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Mrs. Shandy's "Lint and Basilicon":
The Importance of Women in
Tristram Shandy

LEIGH A. EHLERS

CLARA REEVE'S OBSERVATION that *Tristram Shandy* "is not a woman's book" presaged subsequent criticism which barely touches on the role of women in Sterne's novel.¹ Certainly, the Shandy males are the main focus of this novel, and the various women are presented solely from the male viewpoint; hence they are easily invoked or dismissed as it suits Tristram's whim. Understandably enough, critics, when confronted with a novel in which the male narrator leaves his mother listening in suspended animation for five chapters, have generally accorded Sterne's female characters scant attention.² The more recent criticism of Ruth M. Faurot and James Swearingen, emphasizing Mrs. Shandy's activity, common sense, and practicality, provides a much needed corrective to former misreadings.³ However, these arguments do not explore the significance of the apparent tension between Mrs. Shandy's inherent strength and her husband's and to lesser extent her son's denigration of her. Once we look past the Shandean male propaganda, it becomes evident that Sterne's novel is indeed very much of a "woman's book," in which women are invested with considerable, though untapped, restorative powers.

The Shandy males, of course, consider themselves victimized by a world of frustrations, women being but one of many. For example, Walter bemoans to Uncle Toby, "we shall have a devilish month of it . . . fire, water, women, wind" (IV, 16, 348). While the doleful misadventures of Toby and Mrs. Wadman or Walter's difficulties with clocks provide Tristram with his richest comic

anecdotes, the alienation of these men from those "daughters of Eve" indicates serious moral, sexual, and spiritual deprivations. Robert Alter has argued that the Shandys' obsessions, their "hobby-horsing around," represents a "sublimated sexual activity [which is] in some ways a damagingly inadequate substitute for the real thing."⁴ Sterne's satiric attack on all the Shandy males postulates, as Melvyn New has demonstrated, "sexual impotence" as a metaphor for "intellectual and emotional impotence," so that "in the Shandean world, all the possibilities of creation—literary, intellectual, spiritual, as well as physical—are surrounded and subverted by the passions."⁵

A hitherto unacknowledged method by which Sterne marshalls his satiric attack involves the Shandy women, particularly Elizabeth. As New has pointed out, Sterne's use of the Widow Wadman's concupiscence to undercut Uncle Toby's shallow sentimentalism suggests that Sterne's attitude toward women diverges from Tristram's hasty condemnation of them. A similar case may be made for Mrs. Shandy's role as a satiric norm for revealing the shortcomings of Walter, Toby, and particularly Tristram. By means of allusions to Greek and Egyptian mythology and Christian commandment, Sterne first associates Elizabeth with certain procreative and restorative powers. The implication of these allusions is that a balance between male and female roles, both social and moral, is essential for a properly creative, Christian existence. The Shandy males' failure to achieve such balance, their clinging to delusions of male superiority and patriarchal power, is furthermore associated with certain classical allusions invoking death, destruction, and impotence. Sterne concludes his novel by re-emphasizing the satire on male obtuseness and impotence, but he also holds out the hope of restoration. Mrs. Shandy's unobtrusive presence in the final scene, reinforced by that of Yorick, suggests that Tristram, like all Christians, is occasionally blind, but not irrevocably lost to his better spiritual interests.

The allusions to Greek and Egyptian mythology appear in Walter's theory of christian names, when he attempts to give his son a name carrying a "magic bias" strong enough to compensate for a crushed nose (IV, 8, 334). While the incident of Tristram's naming satirizes the rationalistic excesses of Walter's hobby-horse, the choice of the name "Trismegistus" also suggests the problems of procreation, impotence and restoration. As James Work notes, Hermes Trismegistus, the supposed author of the Hermetic books of ancient knowledge, is traditionally identified with Thoth, "the

Egyptian god of wisdom, inventor of arts and sciences" (Work edition, IV, 8, 279, n. 2). Plato reports that the Egyptian god Theuth "invented numbers and arithmetic and geometry and astronomy, also draughts and dice, and, most important of all, letters."⁶ From Walter's point of view, Trismegistus, or "thrice-greatest," represents knowledge and the power derived from it. The traditional association of Trismegistus with writing reinforces the Shandean obsession with words as magic; at one point, Tristram accords language "a talismanic power" (III, 41, 282). The child whose name was to have been Trismegistus is christened instead Tristram and thereafter grows up to become the beleaguered, impotent writer, painfully aware of his difficulties in controlling words and living "364 times faster" than he can possibly write (IV, 13, 342).

