

# “Nothing Odd Will Do Long”: The Oddity of Thomas Amory’s *John Buncl* in Relation to *Tristram Shandy*

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Samuel Johnson’s ill-founded judgment on *Tristram Shandy* has not come true, however, had he remarked the same about Thomas Amory’s work, *The Life of John Buncl, Esq.*, it would have fulfilled the prophecy. Writers who claim to invent a new way of writing often meet a lack of comprehension from contemporary critics and audience, yet they might be rediscovered and included among the classics by later centuries. Also, books that are popular at the time of their first publication may soon become forgotten. Besides literary historians, few would guess today that in the 1750’s and 1760’s Eliza Haywood was the third most popular writer in England, ahead of Smollett, Defoe and Richardson and preceded only by Sterne and Fielding. Similarly, very few would have predicted in the 1760’s that Thomas Amory’s works would hardly be read again in the following centuries despite the fact that they were popular among the contemporary audience. Contemporary novel writers and critics did not have that clear sense of generic distinctions as readers do today, or rather, they had a different understanding of the hierarchy of literary forms. Book titles such as the “History of,” “Life and Adventures,” “Memoirs of” and “Life and Opinions” were carelessly and interchangeably used by the frequently anonymous authors and in several biographies it is impossible to draw the line between the historical and the fictional elements (Hunter 343). In the ruthless judgment of the reviewers comic novels always fell behind highly serious works. Contemporary critics judged prose fiction in terms of the neo-classical tradition of epic theory. Le Bossu’s treatise on the epic poem (*Treatise of the Epic Form*, trl. 1695, (by “W.J.”) second ed. 1719) was a popular work in Fielding’s time; it offered rules for judging epic poems according to the fable, action, narration, manners and machines (Thornbury 95-111). Besides the moral framework, fable (plot), manners (characters), and sentiments or “thought” were the main criteria according to which critical reviews and prefaces introduced most fictional works.

Two “lives,” the *The Life of John Buncl, Esq.* (1756 [vol.1], 1766 [vol.2]) and *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* (1759-1767), received similar appreciation and criticism from contemporary review-

ers on the grounds that they were not admitted among the range of "histories" nor the "life and adventures" type because of their odd narrative line. Although truly original, *The Life of John Bunclce* had only a short-lived success, whereas *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.*, also original, proved to be a main source for the modern novel. Sterne's unusual way of presenting his subject matter with a complete disrespect for the conventional writing techniques opened the way to a subtler understanding of the nature of narrative functions such as the temporal implications of narrativity discussed by Paul Ricoeur or the aesthetical-receptionist approaches of Wolfgang Iser. *John Bunclce* also violates contemporary norms of fiction writing but its narrative design failed to become the source for later novelists. "Oddness" often expressed that judgment of the critic that the writer departed from the accepted literary norms either in the line of the narrative or the development of the characters and their sentiments; but it failed to explain the nature of these deviations. John Ferriar, Sterne's contemporary, proposed an interpretation of *Tristram Shandy* different from the retrospective readings of most literary historians who saw a forerunner of the early 20th century novel in Sterne's work; he claimed that Sterne's oddity lay simply in his uncritical copying of sixteenth century ludicrous writings and the peculiarity of the work is Sterne's surprisingly obsolete way of writing.

Amory was also held a wit-writer by his reviewers, whose narrator liked diverting from his story line and talk about his own views on various subjects. Neither *John Bunclce* nor *Tristram Shandy* was discussed among the newly developed novels by John Dunlop in his *History of Prose Fiction* (1814). *Tristram Shandy* is mentioned once in the work, in the introductory part of the first chapter ("Heliodorus and Chariclea"): "Nothing, for instance, can be more irregular than *Tristram Shandy*, and nothing can be more regular than some of the novels of Cumberland; yet no one prefers the novels of Cumberland to the work of Sterne" (Dunlop 23-24). The similar nature of the early responses to the uncommon arrangement of the plot demonstrates that contemporary audience placed both works in the tradition of wit-writing even if *John Bunclce* is extremely unfunny. An analysis of the parallels of narrative design might verify this point; however, it may not prove a sufficient ground for establishing an inherent connection between the two narratives as suggested by literary historians like Ernest Baker or Wayne Booth since in other respects like the oddity of the characters and their sentiments the two works are different. The approach will look at the main principles of narrative design which governed Amory and Sterne, and demonstrate that behind the seeming chaos, the narrator of *John Bunclce* presents a carefully elaborated plan as well, although in a different way. As regards character drawing, in Amory's work characters are not individuals in the sense the members of the Shandy family are; they seem to be the carriers of variegated moral teachings which support Bunclce's "Unitarian" views and the wider moral edification of the work. The all-encom-

passing presence of the moral aspect had an unprecedented success among the reading public, which raised the work above other, well known novels.

