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Genealogical Traits in *Tristram Shandy* and *She Stoops to Conquer*

The principle known as *inheritance of acquired characteristics* – speculated by both ancient philosophers, such as Aristotle, and scientists, such as the 18th century’s Jean-Baptiste Lamarck – is defined as an evolutionary theory that “holds that evolution takes place because organisms pass on ‘acquired characteristics’ to their offspring,” extending beyond even physical adaptations (Rensma 259). Although the theory cannot be scientifically proven to promise complete accuracy, many important characters of 18th century English literature can be argued to be the embodiment of this belief. Both Lawrence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* – with Walter and son Tristram Shandy both partaking in lengthy, unimportant discussions while avoiding expressing human emotions in the typical fashion and having an obsession with reproduction and anatomy and their connection to success in life – and Oliver Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer, or the Mistakes of a Night* – with Kate Hardcastle, Tony Lumpkin, and Mrs. Hardcastle each using guile to achieve dominance over those around them and each desiring to live in a world that opposes the wishes of Mr. Hardcastle – epitomize a branch off of inheritance of acquired characteristics: psychological Lamarckism.

The theory of physiological inheritance of acquired characteristics, or physiological Lamarckism, was disputed when more evidentiary support established

Darwin's theory of evolution as the most accurate for scientific standards.

Psychoanalyst Carl Jung took the notion of the theory and described what some consider to be psychological Lamarckism: the theory that offspring inherit pieces of their parental figures' psyches as a part of evolutionary adaptation. Sigmund Freud also used this theory in his work, stating that Oedipus received memories of shame and guilt passed down from someone early in his family lineage; these memories were then passed from generation to generation until activated in the cerebellum of Oedipus. Freud's theory goes on to say that the population of the world today also inherited this memory but chooses to repress it (Rensma 262-263). So, according to the definition of psychological Lamarckism, parents can pass down thoughts, memories, attitudes, and beliefs to their children through genetics.

In Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Walter Shandy, the father figure, is described as an irritable man of "acute sensibilities" who uses knowledge he has acquired from his collection of books to take part in long-winded discussions about subject matter that has little significance in the moment ("Tristram Shandy" 1). Walter is further described as "an impractical theorizer far detached from the realities of human need" (Darby 72). For example, upon being informed of his son Bobby's death, Mr. Shandy proceeds to have a philosophical sharing of ideas with those around him using notable sayings from popular thinkers that revolve around death, while never actually dealing with the fact that his son is dead (Sterne 247). Tristram describes his father's reaction to the death of Bobby as a subject he deems "deserves a chapter to itself," which it does indeed receive in order for Tristram to explain that the typical catharsis that occurs during the loss of a

loved one was not present at this time of mourning for Mr. Shandy: “he neither wept it away... or slept it off... or hang’d it... or drowned it... nor did he curse it, or damn it, or excommunicate it, or rhyme it, or lillabullero it,” choosing instead to simply “[get] rid of it” (Sterne 246). Although, typically, a philosophical debate on death might have proven to be an interesting topic of conversation at a more appropriate time, Mr. Shandy chooses to take this route to express his emotions rather than the typical grieving scene the reader would expect (Sterne 246-249). However, this style of expression through an intense discussion of contextually trivial information is exactly what a psychological Lamarckism scholar would expect of the man that sired the narrator of the story: Tristram.

Sterne’s title character and narrator uses digressions as a tool, even in the midst of an important action or discussion, to move the reader around the bends of Tristram’s opinions and life, a tool that makes up most of the novel. In fact, Sterne even writes in volume I, “Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine; – they are the life, the soul of reading; – take them out of this book for instance, – you might as well take the book along with them” (Sterne 52). The account of Walter Shandy’s reaction to the death of Bobby Shandy was interrupted by a story that Tristram sarcastically asks the reader’s permission to “squeeze in ... between the next two pages,” something that Tristram, or Sterne, does accomplish (Sterne 246-247). Scholar James Kim claims, “Tristram's ironic jabs at his father's hyper-rationality are deliciously mixed with an oddly touching kind of self-pity” (Kim 11). The irony occurs in the very style with which Tristram narrates the novel; for example, when Tristram is relating the story of miscommunication