Beyond this association with magical power, the figure of Trismegistus suggests further implications which, unrecognized by father and son, strike more closely at the heart of the impotence in Shandy Hall. In various Egyptian legends, preserved in great detail by Plutarch, Thoth is a healer and restorer invariably linked with the goddess Isis and the Osiris resurrection/vegetation myth.⁷ For example, after the battle between Set and Isis' son Horus, Thoth heals their wounds, Horus' lost eye and Set's emasculation, by spitting on them.⁸ Isis too is associated with healing, especially with restoration of the mutilated male. As Plutarch tells us, when Isis collects the pieces of her husband's dismembered body, she is not "able to recover the privy-member of *Osiris*" and must supply an image of it instead.⁹ In native Egyptian records, Isis, aided by Thoth, revivifies Osiris, who then becomes the King of the Dead. The couple is also associated with the annual rising of the Nile (Osiris) to water the desert (Isis) during the first month of the Egyptian calendar, named "Thoth."¹⁰ Those "thrice-greatest" powers of Thoth, so missing from Tristram's world, are exercised in the service of a goddess, a powerful mother figure whose magical presence restores the deprivations of the emasculated male. This interdependence of male and female is of paramount importance; male and female complement each other to achieve a symbolically fertile harmony.

The point of Sterne's references to Trismegistus and the restoring mother figure is that Tristram and Walter are in sore need of such aid, but after failing to invoke Trismegistus, they also fail to invoke his female associate. When the Shandy males ridicule women—e.g., despising Mrs. Shandy because she "is not a

woman of science" (VI, 39, 569)—they ignore the lessons of the myth of Trismegistus.¹¹ The Shandys should cherish their own masculinity, associated with reason, and Mrs. Shandy's femininity, particularly the creative and restorative aspects of her motherhood. The clearest instance of her motherly actions occurs in the episode of Tristram's circumcision. Walter responds to the accident with cold rationality and thus sends for "a couple of folios" on Hebrew ritual but does nothing tangible to help his son. Mrs. Shandy, on the other hand, concerns herself with binding the wound; she first desires "lint and basilicon" and demands to know "what herbs" would cure the hurt (V, 27, 459). Like Isis, Elizabeth seems to possess certain instinctive, motherly powers to restore the male's wounded groin, in contrast with Walter's pedantic and ineffectual approach.

Elizabeth's restorative powers are also suggested by her practical concern for the repairing of breeches. When Walter quibbles over the various possibilities for Tristram's first pair of breeches, Elizabeth engages in maddening agreement, a major weapon in her "art of counterthrust."¹² Misunderstanding his mother's attitude, Tristram labels her the "truest of all the *Poco-curante's* of her sex," but he unwittingly provides us a better clue to her motive when he notes that she cares not for the details of the breeching "provided it was but done at all" (VI, 20, 533). She knows her husband well enough to refrain from encouraging his hobby-horse; even so, Walter indulges in time-consuming research on the history of breeches, when in fact common sense would more swiftly have chosen breeches with hooks and eyes. Indeed, Elizabeth is far more involved in the subject of breeches than Tristram seems to realize. He sneers at her lack of interest in a trip to the continent: "my mother, who being taken up with a project of knitting my father a pair of large worsted breeches—(the thing is common sense)—and . . . not caring to be put out of her way, . . . staid at home at SHANDY HALL, to keep things right during the expedition" (VII, 27, 617). Given the overtones of the Trismegistus myth and given her practical actions in the circumcision episode, Elizabeth's knitting here assumes a positive status. It indicates not indifference, but love and care; she at least attempts to restore order and creativity to a house visited by death (Bobby's) and plagued by declining potency (Walter's and later Tristram's). In such a context, Elizabeth's knitting represents neither triviality nor stupidity, as Tristram seems to think; it represents an act of life, the very answer to his flight from death, an answer lying unrecognized at home.

