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A Study of Tabitha Bramble's Language and Epistolary Style in *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*

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I

Tobias George Smollett's last and most famous novel *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771) is in the epistolary mode and recounts a journey taken by a gouty Welsh gentleman, Matthew Bramble, through England and Scotland.[1] The letter-writers tell the readers of the exciting expedition through their respective points of view. Smollett effectively employed multiple points of view to make the fiction entertaining and amusing. Those various viewpoints of the characters' are also reflected by the linguistic and stylistic differences of their letter-writing. The difference is fundamental to their characterization in his fiction.

Tabitha Bramble, Matthew's sister, writes only six letters to the housekeeper and her brother's doctor.[2] She is one of the less important characters, but she has an impressive supporting role in the novel. Her peculiar language and unique writing style are remarkable next to her maid Winifred Jenkins' in the novel. The uniqueness of Tabitha's funny performance as well as her lowbrow language certainly helps the novel to be more amusing and laughable to Smollett's readers. The plot and structure of the novel also sound like those of comedy in a sense.

Owing to her idiosyncrasy mentioned above, Tabitha is away from the high society that Matthew, his nephew Jery Melford, and his sister Lydia belong to and is near the lower class Win belongs to. Especially, Tabitha's letters abound in linguistic distortions which may also be explained by a bawdy double meaning.[3]

In this thesis, we will discuss Tabitha's language through her speech in the other characters' letters, as well as through her letters, and her epistolary style in order to explore the brilliance and experimentation of the author's characterization in *Humphry Clinker*.

II

Tabitha, with her petty-bourgeois obsession for cheese-paring and her determination

to get the best possible price for any saleable home products, overwhelms Mrs Gwyllim, the housekeeper at Brambleton Hall, charged with keeping an eye on the bills and the servants, with advice on domestic economy.[4] According to the plot of the novel, three women characters, Lydia, Tabitha and Win, are interested in searching for a husband. For Tabitha it is the desperate search, not of a faded nymphomaniac, but of an old maid clinging to the last straw of hope, for forty-five in those days corresponded physically and physiologically more to fifty-five nowadays.[5]

We are informed of Tabitha's character through the other characters' letters. Win always accompanies Tabitha and always writes her orders like "Mistress bid me not speak a word of the matter to any Christian soul." (9)[6] The tie between the women is very firm. Lydia, Tabitha's niece, indicates her aunt's temperament in her first letter after her love affairs: "My aunt continues to chide me severely when we are by ourselves; but I hope to soften her in time, by humility and submission." (11) The young girl utterly fears her irritable aunt. Matthew describes his sister: "As for the fantastical animal, my sister Tabby, you are no stranger to her qualification—I vow to God, she is sometimes intolerable, that I almost think she's the devil incarnate come to torment me for my sins.... I an't married to Tabby, thank Heaven!" (13) The gentleman is tired of his sister's uncontrollable arbitrariness.

Jery fills the role of the novel's narrator and describes Tabitha most objectively: "My aunt, Mrs. Tabitha Bramble, is a maiden of forty-five, exceedingly starched, vain, and ridiculous." (10)[7] The young narrator, furthermore, describes her appearance and character in another letter of his:

> I have already told you, that Mrs. Tabitha Bramble is a maiden of forty-five. In her person, she is tall, raw-boned, aukward, flat-chested, and stooping; her complexion is sallow and freckled; her eyes are not grey, but greenish, like those of a cat, and generally inflamed; her hair is of a sandy, or rather dusty hue; her forehead low; her nose long, sharp, and, towards the extremity, always red in cool weather; her lips skinny, her mouth extensive, her teeth straggling and loose, of various colours and conformation; and her long neck shrivelled into a thousand wrinkles—In her temper, she is proud, stiff, vain, impetuous, prying, malicious, greedy, and uncharitable. In all likelihood, her natural austerity has been soured by disappointment in love; for her long celibacy is by no means owing to her dislike of matrimony: on the contrary, she has left no stone unturned to avoid the reproachful epithet of old maid. (58-59)

Tabitha is a giddy character who can not understand her situation easily and often ends up making a fuss about everything. Jery shows one extravagantly funny episode of her misunderstanding. When Tabitha sees Matthew handing his charity to a poor woman in a room, his sister reads the affair in another way and makes a terrible fuss to return the money.

