

“Begot and Born to Misfortunes”: Aspects of Conception, Gestation, and Birth in *Tristram Shandy*

It should, indeed, caution us to be more Modest in pronouncing concerning Particulars, whereof we were not sufficiently inform'd, and rather incline us, ingenuously to confess our Ignorance, and to wait till time, and farther application, or the Industry of others, shall open to us the Mystery, than, which we cannot discover the real way by which Nature operates, to fall to inventing first the End, and then the means.

James Drake, *Anthropologia Nova* (1707)

Introduction

It is impossible to see the minutest speck of inspiration. A single cell, although inconsequential to the naked eye, becomes a microcosm of society when observed through the lens of a microscope. What was once thought of as inanimate becomes animate (as it truly has always already been) and suddenly our world becomes larger due to one small discovery, the details of which impregnate the social consciousness. Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767) exemplifies a new interest in science and medicine during the eighteenth century. Sterne himself was fascinated with reproduction in both theory and practice, and as such, much of *Tristram Shandy* explores the inherent issues that come up when exploring sex. I intend to specifically look at the theories of reproduction – in the eighteenth century called “generation” – that would have influenced Sterne. By focusing on the intangible and minute, such as animal spirits and the imagination, and the scientific discoveries that led to their finding, such as the microscope, it is possible to read beyond the cacophony of competing medical theories within the novel and discover Sterne's duality of wit while discussing science and gender. Satirical prose, which has a dual capacity for both authorizing and undermining a position, allows Sterne to analyze serious topics such as reproduction and gender theory by comically presenting opposing or competing sides of then contemporary debates. The two-fold aspect of Sterne's humour mirrors the dual nature of gender – man versus woman. This duality gives play to competing positions within science and society, with the

result of creating an alternative hyper-reality of intellectual possibility surrounding accepted notions of male and female within generation.

Current Scholarship & State of the Field

Scholarship on sex and reproduction in *Tristram Shandy* is characterized by a handful of historical interests: microscopy, theories of generation, conception, the history of medicine more generally, and the debate about midwives versus the man-midwife. To explore the textual scholarship of the novel as a whole, it is important to begin by mentioning the work of Melvyn New, if only as a preface to all the research that will be explored in this paper. New has written and edited several collections on Laurence Sterne, as well as being responsible for the “Florida” edition of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, which is considered by many Shandean researchers to be the premiere edition of the text. New’s “Florida” edition, published in 1978, was one of the first to point to Sterne’s use of medical and reproductive materials in annotated notes accompanying the edition of the novel.

But the first prominent research into Sterne and theories of generation is Louis Landa’s 1963 article, “The Shandean Homunculus: The Background of Sterne’s ‘Little Gentleman,’” which examines *Tristram Shandy* through the lens of preformationist embryology. Landa looks into the idea of the “little gentleman” or homunculus – the concept of a preformed human-being encapsulated within a single drop of semen – and asserts that “Tristram’s account of the ‘little gentleman’ is based on the investigations and speculations” of biologists and microscope enthusiasts “and others whose embryological views were accepted and disseminated in the eighteenth century” (51). Landa was the first to acknowledge the competing preformationist interests that Sterne alludes to in his satire of generation: the animalculists (or spermists) versus the ovists. The crux of the disagreement between the animalculists and the ovists was whether life originated in the sperm or egg, with both camps imagining the idea of the homunculus, or the miniature human contained within the sperm or egg. Landa reminds the reader that “Obviously Sterne saw the intrinsic comedy in such theories; and he is separated from the proponents of the views, scientists and others, by little more than the dimension of wit” (60). Landa delves not only into the idea of the homunculus, but also Sterne’s satire of the microscope and of the homunculus concept. In his 1989 article, “‘The Whole Secret of Health’: Mind, Body and Medicine in *Tristram Shandy*,” Roy Porter also looks closely at the creation of Tristram,

specifically his bungled conception: “It was the misconception in the mother’s head at the moment of conception, leading to spilling the animal spirits, which spelt his misconception and blighted his life” (75). Sterne dramatizes Elizabeth Shandy’s mis-association of copulating and clock-winding in terms of John Locke’s theory about the irrational association of ideas.¹ This association is comically presented as one explanation for Tristram’s troubled life and opinions, but father Walter Shandy’s sexual capacity is also presented as another reason for the misconception of Tristram.

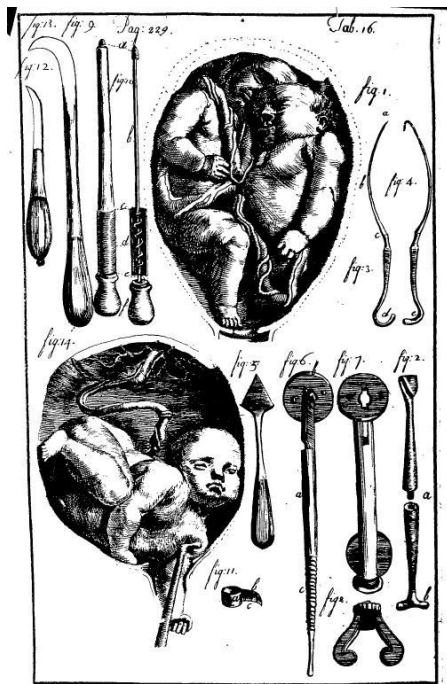


Figure 1: Drawings of implements used to assist with difficult presentations in delivery from Burton’s “An Essay Towards a Complete New System of Midwifery” (1751) [Image from Eighteenth-Century Collections Online]

Several scholars have written about Tristram’s bungled conception and tumultuous birth. In his 1982 article, “The Birth of Tristram Shandy: Sterne and Dr. Burton,” Arthur Cash asserts that “Tristram was as much a product of his father’s intellect as of his loins” (202), discussing at length not Elizabeth’s contribution to the birth, but Walter’s intellectual contribution and the satire surrounding it. He insists upon the man-midwife being in attendance and it is his theory that the ideal birth is via caesarean section. It is Walter who seems distraught and exhausted after Tristram’s birth and the crushing of his nose. Feminist critics, which I will assess shortly, have commented on the exclusion of Elizabeth from the birthing scenes and the direct exclusion of the reader from the actual birthing chamber. There are many possibilities for the birth occurring off-stage but the most likely is that the Shandy world is an androcentric world and women do not take a prominent place within it.