This restorative role of the mother, echoed by the allusions to the Trismegistus myth, is hardly an isolated or minor motif in the novel. Sterne explicitly subsumes his mythic materials within a coherent Christian context. Elizabeth, aided by Yorick, is instrumental in pointing out the way to a proper Christian life. For example, these two answer Walter's Platonic discourse on the distinction between rational, philosophical love and base, physical love:

—I think the procreation of children as beneficial to the world, said Yorick, as the finding out the longitude—
 —To be sure, said my mother, *love* keeps peace in the world—
 —In the *house*—my dear, I own—It replenishes the earth; said my mother—
 But it keeps heaven empty—my dear; replied my father.
 (VIII, 33, 721)¹³

Contrary to Walter's disputation, Christian love combines both the physical and spiritual, for in replenishing the earth, it consequently leads to ultimate love and salvation in heaven. Toby's objection to Walter's Platonic argument, "what has a man who believes in God to do with this?" (VIII, 33, 720), further emphasizes the Christian obligation to unify the types of love. Specifically, such a Christian concept of love recognizes and respects love between man and woman, unlike Plato's *Symposium* (sec. 180, the source, via *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, for Walter's argument), in which homosexual love is superior to love for a woman. In his misogynistic way, Walter fails to recognize his duty to love his wife; for him, love is "a misfortune," to which he "would never submit . . . like a christian; but would pish, and huff, and bounce, and kick, and play the Devil . . ." (VIII, 26, 709).

One consequence of Walter's jaundiced view of love is his difficulty in understanding Corporal Trim's filial affections. In particular, he questions the Corporal about the Fifth Commandment: "Prythee, *Trim*, quoth my father, . . . What do'st thou mean, by '*honouring thy father and mother*'? Allowing them, [*Trim* replies] an' please your honour, three halfpence a day out of my pay, when they grew old" (V, 32, 470). The non-hobby-horsical *Trim* displays wisdom and virtue in his parental love, as Yorick recognizes: "I honour thee more for it, corporal *Trim*, than if thou hadst had a hand in the *Talmud* itself" (V, 32, 471). This Christian

duty of honoring both mother and father reinforces Elizabeth's plea for the equal importance of physical and spiritual love. By investing the mother figure with such importance within the Christian and pagan contexts, Sterne intimates that women, mothers in particular, are essential to a loving and balanced Christian existence. Despite male derision and deprecation, Mrs. Shandy, whose "degree of practical wisdom in maintaining domestic tranquillity . . . deserves respect rather than contempt," remains a potential source of life and harmony in Shandy Hall.¹⁴

If Mrs. Shandy indeed possesses certain restorative powers, as the classical allusions imply she should, why then is Shandy Hall so greatly affected by a sense of frustration, futility, and infertility? The Fifth Commandment recited by Trim provides the answer. The Christian properly owes his parents a duty of honor, even a monetary one, three halfpence per day. Walter, in contrast, begrudges paying his grandmother's pension. Following his paternal example, Tristram derides his mother and women in general, with the exception of young, sentimental types such as Maria. Typical of his carping against women is the list of heroes "whose breasts never felt . . . the sting of love" because they "had . . . something else to do"; the list includes classical examples—Dardanus, Polyxenes and Persicus—as well as the more recent account of Charles XII's disdain for the Countess of Königsmark (VI, 30, 551).¹⁵ In a sense, the Shandy males have fallen from grace; they sin against women by subverting the Fifth Commandment into a justification for patriarchy.¹⁶ Walter's cruelest action, denying his wife a trip to London for her lying-in, springs from a selfish and unchristian will to power. Citing Sir Robert Filmer, Walter cares more for upholding "the monarchical system of domestick government established in the first creation of things by God" than he does for the comfort and safety of his wife (I, 18, 54).¹⁷ As punishment for this disrespect, the Shandy males are cut off from women, that is, from the creative and restorative powers of mothers. To underline this isolation, Sterne invokes a pattern of classical allusions expressing the self-imposed cycle of loss, maiming, impotence, and death rampant in Shandy Hall.

The most striking such allusion appears in the argument that "the mother is not of kin to her child" (IV, 29, 390). Although Henry Swinburne's *A Treatise of Testaments and Last Wills* is the immediate source, critics have pointed out that the ultimate reference is to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.¹⁸ In the last play of that trilogy, Apollo's defense for Orestes' matricide is precisely such a denial of blood-

kinship between mother and son. To effect a resolution of this conflict, Athena wisely recognizes the need to honor both male and female divinities, the patriarchal Olympian pantheon and the matriarchal rule of the Furies. By such a balance between past and present, between male and female, harmony is achieved for the Athenian state. Shandy Hall, in contrast, is dominated by the narrower principle of male superiority. Just as he had hobby-horsically subverted the Fifth Commandment to his lust for patriarchal power, Walter now delights in the Apollonian argument but fails to comprehend the inhumanity of a legal argument which reduces the mother to no more than a "venter," a genetically passive receptacle for the fetus (IV, 29, 390). Yorick sharply attacks this legal absurdity: if "Mrs. *Shandy* the mother is nothing at all akin to him—and as the mother's the surest side—Mr. *Shandy*, in course, is still less than nothing" (IV, 30, 393). By giving the last word to Yorick the cleric, Sterne implies that Walter's patriarchal power violates the spirit of Christianity, of loving and honoring father and mother alike.

