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# Reader as Author in *Tristram Shandy*

Nicholas Roberts

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In a letter dated June 1764, Laurence Sterne wrote to Elizabeth Montagu, "I am going down to write a world of Nonsense" (467). He was referring, of course, to *Tristram Shandy*, a popular sensation from the time the first two volumes appeared four years earlier. Despite Samuel Johnson's prediction that "nothing odd will do long" (qtd. in Sterne 484), Sterne's masterpiece has maintained its prominence, appearing in our own time as the most modern of the eighteenth-century novels. In this essay, I am concerned with Sterne's use of asterisks and blank pages—literary devices leaving gaps in the text—to engage the reader of the novel. Just as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* cannot reasonably be isolated from the feminist viewpoint, the reader's thoughts and responses cannot be left out of *Tristram Shandy*. Several examples of how Sterne requires the reader to interact with the text will illuminate my point.

One of Sterne's first uses of asterisks can be found in Chapter VI of Volume II. Walter and Toby are discussing the use of midwives and male doctors during childbirth. While Walter does not want to risk "trusting the life of [his] child, who has had one misfortune already, to the ignorance of an old woman," Toby has a different line of reasoning, namely, that his "sister . . . does not care to let a man come so near her \*\*\*\*\*" (71). Although we may wonder a lot about what Toby has said, the intended answer is not easily discerned. Sterne's use of asterisks instead of a word forces us to imagine what Toby may have said or not said. Depending on our sense of historical accuracy or taste, we could substitute in place of

the four asterisks a number of taboo words for the private female parts. But does the word have to be four letters? Perhaps Sterne put in four asterisks just to mislead us, leaving us then with a great number of other possibilities. Maybe Toby himself simply left off the word to leave his own audience to its own devices. As Tristram says, "I will not say whether my uncle Toby had compleated the sentence or not; t'is for his advantage to suppose he had, as, I think, he could have added no One Word which would have improved it" (71). Walter's reaction leads us to believe that Toby may have said something taboo instead of something more proper and modest: "Methinks, brother . . . you might, at least, know so much as the right end of a woman from the wrong" (72).

Sterne also seems to have definite phrases in mind for other asterisk substitutions. One of two examples is the famous accidental circumcision scene. Susannah, the maidservant, has lifted baby Tristram up to the window sash, when she says, "Cannot you manage, my dear, for a single time to \*\*\*\* \*\* \* \*\* \* \*\*\*\*\*?" (264). John Preston states that "the asterisks spell out words which do not exist unless in the reader's imagination. In another way, however, they *are* there, waiting for the reader to voice them" (160). Yes, and there are definite words waiting to be voiced for the asterisks: "piss out of the window." Another example can be found in Volume VII, when Tristram says,

—Do, my dear Jenny, tell the world for me, how I behaved under one, the most oppressive of its kind which could befall me as a man, proud, as he ought to be, of his manhood—

'Tis enough, said'st thou, coming close up to me, as I stood with my garters in my hand, reflecting upon what had not pass'd—'Tis enough, Tristram, and I am satisfied, said'st thou, whispering these words in my ear, \*\*\*\* \*\*  
\*\*\*\* \*\* \*\*\*\*\*;—\*\*\*\* \*\* \*\*\*\*\*—any other man would have sunk down to the center.

—Everything is good for something, quoth I. (363)  
In this example, however, it is much more difficult to substitute precise words for the asterisks. We may not be able to find an exact



phrase, or there may be a number of possible solutions. Why does Sterne replace these simple explanations with a group of asterisks? Preston argues that “the asterisks, then, are a playful symbol of the reader’s sense of this book. They imply that the reader is both receptive and creative, and that reading is sometimes equivalent to writing” (161). To engage readers in the text by forcing them to create the text is a rather novel concept. I will emphasize this point later on.

Slop’s exaggeration of Tristram’s injury offers an even greater challenge for readers trying to substitute words for asterisks:

Doctor *Slop*, like a son of a w—, as my father called him for it,—to exalt himself,—debased me to death,—and made ten thousand times more of *Susannah*’s accident, than there was any grounds for; so that in a week’s time, or less, it was in every body’s mouth, *That poor Master Shandy* \* \* \* \* \*  
\* \* \* \* \* entirely.—And Fame, who loves to double every thing,—in three days more, had sworn positively she saw it,—and all the world, as usual, gave credit to her evidence—“That the nursery window had not only \* \* \* \* \*  
;—but that \* \* \* \* \*  
\*’s also.” (304-05).

The first asterisk phrase could read “had his penis cut off” or something similar. The second phrase is a bit trickier. The coordinating conjunction “but” complicates the interpretation. The first half of the phrase could be an exaggeration of what had previously happened. The hint of exaggeration in “—Fame, who loves to double everything—” is evidence for this claim. The “\* \*’s also” in the second half implies that a third party was involved. Whatever the case may be, critics and readers could come up with a diverse range of interpretations, some conventional and some unconventional.

