

**THE HOBBY HORSE'S STUMBLING BLOCK**

by

**KAREN KAISER TRACEY**

**B.A., Kansas State University, 1983**



**A MASTER'S REPORT**

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree


**MASTER OF ARTS**

**Department of English**

**KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas**

**1986**

**Approved by:**

  
**Major Professor**

LD  
2668  
.R4  
1986  
.T72  
c. 2

Sexuality in Tristram Shandy has always received critical attention, from the eighteenth century reviewers and nineteenth century readers who felt the novel was irresponsible and licentious<sup>1</sup> to modern critics who have found the novel ripe for psychoanalytic interpretation. We have turned from the issue of whether or not Tristram Shandy is a "dirty book" to analyses of the sexual comedy (A.R. Towers), explorations of the threat of impotence that hangs over the book (Melvyn New), explication of the linguistic double entendres (Robert Alter), interpretation of the relationship between sexuality and sensibility (Frank Brady), and discussion of the writer's sexual relationship with the text (Dennis Allen). The sexual concerns of A Sentimental Journey have also attracted attention, as critics debate what role lust plays in Yorick's sentimental affairs (Paul McGlynn).

But in spite of all the attention that sex has received, few critics have ever given women in the novels more than passing notice. Ruth Faurot notes this omission where Tristram's mother is concerned, and fully analyzes Mrs. Shandy's character. Leigh Ehlers also discusses Mrs. Shandy, and other critics singly treat dear Jenny (William Rivers) and Maria (McGlynn). Among book-length studies, those by James Swearingen and Henri Fluchere give women the most attention. However, no one has undertaken a broad study of the range of female characters, or of male-female relationships, in Sterne's novels.

The critics' negligence of female characters and concern

with sexuality reflects the biases of the novels' narrators, who are continually preoccupied with sexual issues while rarely, if ever, showing mature interest in a female character. The shadow of impotence that overhangs Tristram Shandy explains part of this tension in that novel, while the fear of involvement that characterizes the flighty Yorick emphasizes the essential selfishness of his sentimental journey.

However, we shouldn't dismiss or ignore the women in the novel simply because the narrators do so. Sterne's consistency in his treatment of women invites a broad study. Although never attaining the status of "main characters," women continually slip into the narratives, usually creating problems for the narrator or other male characters. To Sterne's narrators, the world is mocked when it is hostile, or idealized when its beauty may be safely enjoyed, and women are treated ways that correspond to these attitudes: they are satirized or sentimentalized. The satirized women are mocked for their lack of understanding or their licentiousness, and are unattractive, Catholic, married, or middle-aged. The sentimentalized women are exalted for their attractiveness or suffering, and are young and vulnerable. The satirized women are hostile because they threaten the male character, while the sentimentalized women are ideal as long as they are both vulnerable and transient objects of affection. Both the satirical and the sentimental treatments show the narrators' desire to distance themselves from threats by either elevating or denigrating the women. The apparent impossibility

of avoiding women, combined with this desire to hold them at a distance, reflects the relationship of man with world portrayed by the novels.

Each of the Shandy males in Sterne's Tristram Shandy struggles against a world he perceives as hostile, perhaps because it is uncomprehending, perhaps because it refuses to comprehend, the importance of the character's hobby horse. As Leigh Ehlers notes, women are part of this aggravating world: "The Shandy males, of course, consider themselves victimized by a world of frustrations, women being but one of many" (61). Moreover, each of the Shandy males is frustrated by a particular female antagonist who personifies the practical, non-Shandean world. Walter deals with a wife who refuses to encourage his theorizing, Toby contends with the Widow Wadman whose practical interest in where he received his wound explains her "humanity" and her professed fascination with sieges, and Tristram as narrator struggles with Madam the reader, who fails to read closely, or insists on misreading, his book.

Tristram means for us to side with the Shandy men against the hostile world, including its difficult women. Therefore, he treats each of the main female antagonists satirically, hoping that the reader will perceive Mrs. Shandy as insipid and frustrating, Widow Wadman as a lecherous threat to innocent Uncle Toby, and Madam, the reader, as a willful distorter of Tristram's meanings. Tristram would furthermore have us believe that the Shandys triumph over their female adversaries, controlling them