavor to

“heal” his Quixote through eradicating the passions, although he dies after falling out of favor with church authorities as a result of his “hobby-horsical” notions. As previously noted, he leaves behind a legacy of laughter. Recalling the “worthy Divine” who reforms Arabella in *The Female Quixote*, Yorick fills the dual role of physician and patient; the quixotic folly that renders Arabella unfit for society also makes Yorick the object of censure. Explicitly compared to a teenaged girl by Sterne, Yorick occupies a dual role; he is both the wise churchman and naïve Quixote figure. This duality is similarly expressed in *The Female Quixote*, in which “Arabella’s realization that the ideas impressed upon her by her reading are different from those impressed upon her by her day-to-day experiences becomes the source of her quixotism” (Palo 207). But while this discrepancy is figured as a kind of “madness” in the novel, Sterne does not pathologize Yorick’s similarly quixotic worldview. This suggests that Sterne’s sentimental irony as expressed in the Yorick figure refines Arabella’s expression of the same idea—he no longer requires a cure, having integrated satirical and sentimental impulses into one personality.

Arabella’s identity is mutable, contingent on her self-perception as a damsel in distress and subject to change due to the ministrations of the spiritual doctor, and the veil she wears symbolizes her protean nature. Arabella, having consumed an educational diet of romance, has been authored by literature. Lennox “rescues” her from herself physically and spiritually by providing alternative conduct models in contemporary literature, but at the cost of her female Quixote’s independence. Having relinquished her quixotism, Arabella ultimately joins the social system she had so vehemently rejected, enabling Lennox to successfully satirize female readers and writers.

### **Female Satire Upstaged: *The Witlings***

In Frances Burney's play *The Witlings*, both literary pretenders and sentimental "Gentlemen of the Sighing Tribe" (4.566) become the objects of satire. This shows her ability to transcend traditionally gendered forms of writing and take up the "masculine" role of the satirist. Burney does what Lennox could not by entering the public sphere, satirizing male writers, and challenging the literary establishment. She shows the boundaries between gender (and gendered literary forms) to be unstable and contingent on performance, a notion that Sterne explored in *Tristram Shandy*.

The performance of gender at work in *The Female Quixote* can also be seen in Burney's satirical play, which examines the artifice of fashionable literary salons. Likewise, there is a Pope-Sterne connection to be found in Burney's work. Although she does not directly claim Sterne as an antecedent as she does with Fielding, Richardson, and Smollett in the front matter of *Evelina*, echoes of his project can be heard in the playful, affectionate satire of *The Witlings*, which engages in satirical and sentimental modes of expression simultaneously.

Simmering beneath the witty banter of the play, Tara Ghoshal Wallace argues, is a critique of "the dangers of a new world order based on an unstable system of global commerce" (69). This reading certainly confirms Burney's satirical regulation extends far beyond the polite Bluestocking drawing room. From a disadvantaged, marginal position, Burney strikes out to critique public issues beyond the domestic sphere to which Lennox's satirical commentary had been limited. This very ambiguity, or marginality, allows her to perform complex critiques of the contemporary social and political landscape of which she is a part. A comment on contemporary social mores, *The Witlings* attempts to satirize the literary salon, expanding beyond Lennox's courtship narrative to

take on social and even political issues. The play was censored during her lifetime, deemed too controversial to stage due to its resemblance to actual persons, particularly Elizabeth Montagu. Although *Tristram Shandy* had showed the permeability of gender boundaries by skewering them satirically, women writers were often still subjected to patriarchal control.

Burney's letters show that she was very much aware of the limitations she faced as a female author. Quoting from Burney's correspondence to Samuel Crisp in which the author declares she "'would a thousand Times rather forfeit my character as a *Writer*, than risk ridicule or censure as a *Female*'" (57), Tara Ghoshal Wallace gives a sense of the precarious line Burney had to tread in producing her dramatic satire. Several writers mention the anxiety surrounding respectability for women writers in the late eighteenth century. For a woman to be a respected creator, she had to be an exemplar of traditionally feminine virtues, a paradox right out of *Shandy Hall*. Ultimately, she bowed to the wishes of Crisp and Dr. Burney "'& down among the Dead Men [sank] the poor Witlings,--for-ever & for-ever & for-ever!"' (57). Although it would be nearly two centuries before *The Witlings* was resurrected from its place among the dead, it is nevertheless useful to analyze the play in the context of Burney's other dramas. Wallace informs us that her work displays a "broad range of cultural analysis" (66). Moving beyond gendered concerns such as female education tackled in *The Female Quixote*, Burney deals with class issues as well as the status of women, as "class distinctions are thematised through a consideration of leisure" (67). Burney critiques the emerging economic system, as well as the place of women in it. For example, Censor's final paean to self-dependence is undercut by the notion that "there is in fact no 'Self-dependence'