> Ever prying into other people's affairs, she had seen the woman enter, and followed her to the door, where she stood listening, but probably could hear nothing distinctly, except my uncle's last exclamation; at which she bounced into the parlour in a violent rage, that dyed the tip of her nose of a purple hue, —"Fy upon you, Matt! (cried she) what doings[8] are these, to disgrace your own character, and disparage your family?—" Then, snatching the bank-note out of the stranger's hand, she went on—"How now, twenty pounds!—here is temptation with a witness!—Good woman, go about your business—Brother, brother, I know not which most to admire; your concupissins, or your extravagance!—" (22)

The silly old woman roars at her charitable brother with "your concupissins (= concupiscence), or your extravagance!" Even after she knows the truth of the affair, she continues to cry for the loss of money: "Who gives twenty pounds in charity?—But you are a stripling—You know nothing of the world—Besides, charity begins at home—Twenty pounds would buy me a complete suit of flowered silk, trimming and all—." (24) Jery is disgusted by her terrible avarice. According to her letters, we know that Tabitha naturally likes the management of Brambleton Hall. Through several interesting episodes involving Tabitha as well as her distorted language, the readers get the image of the character. The Augustan image equated the corruption of language with intellectual and moral degeneracy.[9]

III

In this part, we will roughly discuss Tabitha's language and style in her letters. She writes to Mrs Gwyllim, the housekeeper at Brambleton Hall and to Dr. Lewis, Matthew Bramble's attending physician. The beginning of her first letter is as follows:

> MRS. GWILLIM, / When this cums to hand, be sure to pack up in the trunk male that stands in my closet, to be sent me in the Bristol wagon without loss of time, the following articles, viz. my rose collard neglejay, with green robins, my yellow damask, and my black velvet suit, with the short hoop; my bloo quilted petticot, my green mantel, my laced apron, my French commode, Micklin head and lappets, and the litel box with my jowls.... Pray take particular care of the house while the family is absent. Let there be a fire constantly kept in my brother's chamber and mine....(8)

Tabitha, in this first letter, is totally concerned with her own comforts and her own profits on the Bramble estate, thus exposing an apparently selfish character. In her letter, all she wants to write is that Mrs Gwylim should take care of her belongings and the domestic affairs in the Brambleton hall. Tabitha names her personal effects and orders respectively. There is neither salutation nor appreciation to Mrs. Gwylim in her letters.

At a glance, we easily find that the lines have several unfamiliar spelling words like "cums" (= *comes*) and "litel" (= *little*) and some puzzling words like "male" (= *mail*) and

"jowls." (= *jewels*) We often see those words in the work and think her use of words sounds uneducated. That is her linguistic peculiarity in the novel as well as Win's. The peculiarity also helps to characterize her style. In the latter part of this letter of hers, we find interesting malapropism and dialectal words and phrases:

> The maids, having nothing to do, may be sat a spinning. I desire you'll clap a pad-luck on the wind-seller, and let none of the men have excess to the strong bear—don't forget to have the gate shit every evening before dark. The gardnir and the hind may lie below in the landry, to partake the house, with the blunderbuss and the great dog; and I hope you'll have a watchful eye over the maids. I know that hussy, Mary Jones, loves to be rumping with the men. Let me know if Alderney's calf be sould yet, and what he fought—if the ould goose be sitting; and if the cobler has cut Dicky, and how the pore anemil bore the operation.... (8)

The malapropisms, such as "pad-luck," (= *padlock*) "the strong bear," (= *beer*) and "the gate shit," (= *shut*) are innocently mistaken words and cause our chuckle. Tabitha is a great malapropian character in the novel. She is rude and does not hesitate to curse her enemy in foul language like *hussy*[10] and rumping (= *romping*)[11] in the sentence: "I know that hussy, Mary Jones, loves to be rumping with men." (8)

