

1973

Volume VII of 'Tristram Shandy'—A Dance of Life

Susan D. Brienza

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr>

Recommended Citation

Brienza, Susan D. (1973) "Volume VII of 'Tristram Shandy'—A Dance of Life," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 10: No. 3, Article 8.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol10/iss3/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Dayton Review by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

Volume VII of *Tristram Shandy*—A Dance of Life

Susan D. Brienza

Thanks to Thomas Columbus¹ we can now view Volume VII of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* as the essence of the novel and not as its longest digression. The journey motif, the recurrent images of motion, and the controlling image of the dance all merge to produce a pattern so ordered that this volume must be considered one of the most highly structured in the novel. Columbus' focus seems to be distorted, however; he writes of the "journey of life," the "dance with death," and the "dance of death," but the journey is the dance here, so that the thematic and imagistic emphasis is the dance of life. While it seems clear that "Volume VII completes Tristram's account of his life thus freeing him to conclude the novel by dealing with Uncle Toby in Volumes VIII and IX,"² it is also true that Volume VII presents one long affirmation of life and is thus the epitome of *Tristram Shandy*, "the novel of quickness."³ Volume VII celebrates the sexual aspect of life and serves as a fitting prologue to the story of Uncle Toby's amours.

Tristram travels many roads—to, from, and around Paris—but all roads lead to sex. At the beginning of the volume Death interrupts the telling of a tawdry story; at the end Tristram has triumphed over Death with a sexual dance. Sex is identified with the bare necessities of life—food and clothing—and invades the themes of motion, travel, death, and circularity.

Death accosts Tristram in England; he must fly for his life to France. Why?—because Paris is the city of gaiety whose motto is "Sing, Derry, Derry, Down."⁴ Paris, noted for its food and fashion (p. 499) becomes the logical setting for sexual joy in an episode in which food and clothing can not be mentioned without a sexual allusion. The dirty story which opens the volume concerns a "nun who fancied herself a shellfish, and of a monk damn'd for eating a muscle" (pp. 479-80), Tristram notes that the fishing quarter of Calais is populous because of its diet of seafood (p. 485). In chapter 14 Tristram gets only a "taste" of joy, but he can feel vicarious pleasure in the story of Amanda and Amandus who are so in love that their brains are like pap (p. 520). He serves up romantic love as if it were a soft food:

There is a soft area in every gentle mortal's life, where such a story affords more *pabulum* to the brain, than all the *Frusts*, and *Crusts*, and *Rusts* of antiquity, which travellers can cook up for it.

—'Twas all that stuck on the right side of the cullender in my own, of what Spon and others, in their accounts of Lyons, had strained into it; . . . (p. 521)

As the journey of life progresses, food and sex are repeatedly linked either directly

or indirectly. "Andouilletts" obviously has sexual connotations along with its culinary denotation. The muleteer's wine suggests the new pagan world Tristram imagines and merges the Dionysian May-pole dancing and the phallic, fertility symbol of Priapus. Tristram later laments the loss to his own manhood, but consoles himself with the promise of a rejuvenating beverage from a satyr-like animal and thoughts on the "die" pun: "—I'll go into Wales for six weeks, and drink goat's-whey—and I'll gain seven years longer life for the accident" (p. 518). Food may be responsible for another accident in Volume VII. Perhaps it is the heavy load of vegetables in the ass's baskets which causes the straw to unweave and catch on Tristram's pocket which, in turn, has sexual consequences. Tristram later buys some figs "burst at the side" which would be suggestive enough even if they were not placed on the obviously symbolic eggs. Before he chooses Nanette of the splitting petticoat, Tristram dallies with the other nymphs, using an offer of snuff as his seduction rite (p. 536).

Clothes, a hindrance to sexual acts (as well as one of the necessities of life), have the strange habit of coming undone during Tristram's journey. Janatone misses some loops in a stocking she is knitting thus producing a hole (p. 490). Tristram envisions using clothing as an enhancement instead of a hindrance as he imagines drawing Janatone "as if in the wettest drapery"; a sexual pun on "draw" becomes inevitable (p. 490). Mr. Shandy claps his cod-piece when amused thus fusing clothes, gaiety and sexuality (p. 514). The willow from the pattern of the ass's basket tears Tristram's breeches pocket to expose his "out upon it" pun (p. 524). Once on the plain, Tristram learns that frankness "at once unpins every plait of a Languedocian's dress" (p. 536). As for his particular partner, her hair that will not stay tied up in a knot becomes as frustrating as the symbolic slit in her petticoat (p. 537).

In France the dance of life and the dance of sex center on May-poling which becomes one of the necessities of life:

—Tantarra - ra - tan - tive—the whole world was going out a May-poling
—frisking—capering there . . .

The French women, by the bye, love May-poles, *à la folie*—that is, as much as their matins—give 'em but a May-pole, whether in *May, June, July* or *September*—they never count the times—down it goes—'tis meat, drink, washing, and lodging to 'em— . . . (p. 530)

The May-pole, because of its shape and its downward motion, is undeniably a euphemism for the phallus. Ironically, the dance to welcome in the spring doubles as the dance to celebrate the nativity of the Virgin Mary (p. 530). In France the pagan world and the Christian world overlap. Tristram similarly jumps from theological questions on the Christian faith to: "Blessed *Jupiter!* and blessed every other heathen god and goddess! for now ye will all come into play again, and with *Priapus* at your tails—what jovial times!" (p. 495).