Walter displays his callousness toward women most pointedly in his theory of the ideal method of childbirth, the so-called caesarean section, which in this period was tantamount to matricide. With Julius Caesar and Scipio as classical examples, Walter justifies this operation in terms of its benefits for the child, particularly "no pressure of the head against the pelvis" (II, 19, 178), but he disregards the pain and danger for the mother.¹⁹ Mrs. Shandy quite naturally turns "pale as ashes at the very mention of it" (II, 19, 179), for, as Arthur H. Cash notes, this operation was "in the eighteenth century . . . always fatal. An Irish woman had survived it, though performed by an ignorant midwife, only to die a few weeks later."²⁰ Walter's concern for the child's brain represents his extreme rationalism, which would ignore pain and suffering in its ruthless pursuit of intellectual power.²¹

To indicate his disapproval of such a "rational" approach to childbirth, Sterne satirizes the crude, bumbling Dr. Slop, especially in his usurpation of a female role, midwifery. This "scientific" man-midwife destroys Tristram's nose with a tool of modern technology—the forceps.²² Slop resents the unscientific, but proven safe and competent methods of the country midwife, who is a "daughter of *Lucina*," the Roman goddess of childbirth (II, 11, 126).²³ Sterne allows Tristram to reveal his particular bias when he approves of male incursion into female prerogatives; Tristram cites the case of Licetus Fortunio, who, born prematurely, was reared by

his father in an artificial womb “par l’uniformité d’une chaleur étrangère mesurée exactement sur les degrés d’un Thermomètre” ([sic] IV, 10, 338, Sterne’s footnote). Such man-midwifery has its classical locus in the myth of Zeus’ preservation of Semele’s unborn child within his thigh, from which it is later born. The result is the glorification of the father and near exclusion of the mother. Given Tristram’s earlier argument for the animalcular genetics of the Homunculus, the pattern of male supremacy in Shandy Hall has reached its most absurd; Mrs. Shandy becomes the passive “venter,” the midwife is subordinated, and the men try to become father and womb, of course with disastrous results. Slop’s “advanced” methods disrupt the natural birth process, destroy a nose, and by implication threaten the very procreativity of the Shandy family.

As a consequence of their will to power, the Shandy males are alienated from women and suffer from a nearly irreversible split between mind and body, or intellect and procreation. Again, classical allusions pointedly underscore this Shandean divisiveness. For example, Uncle Toby, despite his respect for Elizabeth, at one point echoes a long classical tradition of misogyny prompted by reading Homer: “was I not as much concerned for the destruction of the *Greeks* and *Trojans* as any boy of the whole school? Had I not three strokes of a ferula given me, two on my right hand and one on my left, for calling *Helena* a bitch for it?” (VI, 32, 556). Consequently, his amours with the Widow Wadman are doomed to failure. When he goes courting in “red plush” breeches (IX, 2, 739), Toby calls attention to his weakness, the wound on his groin, which, like the Fisher King’s, inhibits his procreative powers. His sterility is further emphasized by the “camphorated cerecloth” (VI, 36, 564) sewn into his breeches at Walter’s order; as Work points out, camphor was thought to have prophylactic powers and is used by Walter—his classical sources are Dioscorides, Aetius and Rhasis via Burton—as a remedy for the “disease” of love (Work edition, VI, 36, 468, n. 9). Toby, then, is victimized by the Shandean hobby-horses and as a result is alienated from women, especially the concupiscent Widow, and thus from life itself.

Paralleling Toby’s difficulties with the physical, Tristram suffers a divided existence. He is caught between the intellectual exercise of his hobby-horse, his compulsion to write down all his life and opinions, and his physical weaknesses, particularly his impotence with Jenny, “the most oppressive of its kind which could befall me as a man, proud, as he ought to be, of his manhood” (VII, 29, 624).