Tabitha's letters are also sowed with dialectal spelling of a word like "ould" (= old)[12] and "argefy." (= *argufy*)[13] The spellings "huom," "pore," "anemil" are different from standard English. G. H. Vallins praises Smollett's trial of giving special spellings to certain characters in *Humphry Clinker*:

> The spelling in the letters of the maid, Win Jenkins, and Tabitha Bramble in *Humphry Clinker* is no doubt a parody of 'private' spelling during the mid-eighteenth century. But it has its significance. The very exaggerations remind us how far the convention then being finally fixed were from the casual practice of ordinary 'illiterate' people.[14]

It is important to associate the language with the language user's social and regional backgrounds. His or her linguistic situation reflected his or her real life situation in the eighteenth century. People spoke and wrote in English differently according to their social status and their life place at that time. They noticed that the gap between standard language and vulgar language led to class distinction. As for authors, the use of dialect or local as well as class variations of speech is always directed, naturally and legitimately, to the achievement of realistic effect.[15]

IV

In this section, we will explore several remarkable examples of Tabitha's language in her letters and through her speech in the other characters' letters, according to some categories. She frequently uses *heterography* and *malapropism* in words and phrases, hyperbole and interjection, archaism and solecism, and polite expression.

1. Vocabulary

Tabitha's language is outstanding for her unintentional misuse of vocabulary. In section Ⅲ, we see a lot of unfamiliar pieces of her vocabulary in her first letter to her housekeeper like "ould" and "litel." Those strange spellings indicate a West Midland variety.[16]

Tabitha unintentionally gives bawdy words like "an impotent rascal." (75) The word "impotent" is probably *impudent*. The gap between the mistaken word and its corresponding right word makes us laugh or chuckle. She orders to her house keeper to watch the house management: "I hope you keep accunt of Roger's purseeding in reverence to the butter-milk." (264) We can read the word "accunt" as *account*.[17] The word "reverence" is maybe *reference*. She makes mistakes in using polysyllabic abstract and literary words. She reports her maid has changed herself and become fiancé of Humphry Clinker: "she has undergone a perfect metamurphsis, and is become a new creeter from the ammunition of Humphry Clinker." (264) The word "ammunition" is perhaps *admonition*. Those corrupted words are malapropisms. "Malapropisms are interpreted as the failure of less educated speakers to handle hard words correctly."[18] Norman Blake comments "Essentially Tabitha is purveyor of malapropisms rather than a dialect speaker."[19]

Tabitha is the Brambleton Hall hostess who is very interested in domestic affairs and lives life mainly in very provincial surroundings. Her brother and her nephew are very educated and have a great number of Johnsonian words and phrases. On the other hand, Tabitha and her maid Win hardly ever leave their village nor mix with strangers, and stay at home talking to each other only about their domestic management or their local gossip. We cannot imagine those women have any chance to be so intellectual as Matthew and Jery. Thus, the women's vocabulary is composed mainly of colloquial and dialectal words and phrases learned since their birth in the country in Wales, and partly of mock literary words and phrases learned by getting a smattering of them next to the country gentleman Matthew and his associates. We have other examples of Tabitha's unfamiliar words:

phinumenon (43) partected (43) unsartain (44) tamperit (44) leaf (74) Villiams (75) pockat (75) ragmatical (75) hearth (75) purpuss (75) owl (75) gurney (153) circumflection (153) accunt (153) earthly (153) haven (153) acrons (153) porpuss (153) beshits (153) amissories (153) fagget (264) blissing (264) yoosed (264) skewred (264) choak (264) huomwards (264) turks (264) chickings (264) kergo (264) junkitting (264) metamurphysis (264) ammunition (264) manger (336) rummanticks (336) occumenical (336)

Those words above would be hard to guess at a glance. Some of them are phonologically modified like "pockat" (= *pocket*) and "Villiams." (= *Williams*) Tabitha misspells almost all the polysyllabic words like "phinumenon" (= *phenomenon*) in her letters.