## I. The Contemporary Literary Context

Eighteenth century literary journals offered long reviews of the two works which proved to be surprisingly similar in nature. Critics found both narratives original, whimsical, and eccentric. Today it may seem amazing that at the time of the appearance of its two volumes in 1756 and 1766, the *Monthly Review* dedicated more than sixty pages to *John Bunclé*, the longest review in the journal's history to that date, and gave only a shorter description of *Tristram Shandy*. It is also worth noting that another contemporary journal, the *Critical Review*, gave a harsh review of *John Bunclé*: "This is an irreviewable performance, because the nonsense we encounter in perusing it, is insufferable" (Mayo 207-208).

The great popularity of Amory's novel can be assumed from Clara Reeve's list of "works of merit" in the 1760's among which we find the second volume of *John Bunclé*, "a whimsical and *outré* story, intermixed with sprinklings of wit and learning, and a Genius truly original" (Reeve 39-54). Both works appear on her list of "novels and stories original and uncommon" which consists of 21 titles. *John Bunclé* is followed by *Tristram Shandy* on the list. There can be little doubt that both novels were popular, widely read and received contradictory reviews because of the authors' peculiar way of writing, with which the reading public was unfamiliar. In January 1760 the *Critical Review* writes about *Tristram Shandy* that it is "a humorous performance, of which we are unable to convey any distinct ideas to our readers" (Howes 52). The most notorious comment on the novel comes from Samuel Johnson, which, however, expresses the literary taste of the period very characteristically: "Nothing odd will do long. *Tristram Shandy* did not last" (Boswell I. 618-19).

Modern critics follow this tradition when they compare the two works by their odd way of storytelling. Ernest Baker refers to the variety of incongruous subjects: "It is improbable that Sterne ever read either of Amory's books; but they must be mentioned here as a miscellany of strange and incongruous elements parallel to, though so unlike, Sterne's own salmagundi of odds and ends recklessly compounded. *John Bunclé* is soberly absurd as *Tristram Shandy* is playfully so" (Baker 241). Wayne Booth mentions the authorial intrusions as the basis of his comparison and he also emphasises the fact that *John Bunclé* was not meant to be comic fiction: "Throw a dash here and some livelier diction there, and it would pass for Tristram's. But when we know from the contexts that this is not in any sense ironic, that it is intended as straightforward praise for the understanding of women, it becomes amusing in a sense not intended by Amory" (Booth 234).

Priority of the Aristotelian 'fable' over characterization was a key issue in the early reviews and definitions of the novel. Richardson was

reproached by Johnson for not having any story in his novels, only sentiments: "Why, Sir, if you were to read Richardson for the story, your impatience would be so much fretted that you would hang yourself. But you must read him for the sentiment, and consider the story as only giving occasion to the sentiment" (Boswell I. 427); Sterne was blamed by Horace Walpole for his narration going backwards: ". . . it is a kind of novel called, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*; the great humour of which consists in the whole narration always going backwards" (Howes 55). Those historians who assign *John Buncl*e the role of being a major source to *Tristram Shandy* do it in view of the disproportion between plot and digressions; both novels reverse the traditional sense of plot-digression division where the plot played a much larger part in the story (Baker 111). Between the 1740's and 1760's the traditional concept of the Aristotelian elements began to undergo an essential change—characterization gained a far more important role than the consideration of plot. *John Buncl*e and *Tristram Shandy* both disregard the priority of plot but they do it for different reasons. The originality of Sterne's work lies also in its novel way of portraying its characters, which Amory utterly fails to do in *John Buncl*e. *Tristram Shandy* had a different fate in the history of its reception partly because the unconventional portrayal of the members of the Shandy family (recognized but not approved of by his contemporary critics) offered new aspects for modern descriptions of character; the priority of characterization over plot and the distinguished role attributed to the characters' thoughts were unparalleled in the early history of the novel. The sentiments of Amory's characters are expressive of moral thoughts as was generally expected from a highly serious work; they all represent the narrator's individual concern. In the following sections I shall compare the two works regarding the following aspects: narrative structure, characterization and the role of sentiments.

