STERNE’S BAWDRY: A CAUTIONARY TALE

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Following a clue in Smollett’s Roderick Random, we can trace Sterne’s allusion to several bawdy tales to multiple editions and versions of collections published from the 1720s to the end of the century under the title The Muse in Good Humour. The occurrence of such terms as old-hat, button-hole and leaky vessel echo jokes familiar to readers of Sterne, but between the usage in the hands of the writers who contributed to these collections and Sterne’s genius there is a vast chasm. While we may find it impossible to define the boundary between hack writing and literary genius, examples from Sterne, Fielding and Richardson may suggest that it remains a task essential to defining the category of literature as distinct from all other intellectual categories.

Among the many bawdy plays in Tristram Shandy, the jokes on leaky vessel (chapter 14 of volume IV), button-holes (beginning in chapter 15 of volume IV, and periodically thereafter), and old hats (chapter 8 of volume V, chapter 10 of volume VIII) seem obvious enough, although the Florida annotators have found something to say about the second (‘A play perhaps on 1 Peter 3:7: “giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel”’) and the third: (‘See Partridge, s.v. old hat: The female pudend: low . . . Grose, “Because frequently felt”’). In thus eschewing prolixity, the editors avoid one of the primary difficulties when annotating humour, the pitfalls of trying to explain a joke. There is, however, another sort of commentary that might prove useful—namely, to establish whether or not a particular joke originated with Sterne; while one might strongly suspect antecedents in many instances, it nonetheless unsettles us to discover that, despite Sterne’s inventiveness, he is at times echoing—however distantly—some very hoary jokes indeed.

A clue to this recycling activity may be found in Smollett’s Roderick Random (1748), chapter 62, where Roderick is hired as a hack writer and asked to produce something ‘satirical or luscious, such as the Button Hole, Shocky and Towzer, the Leaky Vessel, &c’.2 Paul-Gabriel Boucé’s note refers us to a bawdy poem, Button, and Button-Hole (1723), ‘replete with sartorial double entendres; the second is unidentified; the third (1721) is also a bawdy tale of lust and drink’ (477). We can now identify Shocky and Towzer as well, both an earlier appearance in 1730 and a

later inclusion in *The Muse in Good Humour: or, a collection of comic tales by the most eminent poets* (London: J. Noble, 1745). Of particular interest, perhaps, is that this collection also contains a reprint of *The Leaky Vessel*; possibly Smollett picked out both titles from this collection. In a different collection, bearing almost the same name, *The Muse in Good Humour: or, a collection of the best poems, comic tales, choice fables, &c.*, published by Mary Cooper, also in 1745, one can find ‘The Button Hole’ among the reprinted texts—it is, however, a totally different text from *Button, and Button-Hole*, and quite possibly the work Smollett had in mind, rather than the 1721 publication identified by Boucé.

John Noble’s collection was reprinted several times during the second half of the century, in fact the latest in 1785 (as far as I could ascertain, Cooper’s was not). The contents varied in subsequent editions, and for the sixth edition (1751) a second volume, with new stories (all in rhyme, it should be noted), was added; the two volumes were reprinted as the seventh edition in 1757, the eighth in 1785. Both of Noble’s volumes, and the single volume published by Cooper (accompanied by a second volume containing riddles) consisted of a mix of well-known writers such as Dryden, Rochester, Swift, La Fontaine, Gay and Prior, along with anonymous pieces, such as ‘Button Hole’, ‘Shocky and Towzer’, ‘The Leaky Vessel’, and, with a title familiar to readers of Sterne, Henry Baker’s ‘A Case of Conscience’, first published in his *Original Poems: Serious and Humorous* (1726).

As one reads in the collections, one finds many anticipations of Sterne’s bawdy humour, but perhaps more in the vein of his friend John Hall-Stevenson’s tasteless rhymed tales (and indeed one story, in the added 1751 volume, is entitled ‘Miss in her Teens’ as in Hall-Stevenson’s *Crazy Tales* (1762), although it is not the...
same tale). Most significantly, perhaps, one discovers just how subtle and sophisticated Sterne’s sexual innuendoes are, compared to those writers using the same materials but without his deft touch.

