

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84972-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Laurence Sterne

Edited by Thomas Keymer

Excerpt

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Introduction

In the 250th anniversary year of *Tristram Shandy*, and with the tercentenary of his birth impending, Laurence Sterne remains at the heart of our thinking about narrative representation, the traditions of satire, and some of the most intriguing cultural phenomena of the eighteenth century: the sensibility vogue; the rise of celebrity authorship; transformations in the understanding of personal identity and selfhood. Yet Sterne's formidable achievement as an author was the work of less than a decade. He lived in obscurity as a provincial clergyman for a quarter of a century, and witnessed the suppression of his first sustained work of satire, *A Political Romance*, by church authorities, but shot to international fame with his comic masterpiece *Tristram Shandy*, the inaugural volumes of which appeared in the closing weeks of 1759. With four further instalments published over the next seven years (closing with a ninth volume of 1767, at which point *Tristram Shandy*, as one early reader beautifully put it, 'could not either be properly said to have been left finished or unfinished' (CH 236)), Sterne held a central position in the literary culture of his day until his death from consumption in 1768. *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, his most popular and influential work in the decades to follow, had appeared just three weeks beforehand.

To many readers at the time, the innovative gestures and experimental techniques of Sterne's writing, alongside its insouciant defiance of established decorum, marked a decisive break with the literary past, or even seemed to usher in what the dominant novelist of the previous generation resentfully called a '*Shandy-Age*'.¹ This was an impression that Sterne worked hard to contrive, not least in the clever combination of teasing parody and creative transformation used in *Tristram Shandy* to evoke and trump the most prestigious models of satire and fiction from the previous half century. Especially in the early volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne drew ingeniously on the satirical repertoire of Swift and Pope, but redeployed it on a literary culture that had undergone radical change since *A Tale of a Tub* and the *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*, notably with the maturing, in the hands of Richardson

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and Fielding, of the modern novel and its associated conventions of representation. In later volumes, serialisation provided Sterne with a vehicle flexible and capacious enough to take in other new texts and trends as they emerged over the years of publication, endlessly renewing the novelty of *Tristram Shandy* and its status as a barometer of cultural fashions. Emphatically a work of its extended moment, Sterne's text could even absorb and recycle the attacks of his earliest adversaries, extending the intertextual loop to the point where, as one commentator wrote of the third instalment, 'you have now turned the Tables upon them, and ... have taken and pursued Hints that were chalked out by your Parodists'.²

Yet there is also a sense in which, like Tristram in the marketplace at Auxerre, Sterne occupies several different times at once. After decades of disparagement and relative eclipse in the Victorian era, he came into his own again in the early twentieth-century heyday of modernism, when his witty interrogation of the capacity of language and narrative to represent concrete worlds, transparent meanings, seamless chronologies, and coherent selves seemed to speak in new ways to theorists and practitioners of the novel. For the Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky, *Tristram Shandy* had dismantled in advance the enabling forms and conventions of nineteenth-century realism, and at about the same time Virginia Woolf, drawn more to the creative alternative that followed this parodic rejection, hailed *A Sentimental Journey* as a stream of consciousness novel *avant la lettre*. 'No writing seems to flow more exactly into the very folds and creases of the individual mind, to express its changing moods, to answer its lightest whim and impulse', Woolf wrote.³ Yet there is also something defiantly retrograde about Sterne's writing, even from an eighteenth-century perspective and to critics who dispute the narratological approach inaugurated by Shklovsky and Woolf, his interrogation of fictional realism is merely the chance by-product of his immersion in a formally disrupted tradition of satire that is emphatically pre-novelistic. His early reputation as 'the English Rabelais', and as having written 'an original composition, and in the true Cervantic vein' – both opinions are from the influential commentator William Warburton (*CH* 56), who never unpacked the contradiction – speak to the embeddedness of *Tristram Shandy* in Renaissance sources. From D. W. Jefferson's classic essay of 1951 on 'Tristram Shandy and the Tradition of Learned Wit', to the commentary volumes of the standard Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne (1978–), much criticism and scholarship has been devoted to identification and retrieval of the persistently early-modern ambience of Sterne's writing.