Compared with Tabitha's vocabulary, her niece Lydia has certain favorite adjectives and adverbs, such as "charming," "tender," "charmingly," "melancholy" and so on. Those words are often found in popular sentimental literature.[20] The author nimbly caught the trend that more and more women and girls were fond of literature of the kind in the 18th century. Tabitha is the country woman that is fond of domestic affairs like the management of the house and the people and is scarcely interested in reading books of the literature. Actually, about the general education of girls, "[Jonathan] Swift says that the common opinion restricted a woman's reading to books of devotion or of domestic management."[21] Tabitha is portrayed as a very selfish uneducated woman and her niece as a simple naïve girl. The impressive contrast between the characters makes the novel amusing and lively to the readers. Smollett was probably a genius who collected the information of the times. After reading the novel, the readers certainly find that the work has not only careful continuity and discontinuity of its episodes but also calculated architecture and symmetry of its characters.

Tabitha makes syntactic errors such as the irregular plural form like "sheeps" in "let them make it of sheeps' milk" (43). She writes a word influenced by Welsh phonetically like "rites" (= *writes*) (43) and "owl," (= *wool*) (153) and writes a word elliptically like "ne'er" (75) and "should'n't." (264) The eighteenth-century grammarians and orthoepists criticized those spellings as non-standard or vulgar,[22] and insisted that as many vulgar spellings as possible should be avoided.[23]

Norman Blake comments "Smollett is probably more intent on poking fun at Tabitha and her using her linguistic corruptions to suggest puns or even obscenities."[24] In her letters, "Most of the mistakes can be attributed to a faulty command of written English rather than to a dialect."[25]

2. Hyperbole and interjection

Women have several kinds of peculiar linguistic distinction. The stereotype is that women tend to be more emotional than men. Hyperbole is one of these emotional expressions. Tabitha describes her situation in hyperbole with "my tears fall so fast that I cannot keep the paper dry." Hyperbole is an exaggerated or extravagant statement used to make a strong impression, but not intended to be taken literally. Tabitha's emotional character makes her use several kinds of hyperbole.

At the scene of her brother's giving charity to a poor woman, his benevolence astonishes her and makes her chastise him for wasting money. Matthew is indignant and remonstrates against her complaint. She is amazed and emotionally adds:

> "What! (said she) would you go for to[26] offer, for to arguefy me out of my senses? Did'n't I hear him whispering to her to hold her tongue? Did'n't I see her in tears? Did'n't I see him struggling to throw her upon the couch? O filthy! hideous! abominable! Child, child, talk not to me of charity. ..." (24)

The repetition of the three negative questions "Didn't I ...?" and the utterance of the following exclaimed words "filthy! hideous! abominable!" are effectively used for Tabitha's taunting her brother hyperbolically. She without hesitation curses her brother as usual.

Interjection is another kind of emotional expression. Tabitha utters several interjections and swearwords in the novel. She is astonished at her brother's unexpected charity, and utters "Fy[27] upon you, Matt!" (22) She gives up her marriage with Mr. Martinis, and ejaculates "Jesus, what cruel barbarians!" (189) "O! what pity, (exclaimed pious Tabby) that some holy man ... convert to poor heavens!" (190)

3. Archaism and solecism

Carey McIntosh points out that "lower-class English in the eighteenth century has three traits: colloquialism, incorrectness, and old-fashioned-ness."[28] Tabitha uses several pieces of archaism or solecism in her letters. She uses the archaic conjunction "as how" in the clause "being as how I am much troubled with flutterencies." (44) She uses the archaic third person singular verbs "hath" and "doth" in the clauses "which hath got no bottom" (263) and "that livery doth not become any person that hath got our blood in his veins." (306)[29] Tabitha uses the archaic auxiliary "mought"[30] in the sentence "methinks you mought employ your talons better...." (74) She uses the vulgar *be-verb* contraction "an't" (= *is not*) in "An't he game, Mr. Gwynn?" (51)[31]

Tabitha uses a-verbing construction "a spinning" in "may be sat a spinning." (8) The construction was archaism and was "confined to the representation of non-standard speech."[32] She also uses the collocation "you was"[33] in the sentence "I would have you to know, you was called after great-uncle Matthew...." (187) The usage was regarded as solecism and was condemned by most 18th-century grammarians.[34]

