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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

## Laurence Sterne (1713-1768)

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### Mots-clés

Salons
Enlightenment
Sentiment
Novel
Celebrity
Satire
Slavery

### Résumé

While Laurence Sterne was not one of the most prolific novelists of the eighteenth century, he was certainly the one who understood best the mechanisms of celebrity, and who used his appetite for sociability to further his reputation. This entry examines the works and career of the author of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, and of *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*. It reminds us that the world of Tristram Shandy is characterized by sociability as its narrative trope, while Sterne's second extensive work can be seen as an exploration of sociability.

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In a letter written from Paris to the actor David Garrick, Laurence Sterne wrote in 1762: 'have converted many unto Shandeism—for be it known I Shandy it away fifty times more than I was ever wont, talk more nonsense than ever you heard me talk in your days—and to

all sorts of people. *Qui le diable est ce [sic] homme là*—said Choiseul, t'other day—ce Chevalier Shandy—.1 By then, Sterne was the acclaimed author of the ongoing *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, and his reputation, already well established in England, had reached the continent. He was welcome in the salons of Paris; Diderot recognized in him 'le Rabelais des Anglais,'2 and to his hosts he was as much the hero of his novel ('ce Chevalier Shandy') as the man, Laurence Sterne. His fictional character merged with his social persona, his literary work seemed part of the social fabric. Conversely, his two major works, *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67), as well as *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768), may be read against the background of the form of sociability he favoured, which rested on conversation, on shared feelings, on sentimental commerce. In many ways, Sterne was the embodiment of a form of transnational, cross-channel sociability.3

### From country parson to literary celebrity

Laurence Sterne was first a country parson. After leaving Jesus College, Cambridge, in 1737, he entered the Church. In the autumn of 1738, he became vicar of Sutton-in-the-Forest, a village in Yorkshire, where he remained until 1760. Sterne published himself his sermons. They are neither the work of a sharp theologian nor of a particularly original preacher, but they suggest an Anglican priest in tune with the theology of his time. Even though he explored some familiar themes in his sermons, they do not give many clues about the writer. And yet, they were sufficiently important to him, and indeed Corporal Trim, in *Tristram Shandy*, reads one of these sermons to the assembly. Sterne published his sermons under the title *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick* (1760, 1766). This caused the displeasure of some critics who disapproved of publication of religious texts under the name of Yorick, the King's jester in *Hamlet*, a fictional character in *Tristram Shandy*, and subsequently the narrator of *A Sentimental Journey*. In his parish, Sterne performed first and foremost the duties expected of a vicar. He also spent time in York, where his uncle Jaques was a powerful figure. He married Elizabeth Lumley in 1741. While in Yorkshire, Sterne gave a modest contribution to political life, culminating in the publication of *A Political Romance* in 1759. It is a satirical pamphlet, which is scathing towards the life of the Church in York, in the spirit of *A Tale of a Tub* but without the genius. While of local concern, it displays Sterne's inclination for the satirical mode, reducing the considerable characters of York to a country parish, while being, for those concerned, a clear allegory. It springs both from a desire to take part in a local quarrel, perhaps in the (disappointed) hope of preferment, as from the discovery of the pleasures of writing. The pamphlet was destroyed, and only a handful of copies have survived.

The pleasures of writing in the satirical vein soon became apparent with the publication of the first two volumes of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* in 1759. The encyclopedic turn of the work owes as much to the spirit of Rabelais and of Cervantes, as to Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* or Chambers' *Cyclopædia*. While the life of a country parson meant that he was inserted in the social fabric of the village, and indeed of York, the reception of *Tristram Shandy* brought almost instant celebrity to Laurence Sterne. He had originally sent the book to Dodsley, who turned it down. Sterne proceeded to publish it at his own expense, 'merely to feel the Pulse of the World'.4 It was printed by Ann Ward, in York,

but the first edition bears no indication of the printer on the title-page. Given the success of the book, orchestrated in part by Sterne himself, Dodsley offered to pay Sterne £250 for the copyright in order to publish a second edition, as well as £380 for the next volumes. The second edition appeared in April 1760, with illustrations by William Hogarth which Sterne had managed to secure.

Such was its success that there were two more editions within a year. The book found its public, helped no doubt by favourable reviews. The fact that it was published anonymously helped with the reception—when it later transpired that the author was a divine, the impropriety of the bawdiness of the book began to be noted. Imitations and continuations tried to bank on this popularity<sup>5</sup>—in order to reclaim authorship, Sterne signed in ink the title page of the last three instalments.

In a letter, Sterne expressed the appeal which celebrity exerted upon him: ‘I wrote not to be *fed*, but to be *famous*’.<sup>6</sup> In 1760, he spent a few months in London, promoting his book, and being admitted in all the fashionable social circles, meeting the earl of Chesterfield or Lord Lyttelton, and being presented at Court. Both men of letters, Lyttelton had been a friend of Pope and of Fielding, while Chesterfield knew writers connected with writers such as the Scriblerians. His liaison with the singer Catherine Fourmantel had initially helped him secure the support of David Garrick. His acquaintances were in the world of arts (David Garrick, Joshua Reynolds, who painted his portrait while he was in London), as well in politics. In a most striking and exemplary aspect of the changing nature of celebrity in the middle of the eighteenth century, it is his book which opened the doors of the fashionable circles. The York edition of the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy* having sold out, Sterne embarked on a new London edition, printed by Robert and James Dodsley (5,000 copies). The Sermons were published with a subscription list of more than 600 names, including members of the aristocracy as well as women and men of letters such as Hogarth, Garrick, Reynolds or Elizabeth Montagu. Sterne frequented all the fashionable circles of London, and whenever he went back to Yorkshire, he longed for London society. His letters bear the mark of the social success he was enjoying in London, as does a letter by Thomas Gray, with the characteristic confusion between fictional character and author: ‘Tristram Shandy is still a greater object of admiration, the Man as well as the Book. One is invited to dinner, where he dines, a fortnight beforehand’<sup>7</sup>. Sterne himself was not averse to using the name of Shandy in social intercourse. There is a mutual exchange in the reputation of author and fictional character, one fostering the other. The novelist was thus a celebrity, both in France and in England, through complex interactions between literary fiction and social life.

