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Essay 2

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Early Metafiction: An Examination of *Joseph Andrews* and *Tristram Shandy*

Metafiction is a term most commonly associated with postmodernist writers of the early twentieth century. Interestingly, however, is the existence of two anomalous novels from the eighteenth century, *Joseph Andrews* and *Tristram Shandy*. Both of which encompass elements that are arguably metafictional in nature. The following paper will examine these elements of metafiction in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tristram Shandy*. Through this examination, I will explore the meaning of metafiction and argue that *Joseph Andrews* and *Tristram Shandy* are early examples of metafictional novels based on their metafictional elements.

In pursuit of developing a working definition of metafiction, it is necessary to divulge critical opinions of its meaning. The first iteration of this definition relies on contrasting the ‘anti-novel’ with the metafictional novel. Larry McCaffery conceptualizes the ‘anti-novel’ as “any work of fiction whose intentions include some sort of defiance of the current norms of fiction” and that it “occurs whenever the novel loses faith in itself, becomes critical and self-critical, wishes to break with the established norms of the medium… Tristram Shandy would be an obvious example (McCaffery 181-182). Incidentally, *Joseph Andrews* also fits this bill. Yet, these novels certainly exceed the designation of mere anti-novels. In plain English, ‘metafiction’ denotes what can be contrived as a fiction of fiction. Or, as McCaffery “argues that metafictions derive from 'meta-theorems' being developed in the 1970s in other disciplines which seek to contrive [sic] 'lingoes to converse about lingoes'” (Currie 181). Taken at face value, McCaffery’s sentiments on the ‘anti-novel’ and his position in ‘metafiction’s’ era of manifestation would lead to the possibility that, given the historical context of *Tristram Shandy* and *Joseph Andrews*, neither of which could be metafictional novels, but rather, anti-novels. This would be a shallow branding of the two novels in question for, a broader survey of metafiction will certainly illustrate that *Joseph Andrews* and *Tristram Shandy* do not only contain metafictional elements, but are truly metafictional novels themselves.

Though McCaffery’s conceptualization of the ‘anti-novel’ presents itself as distinct from metafiction, his conceptualization of metafiction certainly encompasses aspects of anti-novels. As McCaffery declares, “many of the things we can say about the anti-novelist will apply to the metafictionist” and “Metafiction resembles anti-novels of the past, for example, in tending to appear unconventional and experimental except in instances when it relies on familiar conventions for parodic purposes” (182). Here, metafiction and anti-novels are similar if not the same, yet he goes on to distinguish between the two, asserting that “the defining characteristic of metafiction, however, is its direct and immediate concern with fiction-making itself (McCaffery 182). McCaffery’s definition of metafiction also notes that “metafictions often present themselves as biographies of imaginary writers” (183). The important aspects of McCaffery’s definition of metafiction are that it 1) tends to appear unconventional and experimental except in instances when it relies on familiar conventions for parodic purposes such as an anti-novel 2) is distinct from an anti-novel in that it is directly and immediately concerned with fiction making itself and 3) is often presented as a biography of an imaginary writer. For now, this is will serve as a narrow definition of a metafictional novel.

In servitude of flushing out this narrow definition of metafiction, it is prudent to explore the symptoms of metafiction. The work of Gerald Prince in “Metanarrative Signs” indicates that the symptoms of metafiction or metanarrative signs are “inherent features of narrative in general” (Currie 55). Further, he argues that these features act as a codex for readers that “do not only tell us how we read – they also specify the distance between a text's self-commentary (as an appropriation of reading) and the reading process of a given reader, reminding us that a text can never fully appropriate reading (Currie 55). Adding this to the aforementioned narrow definition of ‘metafiction’ asserts that 4) metafiction describes narrational features that tell the reader how to read while making a clear distinction between self-conscious text and the experience of reading itself.

A final addition to this working definition ought to manifest something with which an examination might take place. As previously hinted, ‘metafiction’ has not entered the critical atmosphere of literature until the 1970’s with scholars such as McCaffery and Robert Scholes. Scholes, notes that metafiction is “a border-line between fiction and criticism” (Currie 21). In his essay entitled “Metafiction”, Scholes first establishes that there are four aspects of fiction: “fiction of forms, ideas, existence and essence) which correspond to four critical perspectives on fiction (formal, structural, behavioral, and philosophical) in the sense that each critical perspective is the most appropriate response to the four aspects of fiction” (Currie 21). This serves as the basis for his claim that, “because metafiction 'assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself', this scheme offers a model for the typology of metafictions, so that four distinct directions in metafiction can be understood to pertain to these four aspects of both fiction and criticism” (Currie 21). In other words, given that there are four aspects of fiction that correspond to critical perspectives on fiction, and that metafiction assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself, there is a direct, codependent relationship between criticism, metafiction, and fiction.

Taking into account these characteristics of metafiction, the metafictional novel: 1) appears unconventional and experimental except when relying on familiar conventions for parodic purposes, 2) is directly and immediately concerned with fiction making itself, 3) often appears as a biography of an imaginary writer, 4) describes narrational features that tell the reader how to read while making a clear distinction between self-conscious text and the experience of reading itself, 5) is also a work of criticism and fiction.

