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“‘Tis Tris—something”: Fatherhood and Naming in *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy*

Robert A. Erickson

In the Preface to Part I of *Don Quixote*, Miguel de Cervantes, the “I” of the Preface and of the narrative (and whose name appears on the title page) presents himself and his book through a brilliant re-working of two time-worn authorial conventions: the pose of the humble author, and the conceit of the work as the child of the author. Cervantes gives us an unusually rich and detailed initial representation of himself as the elderly, retiring, unimaginative stepfather to a dull, dry, and extravagant production, a man not used to writing books and incapable of imitating the felicities of other authors, an indecisive, unlearned man, lazy about quoting authorities, easily imposed upon and influenced by the clever and lively friend who interrupts the author at the point where “Cervantes” has virtually resolved not to publish the book because of his fear of its bad reception. The friend, who says he has always taken “Cervantes” for a man of sense, is now convinced to the contrary.

But what of this stepson? A more extreme version of the “Cervantes” who has been “*puzzling his Brain*” for a preface, Don Quixote, a lean, old-fashioned gentleman of near 50, “breaks his Brain” to unravel the meaning of his books of romance.¹ If “Cervantes” was extremely “*uneasy*” (xx) about publishing his book (Shelton uses the word “*exstasie*” for the author’s state of mind), Don Quixote goes mad because he allows the books of chivalry literally to take over his imagination: in Motteux-Ozell’s Swiftian rendering, he “*unluckily stumbled upon the oddest Fancy that ever enter’d into a Madman’s Brain*,” namely, to turn knight-errant (4). The hyperbole recalls “Cervantes’” definition of the offspring of his brain as “*extravagant beyond Imagination*” (xix).

Don Quixote must refashion a new identity as a knight-errant, and a large part of the task lies in devising names for his horse, for himself, and for his lady. To borrow a term from Richardson’s *Lovelace* in *Clarissa*, Don Quixote might be called a sonorous “namefather.” Much of his infatuation with the books of chivalry lies in his love of the great, multi-syllabic, resounding names of the knights and their horses. The names themselves are romance. After running through many names which he “*devis’d, rejected, chang’d, lik’d, dislik’d, and pitch’d upon again*,” he finally settles upon Rosinante. Whether he is actually writing or not, Don Quixote is pictured, like “Cervantes” struggling with his preface, in an agony of indecision (it takes him four days to re-name his horse and eight more to re-name himself), but for Don Quixote it is the feverishly pleasurable process of new literary creation.

He sallies forth, but a terrible thought occurs to him: he has not yet been dubbed a knight. He almost staggers in his resolution, and again one is reminded

of the extreme uneasiness of Don Quixote's stepfather. Don Quixote was almost daunted by not having observed "the Laws of Chivalry"; "Cervantes" is almost daunted by his fear of that "*old Legislator, the Vulgar*" (xx), in that he has not followed the usual authorial protocol. Like father like son, both "authors" appear to have a great fear of offending against proper form.

Two other parallels are worth noting between the two. "Cervantes" is prevailed upon to resurrect the great Don Quixote "*buried in the musty Records of La Mancha*" (xxi); Don Quixote's first act as a knight-errant is to rescue his great-grandfather's suit of armor which had been rusting time out of mind in a corner of his house. Don Quixote first transforms himself into the artifact which "Cervantes" unearths. As time goes on, the knight will be imposed upon by his "friends" as was "Cervantes" in his study. But the differences between the two are perhaps even more remarkable.

If the Cervantes of the preface is unimaginative, Don Quixote is all too imaginative. If "Cervantes" is unlearned and reluctant to quote authorities, Don Quixote is overflowing with his chivalric knowledge, always ready to quote an authority from romance. In fact, Don Quixote at times sounds like a sixteenth-century professor of Romance linguistics (in almost every sense of that dual term), if there had indeed been such a creature. He is preoccupied not only with the language of chivalric romance but often with the actual language he hears spoken around him, particularly with correct usage of that language. He not only knows the chief stories of romance but even the most minor ones related by anonymous authors of "no little credit" (93); he knows popular Castilian, and he is quick to correct the diction of the goatherds (68).