Another significant line of critical inquiry surrounding the ideas of gestation and birth concerns the

history of midwives and the arrival of male practitioners, the so-called man-midwives (obstetricians). Medicine was advancing rapidly at this time, and for the first time in history, male practitioners were encroaching upon the traditionally female territory of midwifery. Arthur

¹ See John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Book 2, chap 33.

Cash was the first to write about the connection between the fictional Dr. Slop and the historical Dr. John Burton. In his aforementioned article, “The Birth of Tristram Shandy: Sterne and Dr. Burton,” Cash specifically examined *Tristram Shandy* as a satire not only of eighteenth-century medicine but more specifically of the work of Dr. John Burton. Burton was not an eminent name on the obstetrical landscape at this time, but he was a contemporary and rival to the historically more prominent Dr. William Smellie. Burton took issue with much of Smellie’s work and even wrote responses to what he saw as errors in Smellie’s treatises. The problem, however, was that all the supposed misquotes and miscalculations that Burton claims Smellie made were small and insignificant to the work as a whole [see

Figures 1 and 2]. This, Cash believes, was the reason why Burton was chosen as the archetype for the rotund “accoucher” with his penchant for Latin. Cash asserts that “Dr John Burton and his obstetrical writings underprop the first four volumes of the novel.” He continues: the “key ideas represent his actual theories, the key events are tragicomical extensions of his practices, and the key object are the instruments of Dr Burton’s own proud invention” (198). Who better to lampoon the man-midwife than a character such as Burton? His character, ego, and misconceptions of medicine made him the perfect candidate to represent all the problems inherent in a transition to the increasingly male-dominated birthing scenes. His mistaken methods and misguided condemnation of Smellie are writ large in the creation of Dr Slop.

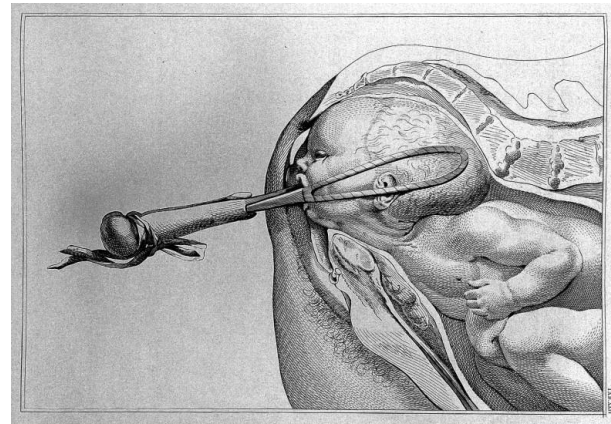


Figure 2: Sketch of forceps in use during difficult delivery from William Smellie’s “A Course of Lectures upon Midwifery” (1742). [Image from Wellcome Collection]

Others have also explored the role of the man-midwife within the Shandy world. In their 1990 article, “Of Forceps, Patents, and Paternity: *Tristram Shandy*,” Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean explore the midwife/man-midwife debate in a much larger societal scope. They work toward validating Walter’s anxieties about birth based on the medical illustrations published contemporaneously with *Tristram Shandy*: “Walter Shandy’s fears that his son’s cerebellum will be crushed by a head-first delivery through the pelvis are perfectly understandable in terms of the graphically illustrated literature on the subject” (535). Although the article discusses the

“graphically illustrated literature,” it does not include the images that form the background of Sterne’s imaginative treatment of conception and birthing. Images found within medical treatises at the time show the graphic nature of birth. I will later look at the cultural currency these images had and how they could have inspired Sterne’s imagining of the fetus in *Tristram Shandy*.

This creative re-imagining of science and medicine is what makes *Tristram Shandy* attractive to scholars interested in the novel and its relation to the history of science and medicine more generally. Judith Hawley’s “The Anatomy of *Tristram Shandy*” looks at *Tristram Shandy* as straddling both the old humoral system and the new physiology: “Sterne reads and misreads medical texts as works of fiction and constructs his own models of the history of medicine” (85). This reading of *Tristram Shandy* as medico-historical fiction is also found in the research of Roy Porter, who has written much on the subject of sex in the eighteenth century, as well as writing several articles on *Tristram Shandy* specifically. In his book, entitled *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, Porter examines closely the relations shared not only by the Shandy males, but also their author Laurence Sterne: “Sterne’s characters, to a man, shrink to mere homunculi, dwarfed and defenceless manikins, ill-starred and impotent, overgrown children strong only in the never-never land of their wishes” (291). In another article by Porter, entitled, “‘Whole Secret of Health’: Mind, Body and Medicine in *Tristram Shandy*,” he explores the Shandy males as suffering their own self-imposed pseudo-medical exile from reality and the outside world. For Toby there is the groin wound, Walter has issues with impotence/sexual-dysfunction, and Tristram, as a possible extension of Sterne, is a man trapped within his own ill-conceived body. Porter himself states, “for he [Sterne] offers a supreme example of one who did not merely register those responses – responses indeed to a body which expired while still in the midst of his life work – but turned them into the focal point of an inquiry into the true nature of being a homunculus” (62). Sterne had health problems of his own – tuberculosis – and it is this that Porter seems to believe accounts for the medical impediments of the Shandy males, be they real, imagined, or metaphorical.