For example, Walter Shandy calls Susannah ‘a leaky vessel’ in a situation where the term is appropriate to her lack of memory: ‘But stay—thou art a leaky vessel...; canst thou carry Trismegistus in thy head, the length of the gallery without scattering...’ (TS, IV.14.344). As we quickly discover, despite her confidence that she can, the best she can recall is ‘Tris—something,’ and the worst of all names is thus bestowed on Walter’s son. Without doubt, however, Sterne would have been aware of the bawdy implications of longstanding plays on women as ‘leaky vessels,’ alluding on the one hand to their supposed inability to keep a secret, and on the other, to the female organ and its various discharges. For Aphra Behn, a third meaning combined the first two to create an image of sexual unreliability: ‘I...am as restless as a merchant in stormy weather, that has ventured all his wealth in one bottom. Woman is a leaky vessel’ (The Lucky Chance, V.7.1–3). In the 1721 chapbook publication of The Leaky Vessel, reprinted in the John Noble collection (1745), part 2, the term is applied literally to a keg of October brew, figuratively to the servant Sukey, who has been secretly draining it; when the master discovers her thievery, she has no recourse but to surrender finally to his long sexual pursuit: ‘The Wench was buxom, plump, and sappy, / And fit to make a Lover happy.’ And when his dinner guest, who had thought the loss a result of a leaky barrel, inquires what is taking him so long to find the source, the master replies, ‘Z----ds, the Leak’s found out / Thro’ which my Nectar daily flows; / Be sure, said Roger, stop it close. / I’ll try, said he, but, on my Soul, / It is a devilish swinging Hole’. When Sterne calls Susannah ‘a leaky vessel,’ then, he almost certainly knew he was drawing on a very bawdy context, but steers clear of it, offering just the slightest hint to those readers for whom the term might reverberate with a much more specific meaning.

Similarly with button-holes. Sterne promises us a chapter on them, along with a chapter on chamber-maids and pishes, and periodically returns to remind himself and us of the debt, but it is never paid (IV.14.345). His tone, however, does move

6 It has been pointed out to me that such titles as ‘A Case of Conscience’ and ‘Young Miss in her Teens,’ and many others, were used again and again with totally different stories attached to them.


9 I quote from the fourth ed. of Noble’s collection, 58–9.

10 Indeed, in the Cooper collection, Tale XX is ‘Susannah and the two Elders’, a sonnet retelling of the biblical story in the octet, and reversing it in the sestet: ‘Had the Reverse been true! Had Author sung, / How that the Dame was old, the Lovers young! / . . . Lord! How the Story would have shock’d my Creed! / For that had been a Miracle indeed’ (113).
us momentarily closer to the bawdy tales of anonymous authors: ‘Button-holes!----there is something lively in the very idea of’em--...--I’ll make merry work with my button-holes--I shall have’em all to myself--’tis a maiden subject’ (IV.15.346). Significantly enough, when in volume V Sterne again mentions his chapter on button-holes, it is linked to a second anticipated chapter on old hats (V.8.434): the 1723 chapbook, Button, and Button-Hole, continues with a sub-title: With a Character of the Drabs [i.e., prostitutes], and the Change of an Old-Hat. The bawdiness is blatant:

When the Hole is too open, too large, or too slack,
The Button is apt (as I’m told) to slip back;
And a Button too large so widens the Slits,
That it tears, and abuses, may some Times it splits;
But here Button, it seems, and Button-Hole fits. (6)

The ‘Button-Hole’ tale that appears in the Cooper version of The Muse in Good Humour, is, if possible, even more explicit; in sixteen couplets the author manages to tell the story of a Quaker poxed by a streetwalker, treated by castration, his organ subsequently stored along with others in the surgeon’s drawer, since ‘A Dozen of them, shank’d, and finely wrought, / Will make a Sett of Buttons for my Coat’. To this explanation the Quaker responds: ‘The Thought is good, and worthy of thy Trade, / (Reply’d the Friend:) But e’er thy Coat be made, / Wilt thou not get as many female Moles, / That so thy Buttons may have proper Holes?’ (131).11 My point is not that Sterne alludes specifically to one or the other of these tales, but rather that button-holes had entered the popular vernacular of bawdiness well before his taking pen in hand, and that when he refers to the tradition he does so in a way that seems to justify his claim that he kept a due distance from Swift as Swift had kept due distance from Rabelais.12