available to citizens of an imperial nation engaged in global trade” (68). As the figure who can be said to express Burney’s satirical observations most directly, Censor embodies her foray into public discourse.

I would argue that Censor (the voice of authority in the play) represents a satirical portrait of the Pope figure, a voice of satiric irony who takes it upon himself to regulate those around him. J. Karen Ray finds that *The Witlings* is indebted to Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* in its “attack on bad critics, bad writers, and the bad thinking which at once creates and venerates the bad critics and bad writers” (64). The play itself, however, lacks the bite of Augustan satire *à la* Pope and Swift. Burney ridicules Dabler, Jack, and Lady Smatter, but her approach is more in line with Sterne’s sentimental irony than the outright scourge of Juvenalian satire. It is perhaps an overreaching claim to say that “the prevailing lack of reason and good sense” which Burney outlines in the play “threatens everything of value in British society” (Ray 65). Because the societal breakdown in question is played for laughs, it is doubtful that Burney agrees with the humorless Censor that there are no redeeming qualities in the “wilderness of frippery” that forms the backdrop for this comedy of manners (*Witlings* I.419). Julian Fung asserts that her satire is more cautionary, “neither punitive nor reformative” (937) after the manner of Swift and Pope. Burney’s satire is written instead to “affirm the possibility of human goodness in the midst of a troubled world” (938). This is a claim that bears some investigation.

Illustrating Burney’s strategic ambiguity, Vivien Jones observes: “it was against this real, if constrained, opportunity for the woman writer and of uncertainty about the future and status of the novel that Burney published *Evelina* and chose to do so anonymously” (115). Like so many other aspects of Burney’s professional self-



presentation, this strategic anonymity “combines ambition with diffidence, independence with obligation” (115). This move demonstrates Burney’s awareness of her precarious position as a woman writer, making her later overt foray into literary culture in *The Witlings* all the more remarkable. It is a tightrope act of self-positioning, one unfortunately doomed never to appear before the Drury Lane footlights in Burney’s lifetime. Despite the play’s failure to reach the stage, it is nonetheless a valuable demonstration of the author’s ambiguous sentimental irony, and her humor at its most cutting.

Julia Epstein’s essay “Marginality in Frances Burney’s Novels” is useful to analyze themes of the marginal at work in the play. She sees the pre-marriage interval as a “liminal proving ground” (198) which highlights the ambiguous social status of unmarried young women, including *The Witlings*’ ingénue Cecilia. Epstein locates a tension between innocence and awareness of vulnerability in Burney’s heroines, for example the socially displaced heroine of *Evelina*. Moving from the father’s control to an identity subsumed by the husband, the pre-marriage period offers freedom to assert “female subjectivity” (199). Of course, in *The Witlings* this subjectivity is often undermined by Lady Smatter’s machinations, as well as Beaufort and Censor’s interference.

Censor, as his name would suggest, is a voice of conventional wisdom opposing the witlings’ pretensions throughout the play, especially targeting Dabler and Lady Smatter. It is unclear how seriously Burney intends for the audience to take Censor’s admonitions regarding proper conduct in the play; indeed, there is an echo of *Tristram Shandy*’s digressiveness in his observation on Beaufort’s younger brother, Jack: “the next

Heir might so easily get rid of him; for, if he was knocked down, I believe he would think it loss of Time to get up again, and if he were pushed into a River, I question if he would not be Drowned, ere he could persuade himself to swim long enough in the same Direction to save himself" (I.382-5). Here Burney's Censor comments disparagingly, as is his wont, on Jack's lack of direction. It is this very meandering quality, as Sterne has demonstrated, that fractures the linear narrative which readers have been conditioned to desire from works of fiction. In this brief aside, Censor pointedly asserts the values of brevity and focus which have come to represent successful fiction, as opposed to the digressive and unrealistic romance. One wonders if he is really the voice of reason (with all its gendered implications) or a figure of fun. It is possible that he occupies both roles, embodying Kim's conception of sentimental irony as observed in his discussion of *Tristram Shandy*.