## II. Plot, Character, Sentiments—The Narrative Design of a Life Process

The most striking feature of the two works is that there is no real plot in either of them: what the reader finds instead is innumerable digressions interwoven with reflections on various subjects that seemingly have no relationship with each other. *Tristram Shandy* resembles *John Buncl*e in that both works have various literary genres implanted within the framing form of a fictional biography and it is the digressions which lead the narrative line. The narrator's reflections play significant roles alike. *John Buncl*e provides several examples for a great variety of embedded genres: the biographical form integrates scientific accounts of muscular motion and the origin of earthquakes, several songs, meditations, a mathematical rule defining the tangents of curve lines, microscopical observations and several other topics which cannot normally be found in eighteenth-century novels. This disproportioning is certainly a common feature and

the manner in which the two writers digress looks similar; but their performances are different in nature even though the outcome may have looked similar in the remorseless judgment of some critics, who found both novels nonsensical and boring. Curtis quotes from a letter by Richard Hurd to William Mason in which Hurd expresses a similar opinion on the continuation of *Tristram Shandy*: "I 'pass at once from Rousseau to Stern. Yet in speaking of romances, I must tell you my mind of his. The 3rd vol. is insufferably dull and even stupid" (quoted in Curtis 130).

## II.1. Two Examples for the Disfunctional Use of Plot

The wider plan of Amory with *John Buncl*e was to make it an attachment to his earlier work, *Memoirs: Containing the Lives of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1755), as a vindication of the author's life. Neither of his works was finished: out of the twenty volumes planned, only one volume of the *Memoirs* appeared and the author undoubtedly planned to write a continuation of *John Buncl*e as well since he several times promised the publication of certain letters and translations in an "Appendix" that never appeared; also, in the "Conclusion" of the second volume he briefly summarizes the 15th section, which he couldn't accomplish because "he had run out of space" (Amory 525). The story ends with the narrator's marriage to his seventh wife who has a fate similar to the previous six, all of whom had an untimely death. In his later years Buncl e finally retires and resolves to live a solitary life after travelling for nine years. This abrupt ending together with numerous untied threads in the story does not provide the reader with the feeling of an accomplished work. *John Buncl*e is a series of marriages in the framework of a long journey in which the main character interacts with women, their fathers or their husbands.

Buncl e's marriages have a recurring pattern in the story: the narrator-hero is disowned by his father for his Unitarian views so he has to leave college; he sets out on foot among the mountains of Westmorland. He wanders until he finds a solitary place where a gentleman lives with his beautiful daughter. He stays there and soon marries her. Meanwhile conversations and reflections emerge on various subjects: how to read history, a description of Miss Noel's grotto to which the English translation of fifty lines in Greek by Epictetus is attached (the picture of Epictetus holding his book is painted on the wall of the grotto; some fifty lines from the book can be distinguished), and theological issues such as the origins of the Hebrew language. The young wife dies within a short period of time so the hero sets out again.

To point out some of the structural principles of the narrative I shall briefly describe the story of Miss Spence, Buncl e's fourth wife from the second volume; Miss Spence's case is similar to that of the other wives, although her story occupies a larger part in the work. After burying his third wife, Buncl e leaves home again "to gain the heart of the first rich young woman" (*John Buncl*e II. 103) who comes in his way. He

meets her at Harrogate where they dance and he deeply falls in love and proposes marriage to her. A digression follows, addressed to the critical reviewers, on why it is not immoral to get married so soon after burying one's previous wife: "A wife must be a living woman. The wife we lose by death is no more than a sad and empty object, formed by the imagination. . ." (103). The narration is continued by Miss Spence's answer to the proposal in which she speaks about her views on matrimony, ". . . it is luck indeed, if a young woman, by marrying, is not undone" (167), and they agree to continue the discussion at a later time, when Bunce visits her. After taking leave of her he sets forth on new adventures, meets other young ladies, stays at different houses and indulges in several entertainments. One day he goes to Cleator to see Miss Spence again. He stays in her house and meets Maria's uncle with whom he has a lengthy conversation—another digression—on the Revolution. He tells the reader about the beauty of the scenery, Maria Spence's character, her vast knowledge of mathematics. The story is followed by a reflection on the education of women. Then they decide to go to London together. On the road Maria narrates the story and the untimely death of her master of mathematics, Martin Murdoch, and they discuss several difficult problems concerning the "arithmetic of fluxions." They safely arrive in London where Bunce marries Maria. Unexpectedly, she dies of a fever after six months. The narrator recounts how four doctors tried to save her, all of them proposing a different treatment, none of which proved to be of any help. Then, to give a truer picture of this admirable lady, Bunce incorporates some of her religious writings into the story, on "Morality," "Religion," "Faith" and other subjects.