The tale of ‘Old-Hat’ included in Button, and Button-Hole is an amusing little exercise, in which two diners take the wrong hat off their pegs after their meal and need to straighten out the mix-up; Sterne had himself been rather explicit in his mention:

It is not like the affair of an old hat cock’d----and a cock’d old hat, about which your reverences have so often been at odds with one another----but there is a difference here in the nature of things----

And let me tell you, gentry, a wide one too. (VIII.10.668).

11 Cf. TS, VI.34.559: ‘but to spare—to spare the mole, for the mole’s sake; which, in its naked situation could be no more than an object of pity’. The Florida editors cite Partridge’s recording of mole as ‘penis’ in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and suggest the term was already available to Sterne. This passage from ‘The Button-Hole’ provides substantial support for that view, but unfortunately is discovered too late to convince that superlative eighteenth-century bibliographer Hugh Amory that mole sometimes does not mean mole—we had engaged in a spirited correspondence on the point. To be sure, he could have riposted that the poet was simply desperate to find a rhyme for holes.

Whether or not he had this particular tale in mind cannot be determined, although one might suspect he had. ‘Old-Hat’ concludes:

You saw not your Hat, and so mine was FELT.
However, to give each Chapeau its Due,
Yours was a Bever, and so was mine too;
But it matters not much had they been This, or That;
Or if we had (each of us) a Bit of OLD-HAT,
So term’d, as I find (by some Authors I’ve read in)
As having a HOLE, which you may put your Head in:
And by seeing, or feeling you’ll find, soon enough,
That, in what’s call’d OLD-HAT, the Cony-Wooll’s rough,
And then’s the Time not to sit still on your Crupp, Sir,
‘Twill then bear a Brush, and wants to be rubb’d up Sir. (8)

What gives some credence to the idea that Sterne did indeed know these verses is the fact that the very next chapter of volume VIII is perhaps the bawdiest in Tristram Shandy—Sterne’s way of indicating (to his readers then and now) that all the tartuffles in England would not inhibit the book he wanted to write and that his genius and not the marketplace was the most significant determinant of his writing. That chapter, I might note, is where the old hat becomes a ‘furr’d cap’—‘warm—and soft; especially if you stroke it the right way’ (670), surely the implication of the final two couplets of the verse.

That Sterne’s relationship with the bawdy tradition that preceded him was never a simple one might be suggested by the fact that the title of the last chapter he ever wrote, ‘The Case of Conscience’, is also the title of one of the collected tales in part 1 of the Noble Muse in Good Humour. It was written by Henry Baker, far better known for his popular The Microscope Made Easy (1742), and first published in his Original Poems: Serious and Humorous, Second Part, 1726.13

The tale’s frame asks whether or not an oath should be kept if it does more harm than good. To illustrate the argument that it should not, the poet tells a story, uncannily enough, of a birthing. The expectant mother, Joan, surrounded by her neighbours at her bedside (during her ‘crying-out,’ as it was called), ‘lie[s] attentive to their Chat, / Of Cocks and Bulls, and This and That’ (p. 12). As her pains continue, she agonises so dreadfully (yet artfully, too, we are assured) that poor John, her husband, agrees to take a solemn oath never again to ask her for sex. There is something sufficiently Shandean about this at least to suggest Walter and Elizabeth are lurking in the wings, and certainly a husband’s non-performance binds the two couples together. But in Baker’s poem, Joan takes the matter into her own hands when John fails to respond to her overtures after the ‘required’ month of recovery has passed. ‘Restless she tosses, deeply sighs; / The Tears fall trickling from her Eyes’ (p. 25). And when John invokes his vow in order to explain his reluctance, she grows indignant: ‘You’d do’t, but for your Vow! she