Sterne can even produce jovial times out of a direct confrontation with some former victims of Death. Thus it seems rather appropriate that Tristram should weave

into Volume VII the story of his grand tour and of his father's trip to Auxerre. Instead of travelling away from death, our hero tells of a time when he travelled towards death—the tombs at the abbey of Saint Germain. Here Walter Shandy's sexual jokes triumph over the solemnity of death. He assumes that St. Maxima wanted to touch the body of St. Maximus; he puns on the phrase "get by it"; and he is pleased that Saint Optat (desire) is buried next to the fair St. Maxima. Is there sex after death?—Yes, says Mr. Shandy.

Sexuality assumes a part in the wheel of Tristram's tour as it has played a major role throughout this very circular volume. Tristram's remarks have been literally turned into circles by being curled in a French woman's hair. Perhaps the large number of circular jokes and stories in Volume VII is not accidental. Volume VII also contains more than the usual quota of female characters for a *Tristram Shandy* volume; there are direct or indirect references to Mrs. Shandy, the girl at the inn, Dame Nature, Janatone, the Virgin Mary, St. Maxima, Amanda, Jenny, the wife of the chaise-vamper, the abbess, Margarita, Madam Le Blanc, the lady with the figs, several nymphs on the plain, and Nanette. Without suspicion of being overly Freudian we may note the sexual implications of the circular dance around the May-pole and the dance in "the ring of pleasure" (p. 537).

As Mr. Columbus has pointed out, in Tristram's journey Sterne equates motion with life and joy, and pits it against the stillness of death. However, Mr. Columbus takes Sterne's image of the wheel (pp. 492-93), and infuses it with too much of T. S. Eliot's imagery. Thus he arrives at the contradictory conclusion that although Sterne warns that "to stand still, or get on but slowly, is death and the devil" (p. 493), Tristram's goal or destination is "the unmoving axis, the still centre of the circle."⁵ To apply Eliot's line from *Four Quartets*, "at the still point, there the dance is" to Volume VII of *Tristram Shandy* seems to deny all of Sterne's own imagery. Tristram remarks that his account of the journey through France and Italy is so unique that it would be a shame "if it be not read by all travellers and travel-readers, till travelling is no more—or which comes to the same point—till the world, finally, takes it into its head to stand still—" (pp. 512-13). Sterne almost sets up a direct proportion between the speed of travel and the quality of life. Tristram calculates his pace: "With what velocity, continued I, clapping my two hands together, shall I fly down the rapid Rhone" . . . (p. 517). He marvels at "what a fresh spring in the blood!" he will get to "see vertiginous, the rocks, the mountains, the cataracts, and all the hurry which Nature is in with all her great works about her—" (p. 517). At the still point is death for Tristram Shandy; only through the dance of life (and of sex) can he escape the stillness of death. Surely the pace and tone of Tristram's dance change at the end of Volume VII, but it was consistently a dance of life, not of death.

For Tristram, motion means life; in France, sex means motion. The horses there do not live by bread alone: "a French post-horse would not know what in the world to do, was it not for the two words ***** and ***** in which there is as much sustenance, as if you gave him a peck of corn" . . . (p. 503). They derive their food energy from the sexual verbs "fouter" and "bouger." [Why, then, does not this method work

for the abbess and Margarita? Perhaps their sterile mules are immune to sexual prodding, or perhaps they are themselves victims of symbolically sexual diseases.] Tristram, who had earlier described himself as being "sick as a horse" (p. 481), also needs a sexual dance to rejuvenate him.

At the beginning of Volume VII Death wants to be Tristram's partner. Because of Tristram's debt to Nature, Dame Nature comes accourting (chapter 7). Upon meeting Janatone, Tristram sincerely wishes he could change partners. He laments fleeting life and youth (p. 490), and asserts that he would stop for the dance of sex if he were not fleeing death. By the end of the volume Tristram has come to realize that he can perform a sexual dance and flee death simultaneously, and that, in fact, the two are intimately related. His stationary mule comes to represent the stillness of death, while Tristram energetically enters into the dance of life:

—My mule made a dead point—'Tis the fife and tabourin, said I—I'm frightened to death, quoth he—They are running at the ring of pleasure, said I, giving him a prick—By saint Boogar, and all the saints at the backside of the door of purgatory, said he—(making the same resolution with the abbess of *Andouillets*) I'll not go a step further—'Tis very well sir, said I—I never will argue a point with one of your family as long as I live; so leaping off his back, and kicking off one boot into this ditch, and t'other into that—I'll take a dance, said I—so stay you here. (p. 537)

As he dances, Tristram decides that he would not mind dying if he could only "die" first: "Why could I not live and end my days thus? . . . why could not a man sit down in the lap of content here—and dance, and sing, and say his prayers, and go to heaven with this nut brown maid?" (p. 538). Here the sexual climax of one of life's journeys fuses with man's spiritual journey in Tristram's mind, but this bliss is not to be. Life encompasses more than sex and this "sitting down" would be too still, so Tristram must dance on to Volume VIII and to Uncle Toby's dance.

NOTES

¹ Thomas M. Columbus, "Tristram's Dance with Death—Volume VII of *Tristram Shandy*," *University of Dayton Review*, 8 (Fall 1971), No. 2, 3-15.

² Columbus, p. 3.

³ Toby Olshin, "Genre and *Tristram Shandy*: The Novel of Quickness, *Genre*, 4 (1971), 360-75.

⁴ Lawrence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. James A. Work, (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1940), p. 501. All further references to *Tristram Shandy* in this essay are to this edition.

⁵ Columbus, p. 7.