It is the overtly obvious sexual innuendo in *Tristram Shandy* which garners the most attention, perhaps because it is so blatant. In a 1970 article, entitled “*Tristram Shandy*: Sexuality, Morality, and Sensibility,” Frank Brady examines the sexual free-for-all of humour from various angles. He declares that the reader of the novel understands “the jokes about

hornworks, half moons, noses, and so forth, and if others escape him it doesn't seem to matter much. Anyone who investigates further soon acquires the uncomfortable feeling that both he and Sterne have abnormally contaminated minds, and that the better part of valor would be to keep Sterne's jokes to himself" (41). In her 1988 article, entitled "Words for Sex: The Verbal-Sexual Continuum in *Tristram Shandy*," Ruth Perry explores this connection between sex and language even further. She acknowledges that for Sterne "sex was just another language and language just another form of sex" (27). Perry then quotes previous work by New which suggests "that sexuality and speech are connected in Sterne's novel insofar as both are mastertropes for creativity," and she continues; "sexual anxiety thus becomes a metaphor for linguistic uncertainty" (27). Perry argues that the sexual language used in *Tristram Shandy* is phallogocentric, and because of this, it is "a man's book if ever there was one" (29). It is also this androcentric perspective that Elizabeth Harries writes about, but her research also has much to do with the gender/ linguistic issues inherent in medico-fiction. In her 2009 article, "Words, Sex, and Gender in Sterne's Novels," she uses Sterne's linguistic patterns to discuss gender in the eighteenth century, especially in sexual terms (such as the metaphorical "nose"). Harries believes that the text "creates a world centred on men and their reactions to the fundamental dilemmas of being male. This may have been a response by Sterne to other novels that were popular at the time. But Sterne's novel is also a comic and anxious – and comically anxious, anxiously comic – meditation on the perils of gender and the gender divide" (116). To her, the novel is an "extended exploration of the trials and tribulations of wounded masculinity" (117), and as such, makes concessions for its lack of focus on the female sexual dynamic.

Other studies have examined the figurative implications of reproduction and virility in the novel. Robert Erickson in his book *Mother Midnight* chooses to examine the roles of fate, fortune, and nature in Sterne. He looks at the life of the character of Tristram through the good old country midwife who was to bring him into this world and the disastrous Dr. Slop who did usher him in. He states the importance of Fate: "In midwife lore of the era, the moment of birth is the 'critical minute' at which the midwife senses the child is to come forth, and her procedures then may have crucial bearing on the subsequent development of the child. She is thus in a very real sense the child's fate" (11). Erickson also discusses the idea of "brain wombs," an eighteenth century idea of the male author "carrying" and "birthing" his creative work, much as a mother gestates a fetus. Raymond Stephanson has also extensively studied the male brain womb.

In his 2010 article “*Tristram Shandy* and the Art of Conception,” he discusses how the novel “spend[s] much sophisticated energy dramatizing the figurative conceptions of [the] male mind – Walter’s intellectual brain-children, Tristram’s idiosyncratic narrative procedure – *and* their vexed relationship to literal embodiment” (137). This metaphor of the male author being impregnated with and birthing his creative literary child is also discussed by Madeleine Descargues in a 2006 article, entitled “The Obstetrics of *Tristram Shandy*,” in which she tries to extend this metaphor of birth to include the birth of the reader, and later, the birth of reader as a midwife. This leap in thought seems tenuous at best but it does allow for further reflection upon the importance of the reader during the misbegetting and the off-stage birth of Tristram.

Feminist scholars are most concerned with Elizabeth Shandy and what they see as Sterne’s ignoring of her. Elizabeth is present, but also mostly absent, through much of the novel, and some feminist critics have chosen to read this as a misogynist error or a purposeful omission on the part of the author. This reading of the text begins with Ruth Marie Furot’s 1970 article “Mrs. Shandy Observed.” Although not as overtly feminist as the works which would follow, this article focuses on the question of where Elizabeth is during the birth of Tristram. Leigh Ehler’s article, “Mrs. Shandy’s ‘Lint and Basilicon’: The Importance of Women in *Tristram Shandy*,” written in 1981, further explores Elizabeth Shandy’s maternity. She refers to the “Shandean male propaganda” in the same breath as calling *Tristram Shandy* a “woman’s book” (61). Her argument is that women in the book “are invested with considerable, though untapped, restorative powers” (61).

Both Juliet McMaster and Bonnie Blackwell have more recently written about the misogyny of the text as well as what Blackwell calls the “mechanical mother” present in the subtext of *Tristram Shandy*. In a 1994 article, entitled “Walter Shandy, Sterne, and Gender: A Feminist Foray,” McMaster begins with the quip “*Tristram Shandy* is a novel (or whatever) by a man, purporting to be the autobiography of another man, who writes mainly about still other men” (198). McMaster seems to have picked up where Ruth Perry left off in her lambasting of the “phallo-centric” novel used to exclude the female from *Shandy* scholarship, as she criticizes the male Sternean critic for misogyny (or what she believes to be misogyny). A far more scathing take on *Tristram Shandy* and its author is Bonnie Blackwell’s 2001 article entitled “*Tristram Shandy* and the Theater of the Mechanical Mother.” Blackwell flies the feminist flag high above the literary arena of misogynistic reading of the novel, taking both Sterne and

William Smellie to task for what she sees as misogyny. She takes the sexual/gender divide inherent in the novel to the extreme and attempts to critique the historical background of obstetrics referenced by the novel.² Although I find these feminist readings of the text interesting at times, I will not argue for an inherent misogyny within the text, but instead will examine other possible reasons for Elizabeth's exclusion.

Although this brief overview of the extant scholarship has touched upon several important historical influences of Sterne's, it is my intention to expand the context of several cultural materials that have either been ignored by scholars or that have not received adequate or full attention. I will focus on the following aspects of reproduction within *Tristram Shandy*: i) "responsible sex" and the animal spirits, ii) the maternal imagination, iii) the paternal imagination, and iv) the role of microscopy in imaging and imagining the fetus. Beyond this, I wish to examine the duality of wit utilized by Sterne's satire in discussing gender in reference to the ongoing midwife/man-midwife debate of the eighteenth century, as well as other social issues surrounding sex and gender during this time period. I will be looking at this duality through Sterne's use of science, medicine, and imaging, thus examining what may have been Sterne's position on the competing theories of reproduction.