cries: / (Breathless, transported, round his Waste / With both her Arms she locks him fast) / Indeed, my Love! ’tis all a Joke; / Rash Vows are made but to be broke’ (p. 26). I do not think Sterne needed this story to create his own ‘Case of Conscience’ in *A Sentimental Journey*, and indeed, it has been thought to have originated in the actual experience of an acquaintance. Still, the idea of a vow, perhaps broken, and of a restless night, underlies both stories and perhaps offers a new insight into Sterne’s version in that it may not only be a ‘case’ of whether or not he broke the oath of silence with his ‘ejaculation’, but a ‘case’ of whether or not it does more harm to Yorick and the Piedmontese lady for him to keep his oath or to break it. It is, in many ways, the question Sterne asks in all his fiction, but most particularly in his final work: ‘Ye whose clay-cold heads and luke-warm hearts can argue down or mask your passions—tell me, what trespass is it that man should have them?’ (*ASJ*, 124).

More generally, in light of this tradition of bawdiness antedating Sterne and influencing the air he breathed and also, perhaps, the pages he read (and sometimes echoed), we might want to question the validity of the abuse he has received, early and late, as the bawdy parson with the dirty smock. Reading page after page of either version of *The Muse in Good Humour*, and knowing that the tales collected therein are merely the tip of the cock and bull stories available to the age in both its verbal and printed discourse, must we not conclude instead that Sterne entered the tradition not merely as a latecomer but as a writer who flirted with bad taste but rarely if ever entered the lists with those for whom bad taste was bread and butter? Or, perhaps from a different perspective entirely, could we not conclude that ‘bad taste’ is always a condition of one’s own time and place—and that judging Sterne in the light of *Muse in Good Humour*, he exhibits great care not to go where his age allowed, but rather to change and alter the discourse of bawdry. Sterne’s combination of sexuality and sentimentality—head and heart triangulated by body—was shaped in part by changing times, but also in part by his own vision of how one could acknowledge desire without denigrating it. His tendency toward sexual flirtation whether in the byways of York, London or Paris, translates here as flirtation with the boundaries of good taste. He refuses either to acquiesce in or totally to deny the overt bawdiness of these tales, but successfully converts bawdry into a necessary partnership with the numerous other modes of discourse that constitute the melding genius of both *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*.

I use the word *genius* quite deliberately. One defining mark of literary criticism in the last half century has been the attempted elimination of any distinction between popular culture and art, hack-writing and genius, so much so that we seem to have no perception or vocabulary available for re-establishing it. As with

14 See The Florida edition of *A Sentimental Journey*, ed. Melvyn New and W. G. Day (Florida, 2002), vol. VI, 281–2, n. to 161.1ff. As did Gardner D. Stout in his edition (California, 1967), 355, so too the Florida editors have doubts as to the authenticity of the claim, adding that if John Crauford, a young Scottish acquaintance of Sterne during his second Paris stay in 1765, did indeed supply ‘the hint, Sterne’s story is an epitome of almost every skill he ever developed as a writer, and every insight he ever had about male–female relationships’ (VI:382).
all questions worth entertaining, there is no ready solution. No fixed ideology or equation should ever be allowed to establish a fixed boundary between good and bad writing, much less among examples of humour, wit, smut and garbage, but surely it is time to reintroduce the notion of discrimination into our thinking about the texts (a dreadfully neutralising word) we help pass on to future generations. Above all else, in this regard, Sterne was able to entwine bawdry with the discourse of serious intent (and comedy and satire can be serious, we need to remind ourselves), by which I mean writing with ethical purposiveness. It was, of course, no more than Rabelais and Swift had done before him (and a host of other great writers from Aristophanes to Shakespeare, Petronius to Fielding), but it does warn us yet once more that comparing Sterne to the authors of *The Button-Hole* or *The Leaky Vessel* only makes sense if we remain cognizant that literary criticism is, as Locke might observe, a mode of judgment (discriminations) as well as of wit (combinations).