Repeatedly Tristram turns to classical imagery to express his mind-body dilemma. Initially, he had argued against Stoics such as Zeno, Cato, and Seneca by maintaining that man's "body and his mind . . . are exactly like a jerkin, and a jerkin's lining;—rumple the one—you rumple the other" (III, 4, 189). However, by the time he reaches Volume VII, Tristram reveals a deep ambivalence toward his ravaged body and in fact wishes to exalt the mind alone: "I love the Pythagoreans (much more than ever I dare tell my dear Jenny) for their . . . 'getting out of the body, in order to think well.' No man thinks right whilst he is in it; blinded as he must be, with his congenial humours . . ." (VII, 13, 593). Tristram retreats from the prospect of physical decline and death by dwelling on his desire for intellectual, not spiritual or Christian, transcendence. The consequence is alienation from Jenny, from love, procreativity, and life.

The culmination of the association of Shandean impotence with classical allusions as well as Christian teachings occurs in the closing scene of the novel. In Mrs. Shandy's presence, Walter expounds against lust, the cause of "every evil and disorder in the world," and against "the devil . . . in women" (IX, 32, 805). Despite Yorick's disapproval of this intemperate and unchristian hypothesis, Walter insults his wife directly by condemning "passion, my dear . . . which couples and equals wise men with fools" and then cites Diogenes and Plato as authorities on the degradations of sexual love (IX, 33, 806). Next Walter deplores the shamefulness of sexuality—"wherefore, when we go about to make and plant a man, do we put out the candle?"—and praises "killing and destroying" (IX, 33, 806).²⁴ This violent speech is so unchristian that Yorick must oppose it, and thus we see him "rising up to batter the whole hypothesis to pieces" (IX, 33, 807).

But in a sense it may be too late for Walter; the consequences of his sin are upon him when Obadiah enters with the accusation against the Shandy bull's potency.²⁵ Although Walter laments that his bull "might have done for Europa herself in purer times," he fails to recognize the implications of this myth (IX, 33, 808). The Shandean world lacks the magical presence of Trismegistus, and therefore the bull, associated in the Egyptian myth with Osiris, fails to impregnate the cow, associated with Isis (who received her cow's head from Thoth). Walter and, by extension, all the Shandy males cannot return to those "purer times"; they now exist in a fallen world, in which women are despised and the Fifth Commandment flouted, in which as a punishment the archetypal vegetation-resurrection myth fails to operate. The very basis of

civilization may be in peril, especially in light of an earlier allusion to Hesiod's theory that civilization begins with "a man,—a woman—and a bull" (emended to "ox" in Yorick's more accurate translation, V, 31, 466). Walter's rhetorical story about his bull as maligned town dandy obscures the point and reveals his incomprehension of the warning against sin. The Shandys are courting disaster if they continue in their patriarchal, rationalistic pursuit of power at the expense of love and respect for women. As long as they do so, Shandy Hall will remain isolated from life, and the Shandy bull will find himself unequal to his task.

Some hope, however, remains for the salvation and restoration of the Shandy family. Both Mrs. Shandy and Yorick, the voice of the moral, Christian point of view, are present in the final scene and between them supply the final lines of the novel. The cock-and-bull story need not necessarily end in impotence and death, for Sterne offers the male Shandys certain guideposts toward salvation. Although Walter seems thoroughly entrenched in his rationalism and misogyny and Toby in his retreat from women, Tristram seems a good candidate for moral development. New has demonstrated that Tristram's reflections in Volume IX on time and mutability represent "a climax of moral recognition"; his earlier games with time have been superseded by Christian faith and the understanding that "God not man is the measure of the universe; that mutability not permanence is the condition of human existence."²⁶ When Tristram includes Jenny in his prayer, "Heaven have mercy upon us both" (IX, 8, 754), he is moving *towards* a moral, religious awakening; as with the time motif, his attitude toward women reveals the state of his soul. Unfortunately, Tristram has not reached such an advanced stage regarding women as he has about mutability; that is, he still shares many of Walter's negative views about Mrs. Shandy and, unlike Trim, is not yet able to honor both father and mother. However, some of his remarks about other young women, reinforced by classical allusions, suggest the emergence of a more positive attitude. Thus there is hope that he will one day recognize his proper duty of filial love for his mother.