Theories of Conception and Gestation

While scholars such as Melvyn New and Louis Landa have focused on the microscopic and scientific within theories of generation, little has been written about the social constructs that also went into Sterne's satirical use of science. In this section I will expand the context of relevant cultural materials that would have been available to Sterne, from sexual misconceptions about coition and gestation to common eighteenth-century ideas and ideals surrounding gestation and birth. Researchers such as Arthur Cash, Judith Hawley and Raymond Stephanson have catalogued what is known about Sterne's reading. The list includes works that he alludes to directly in the text, Richard Mannigham's *An Abstract of Midwifery* (1744), William Smellie's *A Course of Lectures upon Midwifery* (1742), James Drake's *Anthropologia Nova* (1707), and the "sex-manual" *Aristotle's Master-Piece* (1684), as well as those he "borrowed" from directly or satirized, such as John Burton's *An Essay Towards a Complete New System of Midwifery* (1751).

² For a historical perspective of William Smellie and his obstetric work less influenced by gender, see Lisa Cody's *Birthing the Nation* or Adrian Wilson's *The Making of Man-Midwifery*.

Popular works, such as *Aristotle's Master-Piece*, often formed a layperson's basic understanding of sex and conception. Although they were vehicles of much misinformation, they were widely used as primers for young men and women to answer their questions about coition. Adding to this misinformation, science was still trying fully to understand what transpired during intercourse in creating a fetus. Speculations about the effect of animal spirits on the embryo and the consequences of maternal and paternal imagination were all considered. Beyond this, there was much written and drawn that imagined and provided concrete images of the fetus. These new discoveries were challenging long held beliefs in what truly influenced the conception of a child. Working within these preconceived notions of sex and creation, it is the exact moment of Tristram's creation (and all the psycho-sexual baggage that accompanies it), which sets the tone for the entire novel and the flaccid Shandy lineage.

It was a generally held view that those engaging in procreative sex had a great responsibility in ensuring that they remained focused on the act committed to the creation of the child. This idea of "responsible" sex is also of importance to Tristram: "I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me" (1). This is the very first sentence of *Tristram Shandy* and packed within such a succinct line is a cacophony of competing concepts, ideas, religious convictions, and superstition. Perhaps if Walter and Elizabeth Shandy had realized that "not only the production of a rational Being was concern'd in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind" (1), they would have tried to avoid the calamities that led to Tristram's trials in and out of the womb. He blames all the inadequacies of the man he was doomed to become on the unnecessary talking of his mother and the sexual misfiring of his father: "Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly, -- I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world" (1). What is important in this section is not the sperm, or the egg, but the nervous juices, or "animal spirits" of Walter.

Animal spirits were seen to be of great importance in the eighteenth century. This liquid was a key fluid within the nervous system, and was important in the smooth ordering of the body and an essential building block to proper conception, as it was responsible for ensuring the seed travelled to the womb. Tristram sees the animal spirits as an electrifying life force that once initiated in the sequence of generation cannot be stopped. But what of these animal spirits

themselves? What of Walter’s penis? In *Anthropologia Nova*, James Drake states that “without such an Instrument, the *Seed* of the most *perfect* Animals could not be convey’d to the place of *Prolification*” (256). Drake continues that “as occasion requires, of *Erection* and *Flaccidity*, was absolutely necessary, the first, to the Performance of its Office, the latter, for the Security of the Part: Since without an *Erection* it were impossible to emit, and lodge the Seed where it ought to be” (256). There are references to Walter’s age and probable impotence and it is more than likely that this mis-conception is really the work of the aged and decaying seed and flaccid penis of the elder Shandy. In his article, “The ‘Infirmity of Others’: Laughing at Fumblers in Early



Figure 3: Frontispiece of *Aristotle’s Master-Piece* depicting two people affected by the maternal imagination. [Image from Eighteenth-Century Collection Online]

Modern Europe,” Angus McLaren refers to the popular *Aristotle’s Master-Piece* in stating: “Men were described as being able to procreate at sixteen, at their peak between forty and fifty, their heat thereafter declined, and for most after fifty-five, ‘the Seed by Degrees becoming unfruitful,’ and the yard shriveled. Sexual excesses hastened the decline” (56). Walter, in his advanced age, “being somewhere between fifty and sixty years of age” (Volume I/Chapter IV/Page 5), has sex not for pleasure but merely to procreate and it would seem that this unhealthy opinion of coitus could taint the creation of the perfect child he so desperately seeks to bring into this world.

The mind—particularly the maternal imagination—was seen as integral to the creation of healthy offspring. The woman was charged with the duty of keeping her mind calm and pure not just during conception, but for the continuing nine months of pregnancy. In the eighteenth century, popular opinion

held that women controlled more than just genetics, or the well-being of their child within the womb. Both “lower” popular works and “higher” medical treatises blame not only a woman’s humours, but also her mind. People believed that the thoughts, dreams, and desires of a pregnant woman could be imprinted on her unborn child [see Figure 3]. Tristram believes that it is the