between Walter, Mrs. Shandy, and Uncle Toby, he interrupts himself to begin a chapter that basically attempts to convey Tristram's playing of an instrument. Shandy justifies this by making the statement that his novel would only be a farce if "every one's life and opinions are to be looked upon as a farce as well as [his]." This statement displays that he does not necessarily begrudge his father for Walter's lack of normalcy in the way he expresses his thoughts, opinions, and emotions because Tristram himself expresses himself in a unique way (Sterne 260). As far as expressing his emotions, one instance in which Tristram articulates his emotions toward something in a unique "Shandy" way is the death of Yorick at the end of Chapter XII in Volume I, where he leaves a black page as his mourning song, a gesture of which no scholar from that century or the present one has been able to discern the *exact* meaning (Sterne 23-24). Both Walter and Tristram express themselves in unique ways that can be confusing and exhausting to the readers of the 18th century as well as readers of today.

Along with their long-windedness, both Walter and Tristram take an interest in the medical field, especially where the male genitalia and its effect on success in life are concerned. Studies have shown that, in the 18th century, medicalization and reproduction technology seized the interest of many of the men of the time. Reproduction, childbirth, and childcare were the main topics of medical discussion, and the concept of acquiring knowledge in these fields became a sign of masculinity during the period; therefore, many men partook in trying to understand these medical components, with Walter Shandy being no exception (Bailey 272). Walter, with his work on the *Tristrapaedia*, begins a "mad and endless search for medical knowledge" because

he fears that damage to Tristram's physical body, be it during his birth or throughout his childhood, will cause future problems with Tristram's ability to be successful. (Darby 75; Kim 17). Walter is an exaggerated representation of the first half of the 18th century, illustrating England's focus on growing the population in order to sustain the nation's economy and military, allowing for success in affairs both foreign and domestic (Bailey 28).

Walter is not the only character concerned for the physical well being of Tristram while also fearing that Tristram's life will be unsuccessful. Tristram himself believes his physical imperfections have led to the life he currently lives. The opening of the novel begins with Tristram's account of his conception: the event that leads to the series of unfortunate events tailoring his life. Both Tristram and Walter continue to blame different circumstances in Tristram's life as omens that Tristram will be a failure: from his unfortunate conception and his flattened nose to being given the wrong name and the dreaded moment of the dropped window-sash. Medically, these are not life threatening events, but as Walter and Tristram are both "forever treating small, trifling events ... with all the circumstantial pomp of great ones," the entirety of the situation is blown out of proportion. (Kim 17). The window-sash incident, for example, was just a blow to young Tristram's male genitalia and probably warranted intense pain but not the reaction that the incident received from the rest of the household, who immediately acted like his entire member had been severed from his body altogether (Sterne 264). When Walter receives the information and looks at the results for himself, he immediately sets out to find justification by searching the *Tristrapaedia* to make sure that

circumcision could be justified by the ancient civilizations or important religious structures and, therefore, would not harm Tristram's life in a superstitious way (Sterne 269-271). Walter's concern is not necessarily for the physical well being of his son but instead for the perception of circumcision the great thinkers have. Tristram, too, connects the reproductive organ to success and happiness because in the novel:

Tristram's subsequent melancholy and impotence are thus shown to have their origin not only in the unfortunate circumstances of his conception and birth, nor only in this father's obsession with subduing the male generative function, but also in the injury to his male genitalia, analogous to circumcision, caused by the falling window and his parents' failure to attend promptly to the wound. (Darby 81)

Tristram fully believes that these incidents drove him down a miserable path.

Another 18th century work that details assets of the parent's psyche being inherited in the offspring is Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, the particular characters being Mrs. Hardcastle and her children by two different men, Kate Hardcastle and Tony Lumpkin. Some say that Mrs. Hardcastle is actually Kate's stepmother and not her real mother since the play does not specifically state whether or not Kate is the biological daughter of Mrs. Hardcastle because the women are never explicitly stated as related in the play (Evans 61). However, working under the umbrella of psychological Lamarckism, Kate Hardcastle's characteristics match up with those of both Mrs. Dorothy Hardcastle and Tony, making the argument that Kate belongs to Dorothy the only plausible explanation. Some argue that *She Stoops to Conquer* does not have one

central protagonist, with the story's action being propelled forward by the antics of both Kate and Tony, each using their cleverness to reach a personal end. Both siblings are cunning, something which they each picked up from their mother, who, in the end, is revealed to have hidden the legal age to acquire her family's jewels from everyone but her husband, leaving everyone to believe that Tony and Miss Constance Neville had no control over the jewels even when they legally did.