Spanning all these periods are the philosophical contexts foregrounded in another influential study of the postwar years, John Traugott's *Tristram*

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Shandy's World, which has generated a wealth of commentary on Sterne's ambiguous engagement with Lockean psychology and linguistics, and on his relationship to traditions of philosophical scepticism that reach back to Montaigne in the sixteenth century, and forward to the Enlightenment circle of the Baron d'Holbach, in which Sterne was embraced on his visits to Paris.⁴ Other versions of the philosophical approach, albeit seemingly played out now, have made the case for Sterne's anticipation of twentieth-century phenomenology and existentialism; more recently, secularising emphases have been vigorously contested by scholarship aiming to reassert the importance of mainstream Anglican theology in Sterne's thinking. Even Tristram's famous declaration that 'we live amongst riddles and mysteries' (TS 4.17.350) has now been recuperated as a more or less verbatim quotation by Sterne from a Restoration sermon of unimpeachable Pauline credentials.⁵

The present volume is not a survey of Sterne's fluctuating critical reputation, nor of changing scholarly approaches, but the chapters that follow are all written in light of the complex traditions of exploration and debate that have surrounded Sterne's writing in the past few decades, and they also break new ground, introduce unexploited sources, and offer fresh perspectives, in ways designed to shape the agenda for future enquiry and research. Topics include the relationship between Sterne's writings and his ecclesiastical and celebrity careers; the entanglement of *Tristram Shandy* with Rabelaisian and Swiftian traditions of satire, and with the developing genres of autobiography and the novel; the religious, philosophical, and scientific backgrounds of Sterne's writings, including the theological implications of his sermons and the ambiguous sentimentalism of *A Sentimental Journey*; their teasing and provocative play on questions of politics, from gender roles to national identity, specifically in relation to Sterne's Anglo-Irish background; his ingenious exploitation of the mechanisms of print culture, both on the page and in practice, and the visual culture of representations and artefacts that later embraced the novels; and the creative energies channelled or unleashed by Sterne's writing in modernist and postcolonial fiction.

NOTES

1. Samuel Richardson, in his revised sixth edition of Daniel Defoe, *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, 4 vols. (1761), III, 249.
2. *An Admonitory Letter to the Rev. Mr. S-----, Upon the Publication of His Fifth and Sixth Volumes of Tristram Shandy* (1761), 5.
3. Viktor Shklovsky, 'The Novel as Parody: Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*', in his *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher, intr. Gerald L. Bruns (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey

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- Archive Press, 1991), 147–70; Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader, Second Series*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), 78–85.
4. D. W. Jefferson, ‘*Tristram Shandy* and the Tradition of Learned Wit’, *Essays in Criticism* 1 (1951), 225–48; John Traugott, *Tristram Shandy’s World: Sterne’s Philosophical Rhetoric* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1954).
 5. Melvyn New, ‘The Odd Couple: Laurence Sterne and John Norris of Bemerton’, *Philological Quarterly* 75 (1996), 361–85; see also *Sermons Notes* 218–19.

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I

IAN CAMPBELL ROSS

Laurence Sterne's life, milieu,
and literary career

'Tristram Shandy is still a greater object of admiration, the Man as well as the Book.'¹ Thomas Gray's comment on Laurence Sterne's extraordinary literary and social success was written in April 1760, little more than three months after the publication of the first two volumes of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67). That Sterne had so quickly become not only a literary celebrity but one synonymous with the witty hero of his novel was astonishing enough. Still more remarkable was the fact that, by the spring of 1760, the celebrity author was equally well known in a second guise: as the good-natured Parson Yorick, whose character would survive his demise in the opening volume of *Tristram Shandy* to become the purported author of Sterne's second great fiction, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768). In the eight years of extraordinary fame he was to enjoy before his own untimely death, the Revd Laurence Sterne kept himself in the public gaze by impersonating now Tristram, now Yorick – as suited his mood, his audience, or the moment – in an act of ludic self-fashioning without precedent in English letters.

Sterne was born on 24 November 1713 in Clonmel, Ireland. His place of birth was fortuitous, for his parents had only recently arrived in the small County Tipperary town. Sterne's father, Roger, a junior army officer, had been posted with his regiment to Ireland from Dunkirk at the end of the War of the Spanish Succession; his mother, Agnes, daughter of an army provisioner, travelled with her husband. Though born into a prosperous family of Yorkshire gentry, Roger Sterne had left home in obscure circumstances that saw him financially insecure throughout the remainder of his life. Laurence's early years were mostly passed in a series of short stays in barracks, or as a temporary guest of Irish relatives, including Brigadier-General Robert Stearne, who entertained his poor relations at Tullynally Castle, County Westmeath, for almost a year, before the family was obliged to move on once more.