The decision to present this satire as a play rather than a novel also bears some consideration. Drama carries associations of exaggeration and, of course, the built-in conceit that the work will be performed before an audience. A satirical play is public in a way that Lennox's novel is not, and so represents a crossing of the gendered boundary from novel to drama, where "the dramatic figure's occupation of the stage space mirrors many women's social insignificance" (Darby 30). Darby maintains that "in *The Witlings*, Burney explores the often antagonistic relationship between the desire for individuality . . . and social interdependence that is influenced by inequalities of gender, class, and education" (22). The liminality of theater also marks *Tristram Shandy* as an antecedent to *The Witlings*; it takes place in a consciously constructed world in which viewers are constantly made aware of the novel as an artistic production. Compared with

Sterne's constant foregrounding of the book as an object, the overt theatricality of the events and character names in *The Witlings* mark it as a self-aware send-up of pretentious faux literary culture. The salon culture Burney takes as her subject occupies a space between public and private in which women participate in discourse on "masculine" subjects from within a domestic space. As Darby concludes, "the stage is used to depict literal, physical confinement that parallels but intensifies the less tangible, but still serious sources of conflict for the female figures in the comedies" (42). Like *Tristram Shandy*, the culture Burney explores collapses pre-existing boundaries between gendered spheres; it dwells in the in-between, at the site of ongoing meaning-making that her characters often disrupt.

In light of its thematic boundary crossing, it is especially interesting that Burney's play was censored to avoid offending the predominantly female Bluestocking circle, which was perceived to be the target of her satire. Criticizing these public literary figures leads Burney to satirize female readers and critics in particular, an interesting development in light of eighteenth-century trends in women's reading and writing as outlined by Turner. Burney's play was suppressed because the emerging female literary establishment was gaining cultural cachet at the time of the play's composition, rendering a previously marginalized segment of the literary world a target for Burney's satire.

Burney eviscerates the male literary establishment by having her characters repeat and often botch quotations from famous works of literature, as when Lady Smatter misattributes the Thompson quotation "'to teach the young idea how to shoot'" to Shakespeare (4.610-12). Upon correcting her, Censor replies, "madam, it little matters which, since both, you know, were authors" (615-16), implying that the literary canon has

been violated by her ignorance. *The Witlings* takes on a distinctly Shandean flavor with its satire of literary hobby-horses and those who pretend to them, for instance the profoundly mediocre poet Dabler. Like Sterne, Burney is an equal opportunity commenter on the folly of misapplied learning, lampooning men and women poseurs alike. Her satire of both contemporary manners and literary pretensions can be seen as a natural follower of Sterne's destabilization of gender and meaning in *Tristram Shandy*, although there is no explicit link between the two. Like Sterne's novel, *The Witlings* mocks both male and female folly. The literary jokes Burney employs rupture the system of discourse surrounding literature; it is invaded and ultimately changed by the participation of women—whether it is changed for the better is, of course, a matter for her satiric regulation, which she provides through the character Censor, as seen in the following passage:

BEAUFORT: Ought you not, in justice, to acknowledge some obligation to me for introducing you to a place which abounds in such copious materials to gratify your Splenetic Humour?

CENSOR: Obligation? What, for shewing me new Scenes of the absurdities of my Fellow Creatures?

BEAUFORT: Yes, since those new Scenes give fresh occasion to exert that Spirit of railing which makes the whole happiness of your Life. (2.131-37)

This exchange shows that Beaufort, something of a man of feeling figure, is well aware of Censor's often ungenerous tendency to see the worst in people, and to impose his own values on those around him. He pleads to Beaufort, "take me where I can avoid occasion of railing, and . . . I will confess my obligation to you!" (2.142-4), but such a situation would take away his entire *raison d'être*.