4. Polite expression

When Tabitha meets upper-class people, she greets them courteously with a polite expression. She sounds like a member of fashionable society. She is usually immodest and speaks in rustic English in her daily life. After the domestic calamity

among the Brambles, Tabitha so civilly receives Lady Griskin's formal compliments of condolence by saying, "My family is much obliged to your ladyship (cried Tabby, with a kind of hysterical giggle); but we have no right to the good offices of such an honourable go-between." (141) The phrases "much obliged to your ladyship" and "good offices," and the adjective "honourable" are typical pieces of polite language.[35] Actually, her tone "a kind of hysterical giggle" spoils the politeness to some extent in the scene.

V

Last we will see Tabitha's style through her letter writings in the novel. Tabitha is not a serious observer of the travel like Jery and only wants to manage Brambleton Hall through her reliable housekeeper Mrs. Gwyllim. Through her six letters, she mainly writes various orders to her housekeeper. This is a good example of Tabitha's orders to Mrs. Gwyllin:

> Pray take particular care of the house while the family is absent. Let there be a fire constantly kept in my brother's chamber and mine. The maids, having nothing to do, may be sat a spinning. I desire you'll clap a pad-luck on the wind-seller, and let none of the men have excess to the strong bear—don't forget to have the gate shit every evening before dark.—The gardnir and the hind may lie below in the landry, to partake the house, with the blunderbuss and the great dog; and I hope you'll have a watchful eye over the maids. I know that hussy, Mary Jones, loves to be rumping with the men. Let me know if Alderney's calf be sould yet, and what he fought—if the ould goose be sitting; and if the cobbler has cut Dicky, and how the pore anemil bore the operation (8)

Tabitha's message in her letters is mainly orders with the command sentences: "Pray take ...," "Let there be ...," "I desire you'll ...," "I hope you'll ...," and "Let me know ...." Those directions are written in detailed style. She writes her personal possessions very concretely in her letters, like "the following articles, viz. my rose collard neglejay, with green robins, my yellow damask, and my black velvet suit, with the short hoop; my bloo quilted petticot, the litel box with my jowls...." (8)

Tabitha's letters have several proverbial sayings. She often complains about her brother's benevolence:

> My brother is little better than Noncompush. He would give away the shirt off his back, and the teeth out of his head; nay, as for the matter, he would have ruinated the family with his ridiculous charities, if it had not been for my four quarters—(43)

The phrase "shirt off his back" is a proverbial expression.[36] She has other proverbial expressions: "it can't be had for love nor money,"[37] (43) "that's another good penny out of my pocket," (43) "a fool and his money were soon parted," (81) "no better than he should be at bottom," (153) and "baiting an ass."[38] (264) In the eighteenth century, servants

and maids often used proverbs in their speech. It can be said that proverbs were ordinary people's general knowledge then.

Thus, Tabitha's speech and writing style sound uneducated and rustic to the readers. Her spoken and written languages really reflect her own unique social background. She "is gentle blood but apparently never bothered to acquire much education or general culture."[39] The creation of Tabitha is Smolett's skillful technique to make the novel lively and entertaining. We are entertained with much of the verbal play as well as a variety of unanticipated scenes and characters. "Smollett was capable of differentiating the voices so resourcefully."[40] The author certainly is a genius of characterization in fiction.

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1 Clifford R.Johnson, *Plots and Characters in the Fiction of Eighteenth-Century English Authors*, Vol. II (Hamden: Archon Books, 1978) 26.

2 Roger P. McCutcheon, *Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1950) 62.

3 Paul-Gabriel Bouce, *The Novels of Tobias Smollett*, trans. Antonia White (London: Longman, 1976) 202.

4 Bouce 203.

5 Bouce 203.

6 The edition used throughout is Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, ed. Thomas R. Preston (Athens: the Univ. of Georgia Prs., 1990). Hereafter the page number is cited parenthetically.