There are certain illuminating affinities between Maria's story and some parts of *Tristram Shandy*. Similarly to the embedded songs, moral meditations and essays on scientific subjects, we can find different "works" incorporated in the main narrative line in Sterne's work as well, such as the *Tristrapaedia* or the marriage settlement which are cited by the narrator, Tristram. There are also innumerable comments and reflections: for example, one of the narrator's comments on one of the characters' narration is the digression within the story of Uncle Toby's courtship: it is Trim's story about his brother's affair with the Jew's widow. But here Tristram comments ironically on his character's boring way of storytelling: "the story went on—and on—and on again; there was no end of it—the reader found it very long—" (IX. 10). In *John Bunce*, the first steps of courting and the marriage proposal are settled in two sentences: "I was not many hours in her company, before I became most passionately in love with her. I did all I could to win her heart, and at last asked her the question" (II. 163). After this follows the author's lengthy apology for marrying so often. Uncle Toby confesses his passion to the Widow Wadman in a similar manner, without making a fuss about it:

My uncle Toby saluted Mrs. Wadman, after the manner in which women were saluted by men in the year of our

Lord God one thousand seven hundred and thirteen—then facing about, he march'd up abreast with her to the sofa, and in three plain words—thought not before he was sat down—nor after he was sat down—but as he was sitting down, told her, "*he was in love*"—so that my uncle Toby strained himself more in the declaration than he needed. (IX. 18)

Accidentally, this is told in a misplaced chapter that comes after chapter 25 because it was previously left empty together with the following, nineteenth chapter, with the purpose of teaching the world a lesson: "*to let people tell their stories their own way*" (IX. 25). The words pronounced, Uncle Toby cares no more about it but, rather hobbyhorsically, starts reading the siege of Jericho in the Bible that he finds open on Mrs. Wadman's table: ". . . he set himself to read it over—leaving his proposal of marriage, as he had done his declaration of love, to work with her after its own way" (IX. 19). There are other examples in both works, which support the idea that digressions from the plot seemingly have no coherence, neither do they help the action forward. Whenever the narration arrives at a segment of the main story line, it is always discussed very briefly in both works as if the plot served only as an excuse for a long digression on the narrator's thoughts on a different subject. Sterne's narrator seems to be well aware of the consequences of the unusual proportioning of the story. This kind of self-awareness is not found in *John Bunce*. The reflecting narrator in *Tristram Shandy* not only interrupts the narration and digresses from it; he also reflects on the problems that this method raises. The fact that both works were found "odd" and unusual may result from this new narrative design and contemporary critics were not accustomed to going into a deeper analysis of further distinctions between the merely intrusive and the self-conscious narrator.

The methods of characterization are different in the two novels. The theory of biography writing experienced a considerable transformation in Sterne's lifetime. Johnson's essays that appeared in *The Rambler* (No. 60), and *The Idler* (No. 84) characteristically mark these changes. He criticizes those biographers who merely collect facts from papers and then give an enumeration of events, just as the earlier writers of great characters. The aim of characterization is to depict human nature in its fullness, accepting flaws as well. The effort of seeking what is individual resulted in a distinctiveness of personality and the tendency to present a life which is interesting because it differed from the life of anybody else. The recording of sentiments and passions occupied many pages of biographies, and played a most important role in characterization. The meaning of the term "sentiment" underwent an essential change in English literature in the first half of the century; "sentiments" meant not only feelings but thoughts and opinions as well.

## II.2. Characterization Unsupported by Sentiments

In terms of characterization the assumptions and methods in *John Buncl*e are the opposite of the tendency of individualizing characters. In the eyes of contemporary reviewers, this aspect was blurred by other, more important aspects such as the "unity of the character" or the moral principles that they represent. Buncl speaks of the ladies he meets in superlatives. All of them are amazingly beautiful. Miss Statia is "bright and charming as *Aurora*" (II. 38). Carola Bennet is a "dazzling beauty in the height of life and vigour" (II. 384). He even enumerates "the seven qualifications which every man would wish to find in a wife, beauty, discretion, sweetness of temper, a sprightly wit, fertility, wealth, and noble extraction" (II. 164). Following the earlier tradition of biography, he seeks uniformity in life and wants to represent the universal pattern of virtues. Miss Spence has "the head of *Aristotle*, the *heart* of a *primitive christian*, and the *form* of *Venus de medicis*" (II. 162). These compliments could hardly be exceeded.