Censor's role is to rail against "foppery, extravagance and folly" (130), qualities often associated with femininity. Indeed, Ray observes that Burney comments on the lot

of women in literary circles with Lady Smatter's reference to Pope's quotation from "Epistle to a Lady" that "most women have no Character at all" (4.1.47), which she takes as an attack on the virtue of women rather than an observation that there is no possibility for women to attain "character" without education and participation in public life. Ray calls this a "blatant misunderstanding of Pope" (65), noting that it undermines Lady Smatter's literary observations and calls her judgment into question for an audience that is meant to observe her from a position of authority. Likewise her quotation "it was a maxim with Pope,--or Swift, I am not sure which,--that resolution in a cultivated mind, is unchangeable" (III.132-4) informs Censor and Beaufort that her opinion is not to be taken seriously.

Burney's comments on women must be considered in light of her position as a female author, and as a dramatist especially. Because *The Witlings* is a farcical portrayal of the folly of fashionable literary culture, it necessarily takes place in a heightened reality. She seems to align herself with the literary elite, mocking the witlings who attempt to ape the productions of their intellectual superiors. Of course, as a woman Burney is lambasting the perceived frivolity of her own gender through the "sagacious observations" overheard at the salon (I.106). This is a move that requires close examination, if only to rescue the author of *The Woman-Hater* from possible charges of woman-hating.

Like Lennox, Burney comments on the state of women's education with a character who is unable to form opinions of her own. Mrs. Sapient literally has no character, as is readily apparent from her obvious assertions such as "in *my* opinion, a Bankruptcy is no pleasant thing!" (II.482). Her satirical observations on the position of

women in eighteenth-century society do not end there, however. She portrays Lady Smatter as self-centered and mercenary as the play progresses after the young Cecilia, who is engaged to her nephew, loses her fortune in the stock market. Unlike her sentimental hero nephew Beaufort, she is unable to attain the ideals he declares when he states, “her distress shall encrease my tenderness, her poverty shall redouble my Respect, and her misfortunes shall render her more dear to me than ever!” (II.573-5). Lady Smatter is shallow and pragmatic to the point of heartlessness, but Burney presents lack of understanding, and therefore sensibility, as a possible reason for her villainous behavior. She is the product of an educational system and gender ideology that hinders her ability to attain the true sensibility Beaufort possesses. Surrounded by the posturing *milieu* of the literary salon with its flattery and insincerity, Smatter is denied access to the authentic culture of letters which she pretends to comprehend. Instead she is relegated to an object of Censor’s “rational consultation” (III.59), unable to respond because she lacks the tools to do so.

A few more words on Censor’s role as the so-called voice of reason would not go amiss. As the text’s arbiter of taste, sense, and knowledge, this character represents the “real” world outside the liminal space of Lady Smatter’s salon. However, he is an invasive voice, reluctantly penetrating the feminine realm of Mrs. Wheedle’s milliner’s shop in his first appearance when he declares “I’m a very stupid fellow,--I take no manner of delight in Tapes and Ribbons” (I.102-3). Although Censor expresses a lack of interest in the proceedings through his general demeanor and sarcastic responses, he is ultimately responsible for determining the outcome of the play. His social blackmail of the main antagonist Lady Smatter through a satirical ballad he composes mocking the

woman who “gulp’d such a dose of incongruous matter” (V.780) allows Beaufort and Cecilia to marry. Like Lennox’s Arabella, Smatter is excoriated for her misdirected education, although unlike the passionate Arabella, she is a dilettante lacking the encyclopedic knowledge and evident intelligence Lennox’s heroine possesses, and is therefore not sympathetic. Though he returns the lovers to their benefactress’ grudging good graces, Censor concludes with a characteristic epigram: “never praise a man for only gratifying his own humour” (V.904-5). Censor is a figure of authority who refuses to accept praise for his beneficence, a characteristic that aligns him with the man of feeling. He works to rescue the impassioned lovers from ruin with his rational plan while remaining at a safe remove from their overtly sentimental love plot. Although Beaufort accuses him of “satirical dryness” which distracts him from “affairs of real interest and importance” (IV.618-20), Censor is not the satirical rogue he first appears to be.