“clock-winding” interruption of his mother that causes the premature ejaculation that “scattered and dispersed the animal spirits, whose business it was to have escorted and gone hand-in-hand with the *HOMUNCULUS*, and conducted him safe to the place destined for his reception” (2). Walter is sure his wife has created the flaccid future of his son – just as she caused his own flaccid erection – by her inane questioning; “*My Tristram’s misfortunes began nine months before ever he came into the world*” (3). Tristram himself laments: “I was begot and born to misfortunes;-- for my poor mother, whether it was wind or water, -- or a compound of both, -- or neither, ----or whether it was simply the mere swell of imagination and fancy in her; -- or how far a strong wish and desire to have it so, might mislead her judgement” (32). Popular works of the time supported this idea of maternal imagination imprinting, and the eighteenth century was full of instances of women supposedly birthing monsters because of vivid (and sometimes sexual) dreams, insatiable cravings, or frightening encounters. Earlier in the eighteenth century, the “rabbit-breeder” Mary Toft fooled several men of science into believing that her being startled by a rabbit led her to give birth to rabbits, or pieces of rabbit. A very public debate was also brewing in a series of letters debating the effect of the maternal imagination on the child in utero. The first letter published was in 1727 by James Blondel, entitled *The Strength of Imagination in Pregnant Women Examin’d* and was responded to by Daniel Turner in 1730 with *The Force of the Mother’s Imagination*. Blondel believed that the maternal imagination had no effect on the fetus, while Turner was a staunch believer in its adverse effects. This was highly influential, and it is doubtful that a well read man such as Sterne would not have known about it. Scholars have not noted its cultural relevancy to the creation of *Tristram Shandy*. Although the Toft affair took maternal imagination to the extreme, it was after that “medical professionals constructed more subtle arguments about the importance of maternal thoughts and emotions” (Cody 123). Popular works reprinted again and again during this time, such as *Aristotle’s Master-Piece*, still called attention to this idea of the female imagination and its possible devastating effects on the forming fetus and warn against impure thoughts or a wayward imagination. The treatise decrees that one should “let every Thing that looks like Care and Business be banished from their Thoughts for all such Things are Enemies to *Venus*,” continuing that “if it happens, that instead of Beauty, there is any Thing that looks like Imperfection or Deformity, (for Nature is not alike bountiful to all) let them be cover’d over with a Vail of Darkness, and buried in Oblivion” (40). Banishing thoughts which were counterproductive

during sex was thought to help in creating a healthy, unmarked child.

Walter, however, has also inflicted his child with the repercussions of the paternal imagination, an area which few researchers have chosen to focus on. Walter puts forth more energy into the creation and gestation of his intellectual creations – his brain children born from his brain-womb – than he does into his biological children. Perhaps part of the problem is his aversion to sexual intercourse or his infatuation with knowledge and classical thought. Walter prefers fraternal relations with his brother Toby to sexual relations with Elizabeth, and both brothers use their obsessions or “hobby-horses” to escape their own sad, impotent sexual realities. Sterne makes direct reference to Walter “birthing” ideas – his mental prowess being far superior to his sexual – and it seems as though Walter is far more engaged in the creation of ideas in achieving the perfect creation as opposed to sexual exploring with his wife. Walter has theories about everything including sex, gestation, methods of delivery, baptismal rites, and Christian names. Using a reproductive metaphor, Tristram warns the reader about the adverse effects of an easily obsessed mind:

It is the nature of an hypothesis, when once a man has conceived it, that it assimilates every thing to itself as proper nourishment; and, from the first moment of your begetting it, it generally grows the stronger by everything you see, hear, read, or understand. This is of great use.

When my father was gone with this about a month, there was scarce a phænomenon of stupidity or genius, which he could not readily solve by it. (116)

The obsessive nature of Walter controlled not only his mind, but also his genitals, and by extension, his ability to create the perfect son about which he was obsessing. He had taken knowledge and allowed it to gestate “like yeast” (41) in his mind until it had expanded, mutated, and been brought forth as a sort of mutated brain-child formed out of classical knowledge and scientific half-truths. It is Walter’s constant meditation on all topics that can be in the very least partially to blame for the bungled conception of Tristram. Walter cannot satiate his obsessions for any amount of time, and as such, the constant meandering of his mind shouldered some of the responsibility for Tristram’s inabilities and digressions.

Beyond the paternal and maternal effects separately, there is the argument for the collective damage done by their combined force. Elizabeth has a healthy attitude towards sex and yet she is stuck with Walter for a lover. Walter seems to have an aversion to sex that extends

beyond a mere dislike for it to a feeling of contempt for women. He sees sex as a duty, a job which must be done with precision and in a timely, scheduled manner. Marital chores were the same as household chores, and as such “he [Walter] had made it a rule for many years of his life, -- on the first Sunday night of every month throughout the whole year, -- as certain as ever the *Sunday night* came, -- to wind up a large house-clock... with his own hands... [and] he had likewise gradually brought some other little family concerns to the same period, in order... to get them all out of the way at one time, and be no more plagued and pester’d with them the rest of the month” (5). His attitude towards sex seems strained, as it takes very little for him to become disengaged from the rhythm of sex. One small question about the winding of the clock and Walter is a defunct and deflated lover and a premature ejaculator. Elizabeth is emotionally vacant and is mentally going through a check-list of household items that need to be attended to, most likely because of the mechanical, passionless, anti-climactic love-making of Walter.

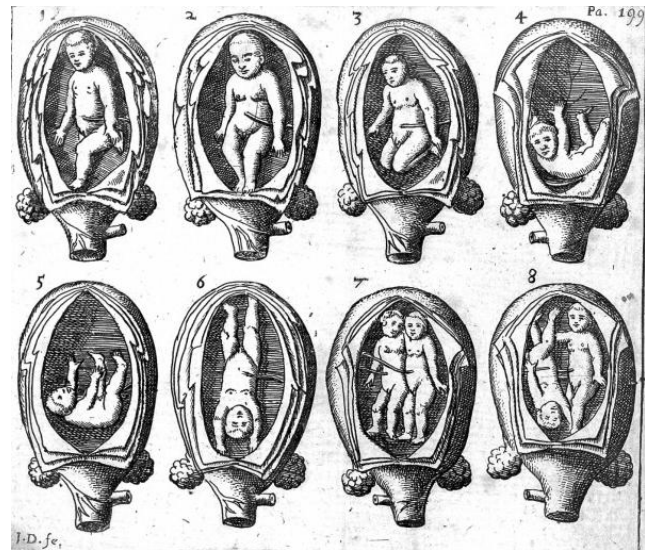


Figure 4: Drawing from Jane Sharp’s *The Midwife’s Companion* (1671) depicting the fetus within the womb. Note the adult features presented and the ample room within the womb.