In 1723 or 1724, Roger Sterne left his wife and one surviving daughter – four other children died in infancy – to take Laurence to the house of his

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wealthy brother, Richard, at Woodhouse, near Halifax, Yorkshire. There, the boy would be accepted out of family duty rather than affection. Father and son would never see each other again, though Sterne remembered him fondly – ‘My Father was a little Smart Man...most patient of Fatigue and Disappoint^{ts} of w^{ch} it pleased God to give him full Measure ... but of a kindly sweet Disposition’² – in the memoir he wrote for his own daughter nearly thirty years later. Eventually ordered to Jamaica with his regiment, Roger Sterne died there of fever in 1731.

As the army was one recourse for the Sternes, the Church of England was another. Sterne’s great-grandfather, Richard, had been Archbishop of York for almost twenty years until his death in 1683. Laurence was apparently destined for the Church from an early age. A pupil at a boarding school at Hipperholme, run by the Revd Nathan Sharpe, he was described as ‘a boy of genius’ by his teacher, who ‘was sure I should come to preferment’ – a prediction the middle-aged writer delightedly repeated in his memoir for Lydia, though only once it had been fulfilled.³ Leaving Yorkshire in 1733 for the University of Cambridge, Sterne graduated with a bachelor’s degree four years later. It was here that he first experienced the worst symptoms of the consumption, or pulmonary tuberculosis, that would dog him for the remainder of his life; as a student he suffered his first severe haemorrhage in his lungs, later recalling that ‘I bled the bed full’ (*Letters* 180).

Despite early separation from his family, serious illness, and constant financial insecurity, Laurence Sterne did possess one significant advantage when he entered the Church of England, for he could count among his relations another uncle, brother to Roger and Richard, who was already a successful ecclesiastical lawyer. The Anglican Church could be as frustrating a career as the army for those who lacked the financial resources or patronage necessary to rise in the ranks, and it was through the influence of the Revd Dr Jaques Sterne, later Archdeacon of York and Precentor of York Minster, that his nephew initially prospered. Following brief periods as a curate in Huntingdonshire and Yorkshire, Laurence Sterne took priest’s orders in 1738 and immediately acquired his first living as vicar of Sutton-on-the-Forest, near York.

Dr Sterne’s support, though, came at a price. The Established Church was heavily politicised, and Jaques Sterne was an enthusiastic supporter of the Whig party, led by Sir Robert Walpole, Prime Minister since 1721. Laurence Sterne’s preferment to a decent church living was to be repaid by assisting his uncle in supporting the Whig cause in Yorkshire. This he did, for a while, writing political propaganda in the *York Gazetteer*, a Whig paper recently founded to counteract the influence of the Tory *York Courant*. In general and by-elections in 1741 and 1742, Laurence Sterne put forward his best

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arguments in support of Whig candidates, while attacking and, if necessary, smearing his political opponents. Such partisan writing did not go unchallenged and, though he wrote anonymously, Sterne soon found his identity discovered and himself subjected to abusive comment in the *Courant* and locally published pamphlets. By the summer of 1742, he had had enough, publicly apologising for the abuse he had heaped on the Tory candidates and their supporters. His withdrawal from Whig politics had its consequences. In January 1741, he had gained ecclesiastical preferment in the form of a prebendaryship in York Minster, valuable to him for the stipend it brought with it; in December, he had exchanged this stall for the wealthier prebend of North Newbald. By abandoning politics, Sterne immediately forfeited all further assistance from his now alienated uncle, who became a lifelong enemy.