While Mrs. Hardcastle uses her guile to maintain control of the jewels for as long as she does and, by consequence, to remain in control of the lives of Tony, Miss Neville, and Mr. Hastings, Kate uses her guile to disguise herself in order to achieve dominance over Mr. Marlow. Dominance, in this case, refers to having knowledge that the other does not have and using that information to manipulate the lesser party in the relationship. In order for Marlow to reveal his real self to Kate, Kate must take matters into her own hands to "see her terms enforced--terms of virtue and honesty-- and do so primarily in the guise of a 'poor relation' in order to reform the rake in Marlow who would prey on a woman of the lower class" (Brooks 38-39). In the same way that Kate's "avaricious mother ... attempt[s] to manipulate her son and Constance Neville, Mrs. Hardcastle's charge, into accepting submissive roles," Kate manipulates Marlow when she takes on the roll of a lower class woman, a woman of a submissive class, in order to gain dominance over Marlow who, all the while, believes himself to be of the dominant class (Brooks 39). This could be a critique by Goldsmith of the social class structure of the 18th century, stating that intelligence and wit are the real qualifiers of dominance rather than class placement.

Tony Lumpkin asserts his guile when he sets the plot of the story into motion by being quite a “damned mischievous son of a whore” and manipulating Mr. Hastings and Mr. Marlow into believing that the Hardcastle home is actually an inn (Goldsmith 10). Tony could have accomplished this act merely for his own enjoyment or as an attack on the society that he openly abhors. However, when he assists Mr. Hastings and Constance in his plan to allow them passage out of the Hardcastle home, unnoticed and with the family jewels, proving that he is actually “a more good-natur’d fellow than you thought,” (Goldsmith 48) Tony is using his guile to assert dominance over his mother, who has babied him and constricted him by forcing a marriage to Constance when he has no desire to do so (Evans 59). When the plan succeeds, he wins out over his mother, thus becoming her “undutiful offspring” as the play and his mother’s dominion come to an end (Goldsmith 59).

While Mr. Hardcastle does not hold the dominion that Mrs. Hardcastle does, he still attempts to keep his family within his social boundaries: preventing Mrs. Hardcastle from venturing to the city, stopping Kate from dressing as a lady of power, and wanting Tony to act how a member of their social class ought to act. While Mrs. Hardcastle longs for the life of the city with all the jewels and gossip that comes with it, Mr. Hardcastle prefers the simple life of the town, showing the 18th century argument of the town atmosphere versus the city atmosphere. Kate would also like to be a part of the city life, illustrated in the agreement she has with her father that she will wear her country dresses in the afternoon only if she may dress as fancily as she likes in the morning. She also disagrees with her father on the elements of a lover that are most

important: she argues passion over modesty, and he argues vice versa. Tony, on the other hand, does not even attempt to play the role encouraged of him by his stepfather. In *She Stoops to Conquer*, Tony represents "an unrefined male deficient in the politeness expected of upper-class masculinity" (Evans 59). So, he is unable to conform to Mr. Hardcastle's wishes that he trade out alcohol for education and the low for the refined. While Mrs. Hardcastle's disagreements with Mr. Hardcastle can be contributed to expected married-couple qualms, Kate's and Tony's disagreements could be because "children have every right to resist, and to use every method their own prudence can suggest to get out of their parent's power; in short, to disclaim an authority which is made use of, not according to its true end" in order to become who they are as people (Brooks 43). However, one cannot overlook that all three of these central characters would rather participate in a world contrary to the one in which they dwell, the world of Mr. Hardcastle, which is yet another way Goldsmith challenges the society of the time period.

Both Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* illustrate genealogical traits passed from the parents of each work to the children. However, not just any traits are being passed down. In each work, the most overarching components of the parental figures' psyches are the traits that are passed: Mr. Shandy's tedious pattern of discussion and superstitious obsession with medicalization and Mrs. Hardcastle's guileful dominance and longing for a different relation with society than the one she currently has. While physiological Lamarckism may not have scientific

proof, one can find evidentiary support for psychological Lamarckism within these two 18th century English literary masterpieces.

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