[Image from Wellcome Collection]

The traditional opinions about coition and conception which would have been part of the cultural consciousness at the time include works such as *Aristotle’s Master-Piece*, which is referred to in *Tristram Shandy* and must be examined again in its relation to the novel. Sterne writes, “It is said in *Aristotle’s Master-Piece*, ‘That when a man doth think of any thing which is past, -- he looketh down upon the ground;-- but that when he thinketh of something which is to come, he looketh up towards the heavens’” (79). The quotation is brief and bawdy but the text to which it refers is important within the cultural understanding of sex in the eighteenth century. The unknown author of this work relies on folklore, hear-say and pseudo-science to discuss its

primary point.³ It is this primary focus on fruitful unions that makes this text so important to *Tristram Shandy* because it is sex that creates our author and our story and it is sex, or the lack thereof or pursuit of it, that propels much of the narrative.

Although sex was the most natural of human functions, the reproductive process was still a mystery to most, and works such as *Aristotle's Master-Piece* allowed for an understanding of all the components that made reproduction possible and sex productive. Women and men engage in sex not only for pleasure, but with the ultimate goal of creating children, and as such, huge portions of the text are dedicated to helping the reader understand the importance of his/her duty in procreation. In order for conception, one must “avoid all manner of Discontent, and the Occasion of it; for Discontent is a great Enemy to Conception, and it so dispirits either Man or Woman, that it hinders them from putting forth their Vigour, which ought to be exerted in the Act of Coition” (46). It is this idea of “responsible” sex that propels much of *Tristram's* argument against his parents and against Fate for creating such a genetic wretch as himself. So much of what occurred to bind him to his sexually impotent and distressed future occurred to him as a homunculus and it is because of this that he is so intent on the microscopic details of his creation. Having read the treatise, Sterne was clearly influenced by such ideas, although scholars have not remarked on the importance of *Aristotle's Master-Piece* as a source of ideas.

New dimensions within optics, the diminutive and the simple being enlarged, allowed for the creation of new plains of existence for a writer to ponder. The idea of the “minute particular” was important to *Tristram Shandy's* satire. Microscopy had advanced significantly since the seventeenth century. It allowed one to peer into worlds within one's body and understand the processes that allowed the species to survive and thrive. It was this idea of the intensely small and infinite that caught the attention of many writers of the time. In her article, “Minute Particulars: Microscopy and Eighteenth-Century Narrative,” Tita Chico states that the “rhetorical parody of microscopy is evident in Sterne's appropriation of the logic of disproportion (minutest, enlarged), as well as in his discussion of the homunculus” (155). She argues that “For Sterne, the minute particular is almost exclusively used in the context of narration: these are the building blocks not of scientific axioms, but of storytelling” (155). Beyond this, Sterne had found in

³ The work was not one continuously published text, but a series of writings, re-writings, additions and omissions that was continuously changing through its many editions. See Roy Porter's article “The Secrets of Generation Display'd: *Aristotle's Master-Piece* in Eighteenth-Century England”.

things naked to the human eye the perfect vehicle for satire. By finding comedy in what was unseen, he could use these “minute particulars” to build upon and create the larger medical metaphors which appear in the book. It was the microscope that allowed the ovarian follicle and spermatozoa to be viewed and this created the idea of the homunculus, which is of central importance in the first three books of *Tristram Shandy*. The microscope allowed for a new collective imagination regarding the miniature, which in turn allowed satirists to explore and comment upon things which were just then within the realm of scientific understanding.

This imagining of a preformed miniature went beyond just words. There were images of such miniscule humans being disseminated within the medical treatises. Historically, the most widely circulated depiction of the homunculus was created by Nicholas Hartsoeker [see Figure 5]. His depiction of a small man, within the head of a single sperm cell, folded at the knees with his head down, became the general understanding of what a homunculus was, and what could be seen through a microscope. The purported discovery did much to support the animalculist’s point of view that life was encased within the male seed, but it also brought about questions about the soul and the death of all the homunculi that were released within a single emission. As Louis Landa states, “this ‘numerosity’ of animalcula, when only an occasional one functioned in the act of generation, had some dark implications. It meant shocking wastefulness, a squandering of potential lives, the apparently wanton destruction... of fellow creatures who have ‘the claims and rights of humanity’” (63). This idea is observed in *Tristram Shandy* when it is suggested quite cheekily that “after the ceremony of marriage, and before that of consummation, the baptizing all the HOMUNCULI at once, slap-dash, by *injection*, would...be a shorter and safer cut still” (47) and would avoid the expelled souls from eternal damnation. The moral implications of new scientific understanding were important to Sterne’s satire, and the homunculus allowed for the exploration of the consequence of small things upon the most miniature of all humans.

Figure 5: Nicholas Hartsoeker’s drawing of the homunculus within the head of a single sperm cell. [Image from Wellcome Collection].



The consequences of the theory of the homunculus were quite disturbing. Was the embryo autonomous from the mother? Was it its own person from conception? Did it have a soul, and if so, when did it receive a soul? The moral implications of this new imagining were staggering, and writers such as Sterne capitalized on the consequences of new scientific advances. Regnier de Graaf was among the scientists we know Sterne read. An influential anatomist, as well as a man who believed in the microscope, de Graaf is often connected to another well-known scientist, Antonie van Leeuwenhoek. He was the first to observe and record spermatozoa under a microscope and as Clara Pinto-Correia states in her book, *The Ovary of Eve*, “Leeuwenhoek was among the first to assume that one animalcule, not many, would be enough to bring about the new human being” (80) [see Figure 6]. Thus began a debate between

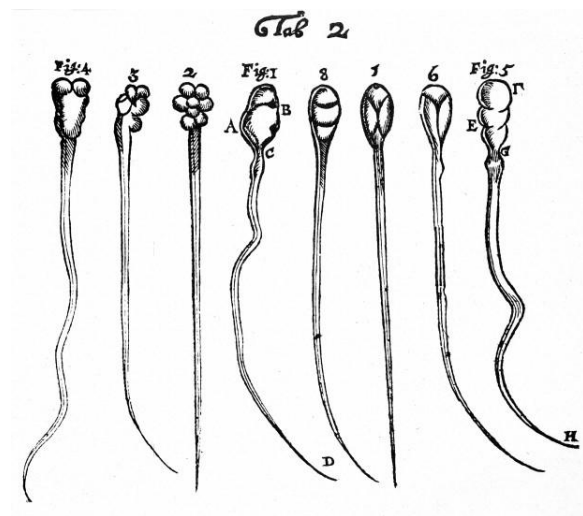


Figure 6: Antonie van Leeuwenhoek's drawing of various spermatozoa as viewed underneath a microscope.
[Image from Wellcome Collection].