Tristram's progress toward respect for other women becomes a journey toward self-knowledge. While satirizing Walter's theories of the cerebellum, Tristram laughs at the idea that "there are two souls in every man living,—the one according to the great *Metheglingius* [a type of the drunken philosopher], being called the *Animus*, the other the *Anima*" (II, 19, 174). Despite his scorn for

such a balance between the masculine/rational and the feminine/vital principles of life, Tristram's quest for Jenny, the archetypal mistress, implies an unconscious recognition of his overemphasis on the reason. The attempted intercourse with Jenny, though ending in failure, brings Tristram closer to the feminine, whereas Walter's beds of justice result in misunderstanding and alienation from his wife. Jenny's positive effect on Tristram is a partial mitigation of his misogynistic posturing. For example, she interrupts, though only briefly, his heated and lewd diatribe against love with a simple reprimand, "O Tristram! Tristram!" (VIII, 11, 670). Eventually Tristram modulates his earlier tone of misogynistic lewdness, as in the nuns of Andouillet's episode or his skeptical comment about Janatone, "nay, thou mayest go off like a hussy—and lose thyself" (VII, 9, 590). As he nears his last two volumes, Tristram's sensuality is tempered by sentiment so that his tearful response to Maria, for example, is respectful and positive. He treats this "poor hapless damsel" with great tenderness and honors her as the "venerable presence of Misery" (IX, 24, 784). In this encounter, Tristram partially expiates his sins against women when he compares his countenance with Maria's goat and reflects on "what a *Beast* man is" (IX, 24, 784).²⁷

To complement this emerging respect for women, Tristram seems close to resolving his earlier discomfort concerning sexuality. One indication of this change is his use of the knot image in a progressively positive context to evoke proper sensuality and Christian morality. Tristram's initial inhibitions about his parents' sexual encounters (the clock joke, for instance) are still evident in the birthing sequence so that he feels compelled to shunt Mrs. Shandy into the background. At this point knots carry negative, dangerous connotations, for as Robert Gorham Davis has argued, Obadiah's knots on Dr. Slop's bag retain implications of magical obstructions against delivery.²⁸ Gradually Tristram develops a more positive connotation for knots. When Walter wishes to analyze those "hidden resources [of] the mind," which he feels enable man to cope with adversity, Toby offers the Christian argument:

'Tis by the assistance of Almighty God . . . 'tis not from our own strength, brother *Shandy* . . . we are upheld by the grace and the assistance of the best of Beings.
—That is cutting the knot, said my father, instead of untying it.

(IV, 7, 332)²⁹

Although he intends to argue for the necessity of rational self-analysis, Walter's reference to the Gordian knot underlines Toby's point more forcefully. The knot represents the accidents and misfortunes of life, like Tristram's crushed nose or his misnaming; faith and trust in God enable the Christian to cope with those afflictions, to cut through the illusions and obstructions of earthly existence to arrive at the universal truths and salvation offered by Christianity.³⁰ Although Tristram may miss the point here (he does not comment on the implications of this scene), Sterne's union of classical and Christian references reinforces the exhortation to faith and points out for Tristram and all the Shandys the way to salvation.

Tristram's spiritual development, though incomplete, expresses itself in his juxtaposition of a positive knot image with an increased respect for women. By the middle of Volume IX, he finds himself able to confront seriously (not comically, as in the novel's opening scenes) the issue of sexuality in marriage; he at least raises the possibility of a "chapter of *Knots*," or marital coition as Work suggests (Work edition, IX, 14, 617, n. 1). Here the knot, no longer a hindrance like Slop's man-midwifery, emphasizes the union and equality of man and woman. Significantly, in the same paragraph concerning the chapter of knots, Tristram applies to himself a phrase that echoes an earlier comment about his mother. The son now admits that he knows "no more than my heels how to answer" objections to digressions in the narrative (IX, 14, 765); thus he echoes his mother's earlier uncertainty about Walter's lamentations—"she knew no more than her backside what my father meant" (I, 3, 4). After nine long volumes, Tristram is finally beginning to recognize, at least subliminally, that part of him corresponding to his mother. While he still lacks proper respect for her, there appears to be hope that he may be close to writing that chapter of knots, that is, to tying together father and mother, male and female, mind and body, Animus and Anima.

As is abundantly evident, Sterne was at some pains to link his classical allusions with the proper roles of men and women and with Christian love and duty. The male characters reveal various levels of awareness concerning women, ranging from contempt to great respect. Sterne's repudiation of Walter's misogyny is exemplified through other characters: the non-hobby-horsical, filial Trim; Yorick, the spokesman for morality and faith; and Mrs. Shandy herself. Tristram is placed in a learning situation, faced with social, moral and spiritual models. Like the typical Christian, he is flawed

and sinful but seeks the path to virtue and salvation beckoning before him. Combining such a Christian context with classical allusions is not unusual for eighteenth-century fiction, but Sterne's subtle questioning of the role of women is somewhat more unexpected for the period. Sterne ironically comments on the shortcomings of Tristram and Shandyism at the same time that he upholds an ideal for man-woman relations. No mere cipher, Mrs. Shandy is essential to the functioning and survival of Shandy Hall, far more essential than her menfolk realize. Sterne's novel envisions the possibility, though not the actuality of a truly humanistic household, a Christian version of Hesiod's civilization, in which men and women coexist in harmony, love, and respect.