Darby maintains that “all attempts to act individually are ultimately judged by Censor . . . who claims authority as the play’s only free man and rational thinker” (41). Censor’s role is to judge those around him, often voicing the audience’s exasperation, and this places him in a privileged position with regard to the predominantly feminine culture which bears the brunt of his critique. Despite this, his is not an unqualified authority. While he may opine at the close of the play in a hilarious bit of understatement: “I begin to hope these Witlings will demolish their Club” (V.945), Censor is merely another participant in an ongoing literary discourse, one that now includes women. Censor can instead be thought of as another manifestation of the “worthy Divine” figure from *The Female Quixote*. He sets the characters to rights and corrects injustices through his ministrations, but the fact of his intervention is similarly problematic. Burney’s choice of

a male mouthpiece to deliver her perspective (and that of the audience) recalls Lennox's eleventh-hour introduction of the male doctor to cure her deluded Arabella. While *The Female Quixote* arguably replaces the Countess with a male doctor to legitimize the heroine's cure by "reason," it is not apparent that Burney is making a similar gesture with her male authority figure, who is neither doctor nor "Divine." Although he fills the physician role in the play, Censor is mere disinterested outsider. He has no intrinsic authority, reflecting the destabilization of patriarchal authority which Sterne gestures toward with his novel.

*The Witlings*, like *Tristram Shandy*, incorporates both sentimental and satirical elements. In Burney's play the sentimental hero and heroine (Beaufort and Cecilia) are placed in the midst of Lady Smatter's absurd pseudo-literary realm and affectionately mocked for their excessive emotion. In her treatment of these characters, Burney recalls Sterne's sentimental irony—particularly in his affectionately ribald portrayal of Yorick. At once a figure of fun and pathos, the country parson embodies the ambiguity at the heart of *Tristram Shandy*. The play of reason and passion that occurs in Burney's drama is highlighted by foils like Censor and Beaufort; the satire privileges the comic voice of reason, but does not completely undermine its sentimental hero's quest for love, although laments like Cecilia's "oh cease, fond, suffering, feeble Heart! To struggle thus with misery inevitable" (V.534-5) can ring hollow to ears which Burney has primed with her droll, tongue-in-cheek brand of comedy.

Burney incorporates the discourse of sentiment into her mockery of salon culture by following the familiarly unhappy love affair of Beaufort and Cecilia, juxtaposing them with the witlings' "frippery" in order to highlight their mutual ridiculousness. Much like



in Sterne and Lennox's works, the sentimental irony on display encourages both identification with and critical examination of the characters presented. Kim theorizes that for people of the later eighteenth century "satisfactions come from skillfully playing a role rather than from fully actualizing some internal essence" (11), and Burney skewers the play-acting dilettantes and fops who populate this social milieu, while also gently mocking the couple of sensibility. Burney reaches beyond Lennox's earlier novel to incorporate public and private life in her comedic send-up of contemporary manners and pretensions. She satirizes both men and women in her unstaged play, entering the discursive space opened by Sterne's abjected laughter.

## Conclusion

As Erickson observes, “In a Shandyan world plagued with male obtuseness, arrogance, debility, and impotence, (as well as female obtuseness, moral and mental frailty, and frustration), Sterne’s midwife book . . . shows an exceptional *human* sensitivity to the feminine origins of life and creation” (204). *Tristram Shandy* is very much attuned to the tensions between opposites that generate change and produce meaning. Sterne’s novel resides in the space between given concepts, at the fraught and often messy site of interaction between opposing philosophies, passions, and genders where human beings are, like the maid Susannah at the scene of Tristram’s birth, “running backwards and forwards” (*TS* 56). It is this refusal to take any notion for granted, to leave any system of discourse unexamined, that makes Sterne’s novel such a radically feminist text. The play between reason and passion that runs throughout *Tristram Shandy* is felt later in Burney’s work, and perhaps the stage was set for it by the ambiguous satire of Lennox’s rollicking *Arabella*. As the text so often points out, meaning dwells in the margins, and especially in the challenge to authorial potency raised by “marginal” women.

Revisiting *Tristram Shandy* as a narrative not only of masculine loss, but of feminine empowerment affords the opportunity to appreciate the work as a foundational text for women writers of the eighteenth century. Although it is rarely mentioned in the same breath as the novelistic tradition as inherited by Frances Burney and her literary descendants, Sterne’s meandering “midwife book” exposes the emptiness at the heart of patriarchy and its discourses until, in Corporal Trim’s words, “the fortifications are quite destroyed” (*TS* 506). Having thus seen the fortress laid bare, women writers, like the

widow Wadman who usurps Tristram's narrative, could erect their own. As Burney's attack on fashionable literary culture suggests, Sterne's challenge to established systems of knowledge and discourse was taken up by women writers of satire—female Quixotes asserting themselves as “rational Beings.”

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