the animalculists and the ovists over the idea of preformation. As Pinto-Correia explains, preformation “proposed, very simply, that all living beings existed preformed inside their forebears in the manner of a Russian doll, put there by God at the beginning of Creation with a precise moment established for each one to unfold and come to life” (3). The idea of preformation was not new, but as Angus McLaren states in *Reproductive Rituals*, it “blossomed in the first half of the eighteenth century” because it “presented an image of a mono-parental embryo in which conception implied simply an enlargement of what was already there” (23). The

autonomous embryo was seen as a miniature adult, fully formed both physically and mentally. There was much debate surrounding newly formed ideas – such as genetics – that much time was spent trying to identify the active and passive parts of generation, namely, the sperm and the egg. James Drake discusses both options in his aforementioned treatise, yet is hesitant to commit to one or the other. He brings up questions of “*mix'd Generation*” and questions the existence of “mongrel dogs” and mules. Just when the embryo was formed and who had the more active component in the formation of the fetus were yet another concern for those who wished to keep

the patriarchal argument of male seed being life giving alive.

Beyond the discussion of gender and reproduction, the discoveries made by the microscope allowed for in depth analysis of the basic building blocks of what it meant to be human. By focusing on the small, society was forced to examine the much larger implications of gender, sex and God. Anatomists were looking within the body. Images being produced were less and less affected by propriety and classical art, but were true representations of the body during and after gestation and birth. The images produced allowed the imagination to go beyond what we thought happened, to what we knew happened. Science and morality were tangled within these images as traditional ideas of the soul and imagination were being challenged. Authors such as Sterne were playing with a new collective imagining of human creation and satirizing the competing theories in order to show the fallacies in accepting one theory whole heartedly.

Theories of Birth and Birthing

Sterne, in his creation of the homuncular hero Tristram, was not only imagining the journey we all must go through in order to enter this world, but was using this voyage as a social experiment which would allow for another kind of gender debate. This would be beyond the male/female tug-of-war in procreation. This discussion of gender (gender-inequality) in the eighteenth century would expand to include the relatively new phenomenon of the “accoucher” or man-midwife, and his relationship to both the birthing mother, as well as the traditionally female midwife. This new rivalry between male and female influence is important within the history of medicine as gender came to represent both rational medicine (male) and emotional intuitiveness (female).

There has been a tremendous amount of scholarship on the history of the emergence of the man-midwife during the eighteenth century. As Adrian Wilson states in the introduction to his book, *The Making of Man-Midwifery: Childbirth in England, 1660-1770*, “it was between about 1720 and 1770 that childbirth became part of medicine” (3) and that “by the late eighteenth century men-midwives had achieved a permanent place in the management of childbirth, chiefly among the wealthy and urban sections of the population – that is, in the most lucrative spheres of practice” (2). The history of medicine became entwined with the history of childbirth and thus

childbirth during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries underwent a significant change. It became fashionable for a woman to go to a lying-in hospital and be attended by a male. Elizabeth Shandy herself wishes to go to London so she may be attended by Sir Richard Manningham (Volume I/Chapter XV/Page 31).

Increasingly, males were being admitted into the traditional female sphere of the birthing chamber, whereas earlier they may have only been called upon in an emergency.

The male was seen by many as superior to the female midwife, who was sometimes satirized as a drunken old hag reliant on

witchcraft. Allied to status and conspicuous consumption, “Prior booking, which was usually made by wealthy mothers or by their husbands, probably enhanced the payment” (49) for the man-midwife, and as such, made the position more desirable.

Sterne’s treatment of the old country midwife is worthy of close reading. Although she is not an active character within the novel, Sterne lauds her abilities to the reader and makes it clear that she is far superior to Dr Slop. It was also during this time that birth became more “medicalized” and moved from traditional delivery to a more streamlined, mechanized one, especially through the use of tools in intervention. This belief in the new discoveries of science and medicine supported the “underlying cultural faith from the eighteenth century forward that both medicine and men could best manage women’s reproductive lives and their children’s entry into the world” (Cody 11). Medicine equalled male; females were relegated to the outskirts of the birthing process. Prior to this, birth was almost entirely female. There was an obvious



Figure 7: Eighteenth Century drawing depicting the half and half nature of the man-midwife. [Image from Wellcome Collection].

gender divide and women closed themselves off to the world during labour. Wilson explains: “birth was not only contained within a distinct social space, but also physically and symbolically enclosed. Air was excluded by blocking up the keyholes; daylight was shut out by curtains” (26).

The first published guide by a midwife in English was Jane Sharp’s *The Midwife’s Companion* (1671). By comparing this work to those that came fifty to seventy years later, contemporary with the publication of *Tristram Shandy*, it is possible to observe the cultural implications of this transitional phase in medical history. Sharp asserts the primacy of females within the practice of midwifery because they are biologically destined as such. She stresses the importance of “speculative” and “practical” knowledge inherent in midwifery, contrasting these “female” capacities to those of the medically trained men “who are bred up in Universities, Schools of Learning, or serve their Apprenticeships for that End and Purpose, where Anatomy Lectures being frequently read, the Situation of the Parts both of Men and Women, and other Things of great Consequence are often made plain to them” (xi). Women, she argues, had an innate knowledge of pregnancy and labour which could not be taught.

This gender divide created an imagined dual existence for the practicing man-midwife [see Figure 7]. Contemporary illustrations allude to this “half and half” man-midwife and Lisa Cody refers to the “hybrid nature of their profession” (12) within her historical survey of the profession. Cody continues:

On the one hand, they presented themselves as possessing heroic, life-saving, masculine strength and the intellectual insight to connect women’s reproductive bodies to national health and political stability. On the other hand, they presented themselves as almost feminine in their empathy for women and in their personal sensitivity to delicate mothers, fragile infants, and the intimate, domestic sphere (12).