Problems of interpretation are made even more difficult when Walter “put on his spectacles . . . turned about, and walked precipitately down stairs,” returning with “a couple of folios under his arm” (269). He wants to know if Tristram has been properly

circumcised, so he reads from *Spencer de Legibus Hebraeorum Ritualibus*:

My mother went down, and my father went on, reading the section as follows.

\* \* \* \* \*  
\* \* \* \* \*—Very  
well,—said my father, \* \* \* \* \*  
\* \* \* \* \*  
\*—nay, if it has that convenience—and so without stopping  
a moment to settle it first in his mind . . . he shut the book,  
and walked down stairs. (270)

This delightful scene demonstrates one of Walter's hobby-horses. He is obsessed with learning and fantastic theories. We could say that he is too caught up in knowledge and is thus unable to deal with reality. This conclusion still leaves questions in our mind. What does Walter read? Where is the text? Why does Sterne leave it out? Perhaps he did not think it important enough to include in his book. From Walter's final remark, it appears as though Sterne may be satirizing intellectuals, something he does throughout the entire novel: "Who am I, that I should fret or fume one moment about the matter?" (270). We could read Spenser or Maimonides, but doing so would not solve the answer to Sterne's riddle or illuminate the situation.

A long string of asterisks also confuses details concerning Tristram's birth. In Volume III, we find Dr. Slop experimenting with his newly invented forceps, a tool to be used in "the safe and expeditious extraction of the foetus" (104). After trying the forceps on Toby's hands, Slop explains to Walter that "if the hip is mistaken for the head,—there is a possibility (if it is a boy) that the forceps \* \* \* \* \*" (137). We continue to read that "There is no such danger, continued [Slop], with the head.—No, in truth, quoth my father,—but when your possibility has taken place at the hip,—you may as well take off the head too" (137). Of course, Walter is referring not to the head of the human but to the head of the penis. We are indirectly asked to fill in the gaps left open by Sterne. So what are the possibilities?



Slop most likely whispered, “[the forceps] will accidentally destroy his reproductive organs.” What makes this scene interesting is that Slop “whispered very low” to Walter. While Slop and Walter are privileged to the opinion of the doctor, we can only make conjectures about what he may have said. The result is a guessing game in which we will never know the truth of our guess.

Sterne also uses blank space as part of the game with the readers. In Volume VI, the narrator tells the “gentle reader” that “never did [his] eyes behold, or [his] concupiscence covet any thing in this world, more concupiscible than widow *Wadman*” (330). Chapter XXXVIII follows:

To conceive this right,—call for pen and ink—here’s paper ready to your hand.—Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind—as like your mistress as you can—as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you—‘tis all one to me—please but your own fancy in it.

—Was ever any thing in Nature so sweet!—so exquisite!—Then, dear Sir, how could my uncle Toby resist it? Thrice happy book! thou wilt have one page, at least, within thy covers, which Malice will not blacken, and which Ignorance cannot misrepresent.

Sterne does not limit the creative imaginations of his readers. In fact, Sterne assumes that they will involve themselves in the text. He expects active readers who will expand the chapter to more than its original ninety-six words, not readers who will ignore his request and move on with the text—even when the text is a blank space on which the readers could “paint” the widow “to their own mind[s],” using the powers of their imaginations. An industrious reader could even put a picture or a painting of a woman on the blank page. By placing the responsibility of writing (or painting) on the readers, Sterne reverses the accepted hierarchy of author/reader. The readers have to make up the novel.



Several pages later Tristram looks back to the two blank chapters: "I look upon a chapter which has, only nothing in it, with respect" (446). He goes on to say, "I was under the necessity of writing the 25th chapter of my book, before the 18th" (446). Once again we are being asked to read what has not yet been written. And what we read later is not Chapter XVIII but "The Eighteenth Chapter"; not Chapter XIX, but "Chapter the Nineteenth." The orthographic change makes us feel as though the two chapters may not be the ones we were expecting. Are they really the two blank chapters? "Chapter the Nineteenth" leads directly into both Chapter XX and Chapter XXVI. In both instances Trim is sent to fetch the map from the garret so that Mrs. Wadman may "see the very place" (440). It appears as though Chapter XXVI is an alternative version of Chapter XX. Preston asks, "Does this not suggest that in an odd way the 'Gothic' chapters 18 and 19 are not simply what was *not there* earlier, but are themselves alternatives to whatever was there? It gives the impression that the author is adding a different version of the story that the reader has already 'written'" (163-64). This tricky literary effect may seem daunting at first, but it creates an interesting effect. Sterne's use of it simply shows the readers the many ways in which they have helped to create what they have read.

### Works Cited

- Preston, John. *The Created Self: The Reader's Role in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*. New York: Barnes & Nobles, 1970.
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