Tristram chooses a different device to let the reader know about the appearance of the Widow Wadman:

. . . For never did thy eyes behold, or thy concupiscence covet any thing in this world, more concupiscible than widow *Wadman*. [Chapt. 38] To conceive this right, — call for pen and ink—here's paper ready to your hand. — Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind—as like your mistress as you can—as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you—'tis all one to me—please but your own fancy in it. (VI. 37, 38)

There follows an empty page at the reader's disposal to paint the woman of his dreams. There cannot be invented a more subjective way of depicting a character. Sterne carries the idea of the individual description of characters to extremes. Also, this is a mocking comment on the attempt of describing what cannot be described in words.

Amory's characters reveal little about human nature. The descriptions of the female figures are so alike, all of them so perfect in mind and body, that there are no personal marks on the basis of which the reader could make a distinction between them. "Miss *Melmoth* had a memory astonishing, and talked on every subject extremely well" (97). "She [Miss Statia Henley] was a little taller than the middle size, and had a face that was perfectly beautiful. Her eyes were extremely fine; full, black, sparkling" (II. 33). When the reader is promised to be given a truer picture of her character, instead he finds another elaboration of religious views, attributed to the chosen lady. In *John Buncl*e there are exemplary characters with no personal features, all united in religious devotion. However, the story of their life and the circumstances in which they meet the narrator-hero is always extraordinary. The eccentricity of the main char-



acter lies in his adventures with women, the uncommon application of his views, and his exceptional way of story-telling. He defends himself against the charge of being an eccentric in the "Preface:" "And if oddness consists in spirit, freedom of thought, and a zeal for the divine unity. . . then, may it be written on my stone, —Here lies an odd man" (ix).

Sentiments in the Aristotelian sense represent the characters' opinions which must be in accordance with their personality. In *Tristram Shandy* all the figures are impossibly eccentric in their behaviour. The innermost feelings of the characters and their various reflections are discussed in lengthy chapters. Tristram's response to proper characterization as an expected device by the critics is rather ironic:

You see as plain as can be, that I write as a man of erudition;— that even my similes, my allusions, my illustrations, my metaphors, are erudite, —and that I must sustain my character properly, and contrast it properly too, —else what would become of me? Why, Sir, I should be undone— (II. 2)

All the actions and expressed views of the characters can be well explained from their eccentric nature. Walter Shandy, who has highly pragmatic views on matrimony, cannot but think of the obvious practical consequences of Uncle Toby's married state:

—My brother *Toby*, quoth she [Mrs. Shandy], is going to be married to Mrs. *Wadman*."

—Then he will never, quoth my father, be able to lie *diagonally* in his bed again as long as he lives. (VI. 39)

In Sterne's work it is always the ruling passions of the characters that determine their actions, govern their life and these are all presented in an exaggerated, parodic way. Bunce follows a different method: passions are the greatest enemies of mankind, he says, and to give a greater emphasis to his conviction he inserts his own version of the story of Orlando and Bellinda. The conclusion he draws from the story exemplifies his views on marriage: "It was by ungoverned passions, that *Eustace* murdered his wife and died himself, the most miserable and wretched of all human beings. He might have been the happiest of mortals, if he had conformed to the dictates of reason, and softened his passions, as well for his own ease, as in compliance to a creature formed with a mind of a quite different make from his own" (II. 12).

The dialogues between Bunce and any of the ladies reveal no information about the ladies' personality but they serve as a treasure-house of principles of the divinity. The good consequences of matrimony, for example, are discussed in detail with a religious view on the necessity of producing heirs. Bunce talks about matrimony to Miss Henley:

Consider what it is to die a maid, when you may, in a regular way, produce heirs to that inestimable blessing of life and favour, which the munificence of the Most High was pleased freely to bestow. . . Marry then in regard to the gospel, and let it be the fine employment of your life, to open gradually the treasures of revelation to the understandings of the little christians you produce. (II. 47)

His moral reflections and meditations all focus on his Unitarian views, Christian devotion and the intention to instruct the reader. The ladies, in their short social intercourse with Bunclé, seem to be as many spokeswomen for Bunclé's moral instructions.