Don Quixote soon overcomes his anxiety about being dubbed a knight and at once conjures in his imagination the putative "learned Author" who will eventually give the history of Don Quixote's famous achievements to the world. The knight then composes and recites, as he rides along, the florid epic introduction to himself in the manner he believes such an author would adopt. We may suppose that Don Quixote would generously compose his own history of his exploits as a first draft for this learned author, and he would have no trouble writing a preface to them. He then addresses this imagined author directly as "thou venerable Sage, wise Enchanter, whatever be thy Name; thou whom Fate has ordained to be the Compiler of this rare History" (8). In this one sentence, Don Quixote intuits the two major narrative voices of his exploits: the sage, Cide Hamete Benengeli, the first author, and "Cervantes," the "second Undertaker" or second author, who presents himself as a mere compiler, editor, searcher of the annals of La Mancha for what has been previously recorded about the knight.²

Stepfather and stepson are in each other's presence here, on one side Don Quixote the enthusiastic poet/scribe talking to the shadowy composite figure of sage historian he does not know but venerates, on the other the reluctant and retiring "Cervantes," compiler of the history, uneasy with his strange offspring because he senses, perhaps, so many disturbing similarities to himself. But the point is that the two do not know each other: Don Quixote has no direct knowledge of this "learned Author," and "Cervantes" does not seem to know that he is, in one sense, the very author Don Quixote envisions. It is easy to see that Alonso Quexana re-invents himself as Don Quixote, but he also

invents his own author. Stepfather and stepson are each in a peculiar sense the author of the other, but they are not aware of their intimate relationship — they keep talking past each other. Perhaps the whole thing is out of their hands anyway, for both share a resignation to a larger power which directs their actions: “Cervantes” calls it Nature — “*Nature will have its course*” (xix), and Don Quixote calls it “Fate.”

The knight has one other important confrontation with this learned author in Part I and Sancho Panza plays an important role in it. Sancho, who begins as a nobody and before long takes an active part in directing Don Quixote’s movements, playing into the knight’s obsession in order to serve his master better (and to serve himself), becomes the second namefather to Don Quixote. At the nadir of the knight’s early career (after he has broken the licentiate’s leg in the furious nocturnal charge against the moving lights), Sancho, looking at his master in the flickering light of a torch, takes it upon himself to rechristen Don Quixote as “*The Knight of the woeful Figure*” saying, “May I ne’er stir if e’er I set Eyes on a more dismal Figure in my Born-days” (126). But for Don Quixote nothing could be more propitious than his new name: “the Sage who is commission’d by Fate to register my Atchievements, thought it convenient I should assume a new Appelation, as all the Knights of yore” (126). He embraces his new denomination, then is struck by the fear of being excommunicated for his assault on the priest. As usual, he quickly gets over his discomfiture, but it is clear that Don Quixote puts more faith in the sagacious chronicler of his history who has re-named him by means of the observant Sancho than in the authority of the Holy Father to do him harm.

Cervantes invents his main character and lets all manner of people define him, beginning with Don Quixote himself. Sterne does something different: at the start of his novel he has re-invented and re-christened *himself* as his main character, a first person narrator of a fictional life and opinions. As we have seen, Cervantes’ preface opens with a concern about the problem of literary authority, or more specifically, literary potency. Despite Cervantes’ and Sterne’s differing modes of authorial presentation, however, we shall, if we look a little more closely at Cervantes’ initial self-portrait, see certain affinities with the opening of *Tristram Shandy*.

“Cervantes” wishes that his book would have been the best that could be imagined, but “*Every Production must resemble its Author, and his barren and unpolish’d Understanding can produce nothing but what is very dull, very impertinent, and extravagant beyond Imagination*” (xix). He wishes he could have exposed this “*Offspring of his Brain,*” “*naked as it was born,*” without a preface, for writing it has cost him far more “*Labour*” than did the book itself (xix-xx). The Preface was a hard birth. Very often he would take up his pen, and as often lay it down again. He pictures himself for the reader “*in a very studious Posture,*” with his paper before him, pen in his ear, elbow on the table, cheek in his hand, wondering how he will begin. It is as if he will not be able to write unless he can get into the correct physical posture for doing so. The picture reminds one of Reynolds’s first portrait of Sterne, and of Tristram at his writing table, hazarding a first sentence and “trusting to Almighty God for the second.”³

Let us remember that Cervantes began his literary career as a romance-pastoralist in *La Galatea* (this year marks the 400th anniversary of that work),

and the vision of pastoral, in one way or another, informs nearly all of his subsequent writing. Every writer of pastoral, after Virgil, self-consciously embraces the problem of literary creativity and fulfillment; to put it another way, the writer asks, how is the Muse (or fancy or the imagination) impregnated in order to bring forth a beautiful work? Cervantes was about 57 or 58 when he wrote this preface. Depicting himself as old and imprisoned, he is a pastoral poet who has lost his nourishing surroundings: all the helps that might "impregnate even the most barren of Muses with Conceptions that fill the world with Admiration and Delight," such things as "Rest and ease, a convenient Place, pleasant Fields and Groves, murmuring Springs and a sweet Repose of Mind," are now absent for him. But he will not make the mistake of some fathers of ugly or unattractive children. He will not blind himself to the faults of his book, or implore his reader to pardon the defects of this child of his brain. He may have his faults as an author, but willful self-deception is not one of them.