For example, in Sterne’s *Letter Book* we find inserted (in his own hand) a letter purportedly from ‘Jenny Shandy’ (?April 1765) offering a bawdy joke, of the sort found in the collections under discussion, that Sterne thought funny enough to copy.15 A similar ‘joke’ appears in Lydia Medalle’s collection of her father’s correspondence (1775), entitled ‘An Impromptu’; Duncan Patrick has cleverly and convincingly demonstrated it to be about a condom.16 It was sent to Medalle in 1775 with a cover letter telling her that Sterne wrote it ‘after he had been thoroughly soused.—He drew it up in a few moments without stopping his pen’. Whether Sterne actually wrote it or not is debatable—it certainly could be his, but one would not be surprised to discover it in some earlier version of *The Muse in Good Humour*. What both bawdy fragments have in common is that they did not make their way into Sterne’s works and hence remain only amusing bawdy jokes, among the thousands that Sterne might have read but did not choose to work into his writings. Compare that decision to the bawdiest moment in *Tristram Shandy*, as noted earlier, the passage in volume 8 (VIII.11.670). We might well suspect Sterne of thumbing his nose at his critics in this chapter, so unsubtle and specific is its sexual content, but within the context of the Widow Wadman’s awakened sexual interests—and the ensuing chapter that provides a comical alphabet of Love—we can find one of Sterne’s most persistent ethical observations: ‘L’amour n’est rien sans sentiment. / Et le sentiment est encore moins sans amour’ (*ASJ*, 6:63). Sterne’s insistence that sex and love, body and soul, amour and sentiment must have something to do with one another is not at all a simple notion but perhaps what the literature of genius has always exhibited as its essential defining characteristic: the insight that human beings, in flesh and in spirit, form a single indivisible whole and that it is the office of the writer always to remind readers of their own experience of the existence—and indivisibility—of

16 ‘Laurence Sterne’s “Impromptu”: A New Title for an Old Joke’, *Notes & Queries* 51 (March 2004), 54–6.
both. As such, literature also demonstrates to its readers the value of discriminating between portrayals of human beings that are too objectifying of the flesh or too mystifying of the spirit, and those that echo their own experience between these extremes. This is, I would suggest, the ethical import of literature, the value it places on the entire human enterprise, and is the reason, I believe, one can claim the uniqueness of the work of art (or genius) as an intellectual category: Different from every other exercise of thought, art rejects all efforts to determine the human experience as other than indeterminate.

A second example may be offered from a recent collection of essays on Henry Fielding celebrating his tercentenary. The essays are arranged alphabetically by author, which accounts for the fascinating near juxtaposition of essays by Scott Black and Gerald J. Butler.17 Scenting the trail of Sophia’s muff, Butler wagers war against the prudes who seem to ignore Fielding’s healthy interest in sexuality, those who, we might say, read Fielding as an ethical fiction rather than—or alongside—a sexual romp. One suspects, however, that Butler may be the most prudish reader of all, insofar as he seems unable to accept the notion that strong sexual appetite, male or female, is not incompatible with Christian virtue—even Richardson knew that. For Butler, Fielding’s acknowledgment of sexual passion in his women undercuts any moralistic reading of the fiction; if Sophia will enjoy married sex, evidenced by her very warm thoughts of Tom prior to marriage, she cannot possibly be the ‘pure’ woman small critics (opposed to lusty critics, persons not subject to petty discriminations) have made her. This seems a most prudish understanding of both Sophia and of Fielding, who seems, on the contrary, determined to create a world in which love, muffs and sexual pleasure, without the masks of deceit, gravity, or affectation, can indeed produce happiness. That such complete happiness, however, can occur only in marriage seems to be Fielding’s final considered statement on human appetites and social community.