Sterne's only escape lay in his parish. In 1741, he had married Elizabeth Lumley, with a background in the Yorkshire gentry, and together they devoted themselves to improving the vicarage house and garden, while avoiding the expensive temptations of city life in York. Through a connection of Elizabeth's, Sterne acquired a second parish, Stillington, adjacent to Sutton. Even two livings proved insufficient to the tastes of the couple, who found themselves frequently in debt, despite attempts at thrift and a long, though eventually unsuccessful, attempt to augment their income by farming. When the Jacobite Rebellion led by the Young Pretender, Charles Edward Stuart, broke out in 1745, Sterne devoted his energies to supporting the Hanoverian cause, contributing financially to the defence of the city and county of York, and attempting (unsuccessfully) to badger a male servant into serving with the forces of George II. Although it is doubtful he was the author of several anti-Jacobite pamphlets that have been speculatively attributed to him, Sterne did pick up his pen once more, in the summer of 1746, following the Jacobite defeat at Culloden in April, with an unpleasant attack on York's Roman Catholic community.⁴

For almost two decades, though, Sterne seemed to have few literary ambitions. A single poem, 'The Unknown World', achieved anonymous publication in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for July 1743, and, as a clergyman, Sterne often wrote sermons that, delivered with the appearance of complete spontaneity, gained him local fame. Not that his talents in the pulpit went entirely unremarked in York, where prebendal duties obliged him to preach his turn in the Minster, for two sermons achieved publication. These were the charity sermon, *The Case of Elijah and the Widow of Zerephath* (1747), and an assize sermon, *The Abuses of Conscience* (1750), which in 1759 Sterne audaciously incorporated into the first instalment of *Tristram Shandy*. For the rest, Sterne showed scant enthusiasm for the parish round, though he

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enjoyed the legal roles in the magistrates' and church courts that came with his position. Socially, he found himself at odds with the local magnate in Sutton, an unhappy circumstance partly redeemed by his friendship with Stephen Croft, the squire at Stillington, and, perhaps, with the group of eccentrics that met at Skelton Castle ('Crazy Castle'), the Yorkshire home of a university friend, John Hall-Stevenson.

Although capable of generous acts of private charity, Sterne was widely considered by strait-laced neighbours as ill-suited to the cloth, not only for occasional neglect of his clerical duties but, above all, for his ill-concealed and eventually notorious sexual liaisons with servants (his wife once discovered him in bed with their maid) and prostitutes in York. Though contracted for love, the Sternes' marriage was not a successful one, and the contemporary scandal associating her husband's infidelity with the temporary imbalance of mind that led Elizabeth, in the late 1750s, to believe herself Queen of Bohemia may not be without foundation. To add to domestic disharmony, Sterne had long had an uneasy relationship with his widowed mother. Agnes's constant attempts to squeeze money out of her needy son – a situation turned to the clergyman's disadvantage by his vindictive uncle – did not, perhaps, entirely justify Sterne's determination to keep his mother at the greatest possible distance. A partial reconciliation, at least, was eventually effected shortly before Agnes's death in 1759.

In that year, Laurence Sterne was forty-five years old. His marriage was unhappy (though he was fond of the couple's only surviving daughter, Lydia), the farming venture he hoped would make him money was on the point of collapse, and Sterne had seen no significant clerical preferment for over a decade and a half. Yet, within the space of a few months, his entire life changed, and from the obscurity of a country parish he emerged into the glare of a literary celebrity that he would continue to enjoy for the remainder of his life.

The origins of Sterne's celebrity are to be found in the unpromising circumstances of ecclesiastical politics. Denied advancement in the Church after quarrelling with his uncle, Sterne had hoped for better things when an influential former college acquaintance, the Revd John Fountayne, was appointed Dean of York Minster in 1747. Besides supporting Fountayne in meetings of the Minster chapter, Sterne (an accomplished Latinist) wrote for him the *concio ad clerum* or discourse to the clergy that Fountayne was required to preach in Cambridge in 1751, in part fulfilment of his doctorate in divinity. Initially, Fountayne seemed willing to reward Sterne, appointing him to the Commissaryship of the Peculiar Court of Pickering and Pocklington, in preference to the ambitious church lawyer, Dr Francis Topham. The remuneration was negligible, however, and Sterne's hopes of