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NOTES

¹Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance Through Times, Countries, and Manners* (New York: Garland, 1970; orig. 1785), II, 29.

²Mrs. Shandy's suspended animation occurs between V, 5 and V, 13. See *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Melvyn New and Joan New (Gainesville: Univ. Presses of Florida, 1978). Quotations from the novel are taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically. References to notes in James A. Work's edition (New York: Odyssey, 1940) will be cited as "Work edition."

³Ruth M. Furot, "Mrs. Shandy Observed," *SEL*, 10(1970), 579-89. James E. Swearingen, *Reflexivity in Tristram Shandy: An Essay in Phenomenological Criticism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977).

⁴Robert Alter, "Tristram Shandy and the Game of Love," *American Scholar*, 37(1968), 317.

⁵Melvyn New, *Laurence Sterne as Satirist: A Reading of "Tristram Shandy"* (Gainesville: Univ. of Florida Press, 1969), pp. 178, 203.

⁶*Phaedrus*, in *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*, tr. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 561-63. For similar accounts of Hermes Trismegistus, see Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, and Lactantius, *De Ira Dei*. For a general discussion of Thoth's transformation into Hermes Trismegistus, see R.E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971).

⁷See Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, tr. Samuel Squire (Cantabrigiæ: Typis Academicis, 1744), p. 15.

⁸Plutarch, pp. 17, 19, 55.

⁹Plutarch, p. 23.

¹⁰George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), VI, 34-36. Frazer notes that this first month "Thoth" begins with the summer solstice when the Nile starts to rise, i.e., fed by the tears of Isis for the death of Osiris, the corn god, at the end of the harvest.

¹¹In part, Plutarch interprets the Isis-Osiris myth as a paradigm for the proper balance of elemental forces in nature: reason (Hermes Trismegistus) facilitates harmony in the universe as in the emblem of a "perfect Triangle" with Isis "the

feminine part of nature" as the base, Osiris or "masculine nature" as the perpendicular, and their "offspring" Orus (Horus) as the hypotenuse (Plutarch, pp. 74, 78).

¹²Faurot, p. 585.

¹³Sterne further undercuts Walter's argument by putting him into agreement with Slop, the representative of bad temper, incompetence, and Catholicism: "'Tis Virginity, cried Slop, triumphantly, which fills paradise. Well push'd nun! quoth my father" (VIII, 33, 721).

¹⁴Swearingen, p. 222. Swearingen's reading of Mrs. Shandy is partially favorable since he praises her ability to outmaneuver Walter on "important issues of concrete life" (p. 223). Here he perhaps overestimates her influence over her menfolk, who seem determined to ignore her contributions to the family's life. Nor does Swearingen recognize that Mrs. Shandy's seeming "intellectual formlessness" and "affective indifference" are qualities attributed to her by biased observers, her husband and son (p. 223).

¹⁵Tristram draws his list from "the few legitimate sons of Adam" who have never loved women, but he excludes extreme women-haters "maintaining . . . all misogynists to be bastards" (VI, 30, 551). However, the inclusion of Charles XII, who was, as Work notes, "an authentic and famed misogynist," blurs this distinction between misogynists and non-lovers (Work edition, VI, 30, 456, n. 1).

¹⁶Walter's tendency to ignore the Fifth Commandment is also revealed in his discussion of a father's "right and jurisdiction" over a son. Only as an afterthought, drawn not from the Bible but from Justinian, does Walter suggest that the "son ought to pay . . . respect" to his mother, who is, however, clearly "under authority herself" (V, 31, 468).

¹⁷See Wilfred Watson, "The Fifth Commandment: Some Allusions to Sir Robert Filmer's Writings in *Tristram Shandy*," *MLN*, 62 (1947), 237.