The following section will expose the metafictional elements in Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* and how it fits the above definition of a metafictional novel. The aspects of *Joseph Andrews* that elicit themselves as metafictional appear in the form of narrative framework. That is, the metafictional elements in this novel occur in a pattern to encapsulate the narrative. Perhaps the best example of this framework is Fielding’s preface:

As it is possible the mere *English* Reader may have a different Idea Romance with the Author of these little Volumes; and may consequently expect a kind of Entertainment, not to be found, nor which was even intended, in the following Pages; it may not be improper to premise a few Words concerning this kind of Writing, which I do not remember to have seen hitherto attempted in our Language (Fielding 2).

Here, Fielding sets precedence for a novel of experimental nature that will challenge the reader’s preconceptions of reading itself. The preface is thus largely concerned with presenting overview of fictional works for the purpose of differentiating them from the upcoming novel. Fielding summarizes this point here:

Having thus distinguished *Joseph Andrews* from the productions of Romance Writers on the one hand, and Burlesque Writers on the other, and given some very short Hints (for I intend no more) of this Species of writing, which I have affirmed to be hitherto unattempted in our Language (Fielding 8).

Moreover, this signifies the experimental and unconventional qualities of the novel. Drawing on the aforementioned definition of a metafictional novel, the preface of *Joseph Andrews* demonstrates a metafictional cue due to these qualities.

In addition to the preface, the first chapter of *Joseph Andrews* serves to function as a narrative framing device with metafictional elements. The novel begins with an emphasis on how “a good man is a standing lesson to all his acquaintance, and of far greater use in that narrow circle than a good Book” (Fielding 15). Only to then posit that “the best Men are but little known, and consequently cannot extend the Usefulness of the Examples a great way” (Fielding 15). Thus, “the Writer may be called in aid to spread their History farther, and to present the amiable Pictures to those who have not the Happiness of knowing the Originals; and so, by communicating such valuable Patterns to the World, he may perhaps do a more extensive Service to Mankind than the Person whose Life originally afforded the Pattern” (Fielding 15). Already, this unconventional introduction hints that *Joseph Andrews* is in part concerned with the production of fiction. This can be attributed to the narrator’s acknowledgement of the writer’s purpose. Moreover, this provides precedence for the third aspect of a metafictional novel (often appears as a biography of an imaginary writer). The narrator’s concern with the production of fiction is furthered by the their subsequent remarks on the existing work, *Pamela*. In these remarks, the narrator claims that the forthcoming novel is a “true history” and that its protagonist has a function. That is to “preserve his purity in the midst of such great temptations” and “[give] himself for the sake of giving the Example to his Readers” (Fielding 16). Since it is the narrator that divulges this functionality of the novel, these elements manifest the second quality of a metafictional novel in *Joseph Andrews*: it is concerned with fiction making itself.

Incidentally, the preface and first chapter of *Joseph Andrews* also contain indications of the fourth and fifth points of the working metafiction definition. The fifth point of the definition is echoed by Fielding’s remarks in the preface that criticize other fictional genres while arguing that *Joseph Andrews* does not fit any of them (Fielding 3-9). Likewise, the first chapter of the novel is critical of *Pamela*, declaring that the “authentic history” ahead “is an Instance of the great Good that Book is likely to do” (Fielding 16). By declaring that the novel ahead is an “authentic history”, the narrator effectively appoints themselves into the position of an imaginary writer, indicating that point three of the definition has been fulfilled. Point five of the definition is exercised as the criticism here is present through the narrator’s satirical tone signaled by the false claim of “authentic history”. Another demonstration of criticism in *Joseph Andrews* is found in Book III, Chapter one where the narrator divulges a lengthy assessment of biography which is then applied to the ongoing narrative (Fielding 162-166).

The fourth aspect of the metafictional novel (it describes narrational features that tell the reader how to read while making a clear distinction between self-conscious text and the experience of reading itself) is catalyzed by Fielding’s narrative framework in the novel’s preface and first chapter. The narrator tells the reader how to read by making assumptions of the reader such as, “The Reader I believe, already conjectures…” and “What the Female Readers are taught by the Memoirs of Mrs. Andrews is so well set forth in the excellent Essays or Letters prefixed to the second and subsequent editions of that work…” (Fielding 16). These cues are maintained throughout the novel where the reader is often referred to as “the sagacious Reader” (Fielding). *Joseph Andrews* makes a clear distinction between self-conscious text and the experience of reading itself by employing these cues as part of its narrative framework. Chapter one of Book II is an excellent example of this where the narrator emphasizes the virtues of a “slower more accurate reader”. The chapter then concludes with the narrator’s self-conscious remarks and a distinction between them and the experience of reading itself:

And now having now indulged myself a little, I will endeavor to indulge the Curiosity of my Reader, who is no doubt impatient to know what he will find in the subsequent Chapters of this Book (Fielding 78).

The distinction between self-conscious text and the experience of reading is illustrated by the narrator’s attention moving from themselves to the reader and their possible impatience with the narrator’s digression.