Sentiments do not serve to support the plot in either case: there are no personalized characters in *John Bunclé* with distinct views; in *Tristram Shandy* all the figures are governed by their hobby-horses giving the story unexpected turns. Sterne's method is unique in reaching the effect of bringing the members of the Shandy family in close intimacy with the reader by making them fallible and sympathetic characters.

Although they do not help the narrative design, sentiments support the moral intention in both works; where the two writers differ is the method by which they want to achieve their moral aim. In *John Bunclé* morals are introduced as prescriptive, positive norms to be reached. The narrator's moral intentions are stated in the "Preface": "I ... have chiefly endeavoured, according to my abilities, to make my readers acquainted with the *majesty of the Deity, and his kingdom, and the greatness of his excellency*, before whom all the inhabitants of the earth, all powers and principalities, are as nothing" (vi). In *Tristram Shandy* there are no such standards explicitly set up for the reader to follow but each character exemplifies the deepest human feelings. Nevertheless, both authors had to defend themselves against accusations of immorality. Sterne was criticized for his bawdy jokes, indecency and disregard of "the colour of his coat." John Bunclé calls the work a vindication against the charges upon his marrying seven ladies: "Our *moralist*, (they [the critical reviewers] will say) has buried three wives running, and they are hardly cold in their graves, before he is dancing like a buck at the Wells, and plighting vows to a fourth girl, the beauty, Miss *Spence*" (II. 163). Contemporary audience saw Bunclé's opinions as moral views which served to deepen the instructive part in a serious way, through giving a lesson. Sterne meant to write a satire, a comic novel. *Tristram* seizes the occasion to make a joke whenever the opportunity offers itself. Before publishing his first volume Sterne writes to his later London editor, Robert Dodsley, about the plan saying that he would make fun of everything whenever he finds occasion for doing so: "The plan, as you <may> will perceive, is a most extensive one, - taking in, not only, the weak part of the sciences, in which the true point of ridicule lies - but every thing else, which I find laugh-at-able in my way. . ." (qtd. in Curtis 74).

### III. Conclusion

What may unite the two novels and provide them with a sense of novelty is that they equally violate the conventional understanding of narrative design; contemporary critics called both novels original, whimsical, and eccentric. For their scholarly notes and inserted translations the authors were labelled wit-writers. Yet, significant dissimilarities can be found in their carrying out a similar plan, presenting a life for moral purposes. Characters have a role that is different from carrying out a plot-supporting function in the story, as Sterne writes in one of his letters: "The ruling passion[s]. . . are the very things which mark, and distinguish a man's character; —in which I would as soon leave out a man's head as his hobby-horse" (qtd. in Curtis 88). Sterne's originality lies in the humorous portrayal of character, which carries the moral purpose in an unconventional way; he presents human inclinations, "humours," in their complexity and ambiguity and to do so he turns to the technical discoveries of the newly developed theories of biography that helped him personify his characters in a subtler way. Wolfgang Iser points out that the early disrepute of *Tristram Shandy* can be explained by the prevailing expectations of a reading public that was not yet prepared to appreciate Sterne's innovatory way of characterization. True appreciation first came from the early Romantics who found in Sterne the representative of the humorous writer who was able to give an insight into the human self (Iser 123-125).

Narrative structure and characterization are subjected to the expression of moral thought in *John Buncl*e in a very straightforward way. The narrator's main purpose is to express his pious intention— this is why William Hazlitt called the novel a "Unitarian romance" —and display his vast erudition in the form of various dialogues and digressions. Henri Fluchere's view on the absurdity of *John Buncl*e well expresses the opinion of readers today: "John Buncle is a very unfunny eccentric, hardly even an eccentric at all, whom we today should consign to the psychoanalysts, and whom intelligence tests would reveal as of incurable mediocrity. In addition to the endless platitudes he regales us with it in the form of sermons to justify, among other things, his curious mania for acquiring one wife after another (legitimately, of course), he also holds forth pedantically on a variety of other subjects" (Fluchere 187). Contemporary readers, however, appreciated the moral teaching, found the story entertaining and placed the work among the highly serious pieces, which marked its value. The success of *John Buncl*e at the time of its appearance owes to its fulfilling the prevailing expectations of the reading public. In Clara Reeve's critical approach the two principal values according to which prose fictional works were judged in the 1750's and 1760's were originality and morality. *John Buncl*e satisfied both expectations.

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