This idea of the masculine and the feminine being present in the man-midwife was both attractive to patients and repulsive to obstetric detractors. It is also this image of a half man and half woman that would have attracted Sterne to lampooning the gender dynamic, namely in his creation of a squat, egotistical, university-trained “accoucher” by the name of Slop. The character is neither female or male in his nature, but instead a strange subset of which he may be the only member. He was all that was seen as unsavoury in a man-midwife.

The masculine medicine and mechanization was often attacked by those against male obstetricians. A major topic of contention within the midwife/man-midwife debate was the use

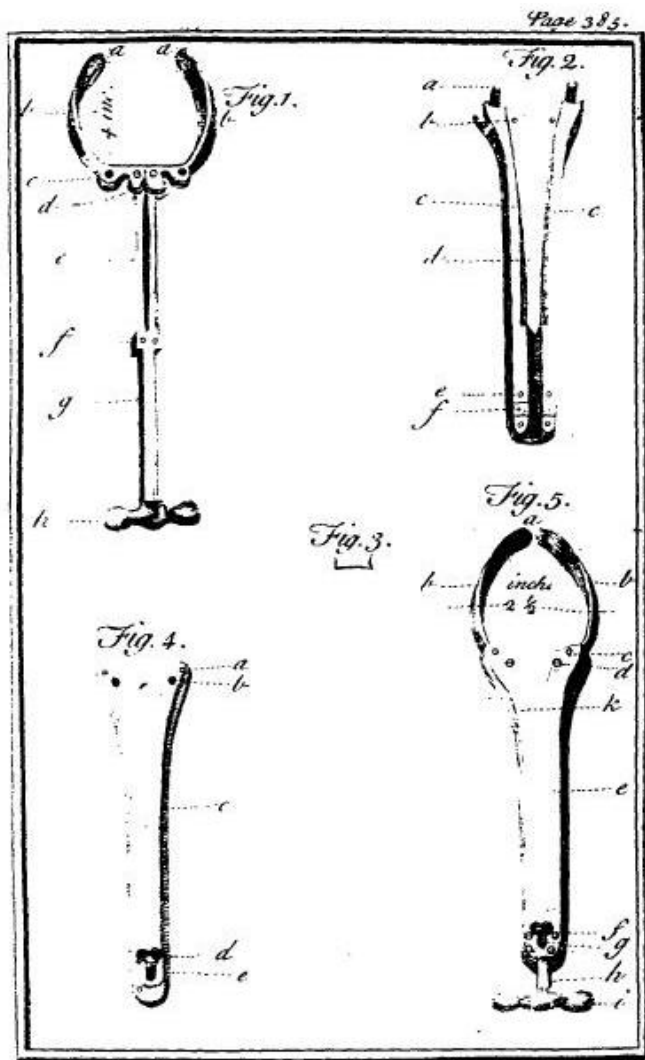


Figure 8: Drawings of Burton's "new" forceps from *An Essay Towards a Complete New System of Midwifery* (1751).

[Image: Eighteenth-Century Collections Online.]

of tools or instruments to aid in delivery. These instruments, such as the crotchet and forceps, were seen as barbarous torture devices instead of medical intervention. Forceps were challenging to use, and in the hands of an unskilled practitioner, often caused more injury than they prevented. Wilson states, however, that the "transformation of attitudes [regarding childbirth] flowed from the use of forceps" (99), and this allowed for more men to begin studying obstetrics. Sterne would have been aware of several public letters Burton had written in regards to what he viewed as the shortcomings and mistakes of Smellie's work, and was also aware of Burton's "newly invented" forceps – a frightening claw-like creation – which Burton touted as being superior to those of Smellie [see Figure 8]. The reader is first introduced to the forceps during the "stay thy obstetrick hand" paragraph, which continues "[t]hou has come forth unarm'd;-

- thou hast left thy *tire-tête*, -- thy new-invented *forceps*, -- thy *crochet*,-- thy *squirt*, and all thy instruments of salvation and deliverance behind thee" (Sterne 84). The use of "unarm'd," as if he were about to engage in battle, follows a theme of military terminology when describing relations between men and women. This line of language continues: "Of all men in the world, Dr. *Slop* was the fittest for my father's purpose; -- for tho' his new invented forceps was the armour he had proved, and what he maintained, to be the safest instrument of deliverance" (118). Obadiah is thus sent to fetch the forgotten armour of the man-midwife. In his haste, he ties a "multiplicity of round-about and intricate cross turns, with a hard knot at every intersection or

blocks that make up human life.

Sterne took the science, internalized it, let it gestate in his mind, humanized it, and then acknowledged where it was open to emotion and interpretation. Satire allows for multiple points of view and for the writer to have a dual voice, a dual presentation, within his discussion of reproductive theory. Sterne's writing is full of purposeful misquoting and erroneous footnotes and these authorial choices create a cacophony of information similar to the ever-changing world of scientific certainties. His satire is so effective because he possessed a duality of wit which allowed him to explore the shortcomings of competing ideas. This duality includes gender, which is comically dramatized in his opposition of male/female, male/female imagination, man-midwife/midwife. It would seem as though Sterne saw supposed "gender specific" traits as belonging to a larger framework, that is, of being a human-being, and it is the distinction between true human and caricature which allowed the author to create such a sub-human and grotesque character as Slop. It is also the same framework which makes the hyper-inflated feeling and reason of Walter seem disproportionate to the real world. With male characters such as this dominating the book, Sterne's supposed "exclusion" of the female from the novel is not, as some would suggest, the by-product of misogyny. Instead, women are in the novel to be observed against the fallout of male enterprise run amuck. The presence of women can be best explained by his witty and satirical use of reproductive theory by which he critiques the "new" male obstetrics through the character of Dr. Slop. The women within the novel serve as the "straight men" to the comedic males, and thus are important to the efficacy of comedy within *Tristram Shandy*.

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