¹⁸Apollo argues "the mother is not the begetter of the child"; instead she is "merely the nurse of the newsown embryo" (Eumenidies, 11. 658–59). See Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, tr. Douglas Young (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1974). For a discussion of the Shandy males' usurpation of the female's role in childbearing, see Robert Gorham Davis, "Sterne and the Delineation of the Modern Novel," in *The Winged Skull: Papers from the Laurence Sterne Bicentenary Conference*, ed. Arthur H. Cash and John M. Stedmond (Kent: Kent State Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 21–41.

¹⁹The immediate source for Sterne's list of caesarean operations is Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopaedia* (London: Knapton, 1728), s.v. CAESARIAN Section. Cf. Richard A. Davies, "Further Sterne Debts in 'Tristram Shandy,'" *N&Q*, 22 (1975), 14–16. Chambers does not include Trismegistus in the list, nor do any myths about Thoth or Trismegistus record such a birth. Here Walter's reverence for the intellect associated with Trismegistus carries over into his obsession with the caesarean section.

²⁰"The Birth of Tristram Shandy: Sterne and Dr. Burton," *Studies in the Eighteenth Century: Papers Presented at the David Nichol Smith Memorial Seminar, Canberra, 1966* (Canberra: Australian National Univ. Press, 1968), p. 141. Chambers also cautions against the caesarean section: "it is not without great danger; on which account, the operation is very rarely practised, except on women newly dead" (*Cyclopaedia*, s.v. CAESARIAN Section).

²¹Mrs. Shandy's difficulties in giving birth to Tristram echo a similar incident in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*. The mother of Sir Tristram, named Elizabeth, dies after the birth: "'A, my lytyll son, thou haste murderd thy modir . . . and bycause I shall dye of the byrth of the, I charge . . . whan he is crystened let calle hym Trystrams,

that is as much to say as a sorrowfull byrth.' " See *Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), I, 372. Thus the name Tristram is associated with the tribulations and sorrows of a Christian hero.

²²According to Cash, Dr. Burton's forceps were "poorly designed for a child's head," with blades that exert pressure indiscriminately (Cash, p. 149). The other instruments in Slop's bag—the squirt, tire tête and crochet—were used in fatal cases, for the baptism of a doomed infant and its extraction after death (Cash, pp. 146–48).

²³For a history of clashes between midwives and obstetricians, see Jean Donnison, *Midwives and Medical Men: A History of Inter-Professional Rivalries and Women's Rights* (New York: Schocken, 1977). Midwives customarily avoided the use of instruments like the forceps and, despite the risks of abnormal labors, had a lower maternal death rate than did the lying-in hospitals or male practitioners (Donnison, pp. 22, 35).

²⁴Walter's speech against love is borrowed from Pierre Charron, *Of Wisdom*, tr. Samson Lennard (London, 1612), I, 22, 83 and I, 39, 138. See Françoise Pellan, "Laurence Sterne's Indebtedness to Charron," *MLR*, 67(1972), 752–55.

²⁵Cf. Charles Parish, "The Shandy Bull Vindicated," *MLQ*, 31(1970), 48–52.

²⁶"Laurence Sterne and Henry Baker's *The Microscope Made Easy*," *SEL*, 10(1970), 603.

²⁷While Tristram's satire of the Widow Wadman, a middle-aged woman, remains unabated, he treats two younger women in a positive manner: Nannette in VII, 43; and the negro girl in IX, 6.

²⁸Davis (p. 38) cites Frazer's *Golden Bough* on the use of knots as magical obstructions. See *Golden Bough*, III, 294–96. On a more pragmatic level, Cash suggests that Slop's error with the forceps "was caused by the cut on his thumb" sustained while attempting to cut open the knots on his bag (Cash, p. 152).

²⁹Walter's rationalistic response to Toby's Christian argument is borrowed from Sterne's sermon, "The Ingratitude of Israel." In a passage concerning earthquakes, the rationalistic doubter argues: ". . . it was idle to bring in the Deity to untie the knot, when it can be resolved easily into natural causes." Sterne the sermonist replies: "Vain unthinking mortals!—As if natural causes were any thing else in the hand of God,—but instruments which he can turn to work the purposes of his will. . . ." See *Sermons of Mr. Yorick* (London: Dodsley, 1760–69), VII, 45, 157.

³⁰Toby's Christian argument, especially his identification of the "great and elastic power within us of counterbalancing evil" with "Religion" (IV, 8, 334) is taken from Sterne's "Trust in God" sermon. The proper counterbalance to misfortune is faith: ". . . however the sorrows of man are multiplied, he bears up his head, looks toward heaven with confidence, waiting for the salvation of God . . ." *Sermons*, VI, 7, 10–11.

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