Tristram Shandy's story too opens with a concern about the problem of begetting, this time actual human procreation, but now instead of the figurative father worrying about his figurative son, the son worries about his parents in a tone rich with yearning: "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" (4). Hence we have in the opening of *Tristram Shandy* the frustration we sense in the preface to *Don Quixote*, the earnest and imploring tone of, if only circumstances had been otherwise, this book, or this title character, would have been better, and we have the same concern with procreation, one a literary concern, the other a literal one. Both authors also share a sense of inevitable causality: in "Cervantes'" case, Nature will have its course; for Tristram, the "animal spirits . . . are transfused from father to son" (4) and once set going they take their unalterable course. Both authors compliment their readers, "Cervantes" on their independence, Sterne on their medical knowledge, and both introduce a fictional reader into the opening scene, "Cervantes" his lively friend, Sterne the sceptical "Sir" who asks what Tristram's father was saying.

Cervantes and Sterne, despite the century and a half that separates them, share traditional notions of physiology. Both would be aware that medical lore regarding human procreation assigned the father the most important role in dictating the nature and character of the offspring at the time of conception, and both knew about the fundamental or natural heat and moisture of the body necessary for sustaining life. "Cervantes," the graying stepfather, is afraid he will be accused of authoring a "*dry, insipid Legend*" (xx), and Don Quixote the stepson is born out of dehydration: "by sleeping little, and reading much, the Moisture of his Brain was exhausted to that Degree, that at last he lost the use of his Reason" (3). Walter Shandy, the patriarch of the Shandy family, worries a great deal about the "radical moisture." In one flight of fancy he wishes he could procure beautiful women in order for his brother Toby to propagate replicas of his gentle self if only the "gymnicks," or physical exertions involved would not, as he tells his brother, "impair thy strength — or dry up thy radical moisture too fast" (586), and Walter himself will come to bewail the fact that his son was "produced into being in the decline of thy father's days — when the powers of his imagination and of his body were waxing feeble — when

radical heat and radical moisture . . . were drying up" (296).

The stepfather-author "Cervantes" is dry and sterile; Walter Shandy, the father of Tristram, is a man advanced in years when Tristram is conceived and more important, besieged by doubts about his own potency and virility. Tristram is his father's son and "my father" is also the creation of Tristram. Like stepfather "Cervantes" with his strange offspring, Shandy *père et fils* co-exist in a mutual act of "creation" in the novel, but this mutuality has the distressing effect, as was apparent in *Don Quixote*, of seeming to hold one from the other in perpetual estrangement. Despite their conventional awareness of the father's formative role in procreation, however, both Cervantes and Sterne evoke, in similar ways and at a deeper level, a more ancient and primitive notion about fatherhood: the idea, or perhaps better the anxiety or mood, that the father really knows nothing at all about his role in creation and has no control whatsoever over the formation and development of the child: How did it happen anyway? Who is this creature?

We saw that "Cervantes" and Don Quixote are both depicted as being overwhelmingly concerned about following proper procedures for their respective vocations of authoring and knight-errantry, and Walter Shandy is no less concerned about decorum in the matter of fathering. We may recall three of Walter's pet theories with respect to producing a mentally superior and successful child into the world. There is first of all, in Walter's words, "the due care to be taken in the act of propagation of each individual, which required all the thought in the world as it laid the foundation of this incomprehensible contexture in which wit, memory, fancy, eloquence, and what is usually meant by the name of good natural parts, do consist" (149).⁴ The second of Walter's theories emphasized the preservation of the cerebellum in the birth labor. And the third stressed the importance of giving the child a good Christian name. Tristram says that his father believed that "there was a strange kind of bias, which good or bad names, as he called them, irresistibly impress'd upon our characters and conduct. The hero of *Cervantes* argued not the point with more seriousness — nor had he more faith — or more to say . . . on *Dulcinea's* name, in shedding lustre upon his deeds, than my father had on those of *Trismegistus* or *Archimedes*" (50). Of all the names in the universe, as everyone knows, Walter had "the most unconquerable aversion for Tristram . . . it could possibly produce nothing in *rerum natura* but what was extremely mean and pitiful" (55). Walter had even written a dissertation upon the word Tristram two years before his son was born showing his abhorrence of the name.