Black’s essay, it turns out, makes this point with particular elegance through a revaluation of the genre of romance. If Tom Jones is organised, as H. K. Miller pointed out many years ago, around the notion that ‘the human soul represents an intersection of the human and the transcendent’, a ‘double realm of value’ in which human value (history) intersects a transcendent value (Providence),18 Black situates this intersection in the romance, somewhere between ‘myth and history, tradition and modernity, epic and novel, long time and local time’. ‘The romance’,
he explains, ‘doesn’t resolve into one or another of these poles but rather hovers halfway between them, mediating, exploring, and indeed enabling their interactions’ (35). This mediation is most clearly found in the love story, convincingly restored by Black to the centre of the work, muff and all: ‘the novel thereby fulfils its generic profile as a romance, self-consciously positioned at the seam of critique and faith. Neither idolatry nor iconoclasm, romance sponsors a pleasurable weak assent to the salience of love’ (37). Put another way, by encouraging readers to desire the union of Tom and Sophia, Fielding makes certain that they do not have to choose between myth and history, ultimately an untenable choice to all but fantasists and materialists (neither of which would seem to be attentive readers). As with Sterne, contextualising Fielding’s bawdry in no way erases it; indeed, the better understanding of Fielding’s genius comes precisely when every pleat and fold of Sophia’s muff is accounted for, without the tut-tutting of tartuffes on the one hand, the sceptical (or ideological) dismissal of aesthetic and ethical choices on the other.

Finally, in any discussion of eighteenth-century bawdry, who could exclude Richardson? Or rather, most might opine, how can we include him? Clearly, however, Fielding’s simplistic reading of Pamela (like Butler’s of Tom Jones) suggests how easy it is to be an inattentive reader. Shamela’s success as a bawdy exercise comes in large part because we read the author’s clever inventiveness in the context of the work he is parodying; without that context, it would be, I believe, just another tale for a collection of bawdry. Richardson was, in truth, as aware as Fielding and Sterne of the necessity of melding body and spirit when representing with accuracy the meaning of being human. There are many inattentive readings of Richardson, but perhaps I can conclude my argument here by offering an over-attentive one instead. In volume III, letter 18, of Sir Charles Grandison a conversation takes place primarily between Sir Charles and his younger sister, Charlotte, a pert young woman much like Clarissa’s Miss Howe. Questioning her about her feelings toward two suitors, he finally loses patience and asks for a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ response, to which Charlotte replies: ‘Would you have my poor Lord rejected by a slighting monosyllable only’? Her sister then exclaims ‘Mad girl’, to which she retorts: ‘Why, Lady L. don’t you see that Sir Charles wants to take me by implication’?19 Perhaps only a reader of Sterne would take note, but monosyllable has a hoary history as bawdiness20; and the Latin implico (‘enfold, embrace, join’ with the idea of intimate connection) allows Sterne almost certainly to play on implication in III.10.198: ‘[knots] made by the duplication and return of the two ends of the strings through the annulus or noose made by the second implication of them—to get them slipp’d and undone by----–I hope you apprehend me’. This is, by the way, the same Charlotte who only a few pages earlier told Sir Charles that his word ‘esteem’ is ‘a quaint word, tho’ a female one’

(101). What is one to make of monosyllable, implication and quaint all spoken by a pert young woman within half a dozen pages. Perhaps nothing, but I would like to suggest that our suspiciousness in this instance is to Richardson’s credit—surely it would be hard to believe that he (or some of his friends) would be totally ignorant of the connotations associated with these words. Within the context of Richardson’s novel, we would obviously be reluctant to suggest that he shares Fielding’s and Sterne’s delight with bawdiness, but I think we err very much in another direction if we assume such play was beyond him. A strong case can certainly be made that Harriet Byron is as sexually alert as any woman in English literature (against everything she believes is proper, she falls inextricably in love with Sir Charles prior to any indication of reciprocity), and close behind her in feeling the fulness of their bodily, as well as spiritual, existence are Pamela and Clarissa. Indeed, it is the defining characteristic of Richardson’s fiction that he portrays better than Fielding or Sterne the fact that innocence can enjoy the richness of appetite just as fully as experience. It is, in fact, the defining characteristic of his genius that we will never be certain whether or not his monosyllable is innocent. Richardson’s novels are indeterminate not because he failed to close off their meanings, but because his genius for portraying the full meaning of being human did not allow such efforts—his own or those of his readers—to succeed. In this, he shares a world with Fielding and Sterne that attentive readers have long recognised as the world of literary genius, a world worthy of their most attentive discriminations. It is a world we now need to rediscover.

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