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a significant increase in income were dashed when Fountayne indicated that he thought his debt now paid in full. Though resentful, Sterne let the matter rest there until 1758, when a quarrel broke out between Fountayne and Francis Topham. A pamphlet war ensued, in which Sterne again sought to promote his own interests by supporting Fountayne. His contribution was *A Political Romance*, printed in January 1759. In an allegorical 'History of a Good Warm Watch-Coat', Sterne satirised the ecclesiastical dispute as a petty squabble, turning the archdiocese of York into a country parish – and compounded the humour by adding a 'key', in which competing members of a political club in the city offer inflated accounts of the history, which they understand as a political allegory of European significance. Sterne did not entirely spare even himself, introduced in the transparent guise of Lorry Slim (he was a tall, notably gaunt figure), but he also less wisely satirised the conduct of both the previous and present archbishops of York.⁵ In London for the parliamentary session, the Archbishop summoned Fountayne and Topham to the capital and warned them to stop bringing York into disrepute. Additionally, he ordered the burning of the entire edition of *A Political Romance* – and while a few copies survived, even Sterne himself did not apparently possess one. The blow was hard, for the author was proud of his work and had insisted it be priced at a shilling, worth double the sixpenny-pamphlets that preceded it (PR 51).

Sterne did not allow the suppression of the *Romance* to put an end to his literary ambitions, however. '[W]hy truly I am tired of employing my brains for other people's advantage', he declared (*Letters* 84). Now he determined he was capable of writing successful comic fiction for his own benefit, and on a much larger scale. In the space of a few months, he had written enough of a new work to approach the eminent London bookseller, Robert Dodsley. The original plan was for a bawdy encyclopaedic satire that owed much to Sterne's love of Rabelais and Swift; part of it probably survives as the 'Rabelaisian Fragment' (see ch. 2 of this work). Though unconvinced, Dodsley offered suggestions for making the book more marketable. These Sterne embraced so enthusiastically that, having written what we now know as volumes 1 and 2 of *Tristram Shandy*, he borrowed money to have it printed and published in York. Concerning himself with the size of the book, its paper and type, and reading proofs with great thoroughness, he declared: 'it shall go perfect into the World'.⁶

The first instalment of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* appeared in York in December 1759. The title pages of the two volumes were dated 1760, and lacked any indication of the place of publication, a strategy designed to disguise the work's provincial origins. Unlike the more general, Scriblerian-influenced satire that Sterne had originally

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intended, the new work was cast as a modern fictional autobiography. Though the events of Tristram's life are mostly far removed from Sterne's, author and hero were quickly identified with each other, and the work draws quietly on elements of the author's own biography: the sympathetic portrayal of Uncle Toby owes something both to Sterne's father and to the military career of Brigadier-General Robert Stearne; the ludicrous Dr Slop caricatures the York physician Dr John Burton, a political enemy from the distant days of the Jacobite Rebellion; and Parson Yorick is a real, if very partial, self-portrait.

That Sterne was writing a comic work was evidently known in York, even beyond the author's immediate circle. Encouraged by its local reception but anxious to secure wider circulation, Sterne engaged in an ingenious stratagem to secure *Tristram Shandy's* success in London. He wrote a letter praising his book, which he persuaded a visiting singer – Catherine Fourmantel, then his mistress – to copy out as her own and send to the actor, playwright and influential arbiter of taste, David Garrick. Though Garrick most likely saw through the deception, he read the book and promoted it, thereby helping to ensure its metropolitan as well as provincial success.

And a success it certainly was. The small, York-printed first edition sold rapidly. When Sterne reached London in early March 1760, he was understandably delighted to find that no copy of the book could be had there 'for Love or money'.⁷ A second edition was needed, and although the Dodsleys had not been willing to pay £50 for Sterne's fiction a few months before, they now paid £250 for the copyright, in addition to the £50 Sterne had earned from copies already sold. A second edition of volumes 1 and 2 of *Tristram Shandy* – with a print run perhaps ten times larger than the first edition's – was on sale by 2 April. Besides a number of smaller changes, this edition had two significant additions. The first was a dedication of the work to the Prime Minister himself, William Pitt; the second, two illustrations by the leading artist of the day, William Hogarth. In an age when ambitious authors regularly attempted to secure the most prestigious dedicatees for their work, Sterne had earlier sought local aristocratic patronage, so that the Marquess of Rockingham, then lord-lieutenant of the North and East Ridings of Yorkshire, took no fewer than eight sets of the York edition. A future prime minister, Rockingham would be one of many who took Sterne socially under his protection in the spring of 1760. Having spent the previous twenty-five years in near-total obscurity, Sterne now found himself lionised in London society, and his letters make clear the delight with which he accepted the visits and invitations that came his way from nobility – 'from morning to night my Lodgings ... are full of the greatest Company' (*Letters* 102) – and even royalty. The second edition, meanwhile, sold quickly, and