Now the "melancholy disyllable" of Tristram, or "triste," emerges in three different contexts which concern us here. There is first the motto attributed to Aristotle and quoted by Walter in his discussion of "the due contention betwixt the radical heat and radical moisture within us . . . *Quod animal post coitum est triste*" (397). The next occurs in the discussion of Sancho's re-naming of Don Quixote as the "Knight of the woeful Figure." The original Spanish is "caballero de la triste figura," a phrase Sterne may have been aware of. And finally, it is possible that the "small hero" of Sterne's "obstetrical romance" (as it has been called) may be named after Sir Tristrams de Lyoness in Book Eight of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, especially considering that Sir Tristrams' delivery deep in a cold forest causes the death of his mother, and her last words are a solemn

charge to her lord that “whan he is crystened let calle him Trystrams, that is as muche to say as a sorowfull byrth.” And the king “lette call hym Trystrams, the sorowfull-born chylde.”⁵ Hence both of Sir Tristrams’ parents join in so naming him. We know that Walter Shandy was shattered when he learned that his child’s nose was crushed in Dr. Slop’s bungled forceps delivery. Hoping to make amends, Walter decided to take the risk of naming his son “Trismegistus,” even though the sorrowful-born child was by this time as black as the servant Susannah’s shoe, and the name might thus be wasted. “Canst thou carry *Trismegistus* in thy head the length of the gallery without scattering,” Walter says to Susannah, unconsciously recalling the scattering of the seed in Tristram’s conception. Before Walter can get his breeches on,

Susannah got the start, and kept it’—Tis *Tris*—something, cried *Susannah*—here is no christian name in the world, said the curate, beginning with *Tris*—but *Tristram*. Then ’tis *Tristram-gistus*, quoth *Susannah*.

There is no *gistus* to it, noodle!—’tis my own name, replied the curate, dipping his hand as he spoke into the bason—*Tristram!* said, he, &c. &c. &c. &c. so *Tristram* was I called, and *Tristram* shall I be to the day of my death (287-88).

The curate thus becomes Tristram’s true namefather and Walter Shandy’s “Lamentation” over his “Unhappy Tristram! child of wrath! child of decrepitude! interruption! mistake! and discontent!” (296) is different only in degree from “Cervantes”’ initial apology for his own “Child of Disturbance” (xix).

NOTES

1. Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (New York: Random House, 1930), pp. xx and 2. Hereafter page references to *Don Quixote* are in the text, and all references are to this edition, which reprints John Ozell’s revision of the translation authorized by Peter Motteux. It is fairly certain that Sterne knew Thomas Shelton’s translation of Part I of *Don Quixote*, 1612, and the Motteux-Ozell translation of 1719. Of eighteenth-century translations, Motteux-Ozell might be considered the Juvenalian counterpart to Charles Jervas’s more urbane and Horatian version of 1642, the one which Fielding used and which Sterne may also have known.

2. The “second Undertaker” is, in fact, almost as obsessed with his mission of recovering the real *Don Quixote* as Don Quixote is with recovering and re-enacting the virtues of chivalric knights. Each is obsessed with the recorded remains of his subject. The compiler, “Cervantes,” is represented as a true believer in Don Quixote in contrast to Cide Hamete, whom the compiler regards, early on, as a lying enemy, malicious, and stingy with his praise of the knight.

3. Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. James Aiken Work (New York: Odyssey Press), p. 540. Hereafter page references are in the text.

4. The midwife books of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are our most explicit guides to the proper manner of male and female comportment in the act of sexual propagation. See especially the full and detailed instructions for a successful “Act of Coition” in John Maubray’s *The Female Physician* (London, 1724), pp. 54-55, and Aristotle’s *Compleat Master Piece* (London, 1750), pp. 50-51, a work to which Sterne alludes (*Tristram Shandy*, p. 102). For a further discussion of Walter Shandy’s procreative dilemma, see Robert A. Erickson, *Mother Midnight: Birth, Sex, and Fate in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, forthcoming from AMS Press, 1986.

5. *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugene Vinaver (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 277-78.