7 The *OED* defines: An unmarried woman, spinster, and notes this meaning is obsolete except in its dialect use. (s.v. *maiden* 3)

8 The *OED* notes "doings": "Apparently little used in the eighteenth century; Johnson says "now only used in a ludicrous sense, or in low, mean language." (s.v. *doing vbl. n* 2)

9 Damian Grant, *Tobias Smollett: A Study in Style* (Oxford Road: Manchester Univ. Prs., 1977) 90.

10 The *OED* defines the word "hussy": "A strong country woman, a female of lower orders; a woman of low or improper behaviour, of light or worthless character." (s.v. *hussy* 3)

11 The word "rumping" is probably *romping*. The *OED* defines *romp*: "To play, sport, or frolic in a very lively, merry, or boisterous manner," and presents the first citation of 1709. (s.v. *romp v* 1)

12 The *OED* notes the word "ould": "a representation of an Irish pronunciation." (s.v. *ould*)

13 The *OED* notes "a colloquial or dialectal equivalent of *argue*" and cites this passage "would you go for to offer, for to arguefy me out of senses?" (s.v. *argufy* 3)

14 G.H. Vallins, *Spelling* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1954) 85-86.

15 G.H. Vallins, *The Best English* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1960) 87.

16 N. F. Blake, *Non-Standard Language in English Literature* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1960) 122.

17 The word "accunt" is possibly associated with *cunt*. The word could give the readers a bawdy image.

18 Manfred Gorlach, "Regional and Social Variation," *The Cambridge History of the English Language*. Vol.III. ed. Roger Rass (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1999)

494.

[19] Blake 122.

[20] Sentimental literature emphasized the importance of the individual's emotional state and benevolence to the weak at the beginning of the 18th century, and was criticized as a soap-opera at the end of the century.

[21] *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, ed. Sir A.W.Ward and A.R.Waller, Vol. IX (Cambridge: the University Press, 1952) 402.

[22] Vivian Salmon, "Orthography and Punctuation," *The Cambridge History of English Language* 18.

[23] In *The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage 1700-1800* (New York: Russell & Russell-Inc, 1962) 172, Sterling Andrus Leonard cites John Hornsey's prescription about the verb contraction: "But this and all such like contractions ought to be avoided as much as possible, especially in the writing of prose. In poetry and in familiar conversation contractions are allowable; as, *lov'd, prais'd*, for *loved, praised*, &c." (*A Short English Grammar in Two Parts*, 1793) 93.

[24] Blake 120.

[25] Blake 121.

[26] The *OED* notes "In negative or hypothetical context, *to go (for) to* (do something) is vulgar used for...," and presents the first citation of 1752. (s.v. *go* 34.c)

[27] The *OED* notes the interjection "Fy" is the variant form of *fie* prevalent between 13th and 18th centuries, and expresses "disgust or indignant reproach." (s.v. *fie* 1)

[28] Carey McIntosh, *Common and Courtly Language: The Stylistics of Social Class in 18th –Century English Literature* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Prs., 1986) 12.

[29] Manfred Gorlach notes that the conflict between *–(e)s* and *–(e)th* in the third person was almost at an end in the eighteenth century, and that only in doth and hath *–th* still occurred with significant frequency. *Eighteenth-Century English* (Heidelberg: Univ. C. Winter, 2001) 102.

[30] The *OED* notes "This form had an extensive literary currency in the 16th and 17th centuries." (s.v. *may* 4c)

[31] The *OED* notes: "in illiterate or dialect speech for *is not, has not* (*han't*)." (s.v. *an't*)

[32] Joan C. Beal, *English in Modern Times 1700-1945* (London: Arnold, 2004) 80.

[33] The *OED* notes "the collocation *you was*, prevalent in the 17th and 18th centuries." (s.v. *you* 5a)

[34] Beal 70.

[35] McIntosh 69.

[36] The *OED* defines the phrase as "all one's possession," and cites this passage. (s.v. *shirt n* 2d)

[37] The *OED* notes: "at any price, by any means (Used in negative context)." (s.v. *love n* 7c).

[38] The expression is "to bate an ace," and the *OED* notes: "To abate a jot or tittle or to make the slightest abatement." (s.v. *ace* 3b)

[39] McIntosh 134.

[40] Grant 61.