Taking the aforementioned elements of metafiction from *Joseph Andrews* into account, the novel certainly fits the working definition of a metafictional novel on all five counts. The following section will apply a similar analysis with *Tristram Shandy*.

With a clear idea of the metafictional qualities present in *Joseph Andrews*, and how they manifest authority in the narrator, this section will perform the same examination with *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne’s novel is most certainly an example of unconventional and experimental style. Jayne Lewis remarks on these qualities of the novel, stating, “In its own day, *Tristram Shandy* was often regarded as a raunchy anomaly, and most Victorians failed to appreciate it at all” (21). She further notes that the anomalous nature of Sterne’s narrative, “disrupt our habits of thinking developmentally, or even chronologically, about both personal and literary history (Lewis 22). Thus, *Tristram Shandy* fulfills part of the first requirement of being a metafictional novel by appearing unconventional and experimental. In turn, the novel also features familiar conventions that are parodic in nature. Jeffery Williams provides insight to this phenomenon, stating, “*Tristram Shandy* maximally thematizes the complex of relations of narrativity, foregrounding the levels and the hierarchy of levels of narrative representation, and the tension between the locutionary and performative status of literary narrative” (5). In other words, *Tristram Shandy*’s narrative architecture is held together by tension between familiar conventions and narrational elements that parody those same conventions. This is most evident in Tristram’s constant digressions that engage the reader as to the purpose of said digressions. Here is an example from volume one:

As the reader (for I hate your ifs) has a thorough knowledge of human nature, I need not say more to satisfy him, that my Hero could not go on at this rate without some slight experience of these incidental mementos (Sterne 26).

Here Tristram presents a parodic statement following conventional narrative, thus attaining the first requirement for the novel’s metafictional status.

Tristram is also concerned with fiction making itself (point 2). This can be attributed to his self-conscious references to producing the narrative of the novel. For instance, Chapter XI of volume seven functions purely as a transition where Tristram proclaims, “WHAT a vast advantage is travelling! only it heats one; but there is a remedy for that, which you may pick out of the next chapter” (Sterne 443). Here, Tristram acknowledges that travelling is advantageous to narration insofar as it provides a means for moving between story arcs. A similar instance of this occurs in the ninth volume, chapter fifteen:

THE fifteenth chapter is come at last; and brings nothing with it but a sad signature of “How our pleasures slip from THE fifteenth chapter is come at last; and brings nothing with it but a sad signature of “How our pleasures slip from under us in this world;” For in talking of my digression——I declare before heaven I have made it! What a strange creature is mortal man! said she. ’Tis very true, said I——but ’twere better to get all these things out of our heads, and return to my uncle Toby (Sterne 563).

By calling the reader’s attention to how he purposefully digresses, followed by transitioning to a new chapter, Tristram signifies certain concern with how fiction is made. That is, how the fiction of the ongoing narrative is made.

The third point of the working metafictional novel definition is quite obviously present in *Tristram Shandy* as the narrator, Tristram is completely fictional. Williams offers some insight here, as he states, “*Tristram Shandy*, at least on one significant level, comprises a relatively simple historical novel that explicitly features the act of Tristram’s writing” (2). Unsurprisingly, Tristram’s position as narrator factors into points four and five of the metafictional novel definition. Tristram provides the narrational features that tell the reader how to read. An example of this occurs in volume nine, chapter twenty-five where Tristram instructs the reader, “WHEN we have got to the end of this chapter (but not before) we must all turn back to the two blank chapters…” (Sterne 575). Additionally, these features make clear distinctions between self-conscious text and the reading experience by switching between addressing the reader and narrating the unfolding story. An example of this occurs in volume one, chapter four when Tristram declares that the following narrative in the chapter is “wrote only for the curious and inquisitive” and then instructing the reader to “Shut the door” (Sterne 8). Thus, Tristram is making a distinction between self-conscious text from the experience of reading. Where the self-conscious note of who the text is written for is distinguished from the experience of reading with a shift in tense.

Finally, the work functions as a work of criticism due to its many critical intertextual references. These are peppered throughout the novel, most notably of which occurs in the first volume, chapter eleven when Tristram criticizes Shakespeare’s work for being “founded upon unauthenticated facts” (Sterne 23). Moreover, in chapter nineteen of the same volume, Tristram’s father becomes a vessel for criticism as he is “a philosopher in grain, speculative, systematical…” (Sterne 60). To criticize the figure of the philosopher, Tristram satirizes his philosophical tendencies, calling them “a thousand little sceptical notions of the comick kind to defend…” (Sterne 48-49). It is now very clear, having iterated through each point of a working definition of the metafictional novel, that *Tristram Shandy* fits this very definition.

Having now applied the working definition of a metafictional novel to both *Joseph Andrews* and *Tristram Shandy,* it is clear that despite McCaffery’s assertions about metafiction and their place in history, the two novels are in fact examples of metafictional novels. The metafictional elements that have been highlighted in this are but a few examples that point to this classification. Given a more in-depth investigation of the two novels in their entirety, the findings of this metafictional examination will most likely hold true.

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