Image



Legend

Joshua Reynolds, Portrait of Laurence Sterne (1713-1768), 1760, National Portrait Gallery, London.

Sterne returned to Coxwold, near York, to live in a house which has survived under the name of Shandy Hall.<sup>8</sup> From then on, Sterne followed a pattern of spending time in London—to oversee the publication of *Tristram Shandy* and to enjoy the celebrity it generated—and time in Yorkshire, to attend to his ecclesiastical duties and to be with his family. Volumes three and four of his novel came out early in 1761, with a frontispiece by Hogarth depicting Tristram's christening. Volumes five and six came out late in 1761 but are dated 1762. His books were now published by T. Becket and P. A. De Hondt.

### **The Shandy years**

In the same way that there is much interchange between the character of Tristram (and indeed of Yorick) and the writer Laurence Sterne, the sociability of the latter, induced in part by the celebrity of the former, is inseparable from the fabric of his great novel. Indeed, the world of

*Tristram Shandy* is characterized by sociability as its narrative trope. It is centred on Shandy Hall, whose existence is sustained by Tristram's father, Walter, once a successful merchant with the Levant Company. In spite of escapades, such as when Tristram travels to France (volume VII), the novel takes place in the family circle of the Shandys, and finds Walter, his brother Toby, his faithful Corporal Trim, Parson Yorick all engaged in conversation. The village where they dwell becomes 'the world', ironically developed by the narrator: 'by which word *world*, need I in this place inform your worship, that I would be understood to mean no more of it, than a small circle described upon the circle of the great world, of four *English* miles diameter, or thereabouts, of which the cottage where the good old woman lived, is supposed to be the centre'.<sup>9</sup> While the conversation between the characters presupposes a form of sociability, and of cooperative engagement, most characters indulge their 'hobby-horses': a ruling passion which leads Walter Shandy to discourse about discourse, Toby to reenact the siege of Namur where he was wounded, through military treatises and the construction of a map on the bowling green, and Tristram to write the story of his life and an account of his opinions. The hobby-horse paradoxically goes against the sociability of conversations, because it privileges obsessional monologue, at the same time as it defines the freedom of the speaker. —In turn, Tristram's hobby-horse defines the reader's hobby-horse as the reading of *Tristram Shandy*: 'and so long as a man rides his Hobby-Horse peaceably and quietly along the King's high-way, and neither compels you or me to get up behind him,—pray, Sir, what have either you or I to do with it?' (I.vii.12). The sociability between the characters is transferred to the relationship between narrator and reader. Tristram tells the reader: 'As you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance which is now beginning betwixt us, will grow into familiarity; and that, unless one of us is in fault, will terminate in friendship.' (I.vi.9) Sterne is using concepts used to define sociable intercourse and is ironically transferring them to the fictional relationship between the narrator and the reader *in* the text. But of course, in so doing, he is making sure that the reader *of* the text develops a form of familiarity with the narrative.

Image



#### Legend

Thomas Rowlandson, After Henry William Bunbury, *The Overthrow of Dr. Slop* (1803), The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In 1762, Sterne left for France, where he was already, and equally, a celebrity. He stayed until 1764. He would go again in 1765, and carry on, unlike Yorick in *A Sentimental Journey*, across the Alps to Italy. Sterne's letters testify to the reception he met with in Paris, being feted as the author of *Tristram Shandy*, being invited to attend salons such as the Baron d'Holbach's – also frequented by David Hume or Edward Gibbon – talking to David Garrick of the 'unexpected honours I have met with here'.<sup>10</sup> He adds: 'Tristram was almost as much known here as in London, at least among your men of condition and learning, and has got me introduced into so many circles ('tis comme a Londres)'.<sup>11</sup> Sterne was constantly in demand, although, since *Tristram Shandy* had yet to be translated into French, this was as much due to news of his fame in England, as to first-hand knowledge of his writings. Diderot proved an exception, as Sterne gifted him the six published volumes of *Tristram Shandy*. The future author of *Jacques le Fataliste et son maître* was immediately enthusiastic, and later invoked the spirit of Sterne's novel—if not its letter—to relate the tale of Jacques and his master. This period coincides with Sterne's ailing health (he suffered from a form of tuberculosis), which led him to spend time in the south of France. Volume IX, the last, of *Tristram Shandy* came out in 1767, but was met with less enthusiastic responses: the public, or perhaps the critics, were no doubt getting tired of his literary eccentricities, preferring, as had been the case for a

while, the sentimental Sterne, anthologized for instance in *The Beauties of Sterne*.<sup>12</sup>

### The sentimental and epistolary writer

Despite increasingly indifferent reviews, Sterne's reputation had not abated, as testified by his exchange with Ignatius Sancho.<sup>13</sup> Sancho wrote to Sterne expressing his enthusiasm for uncle Toby as well as for his sermons, and suggested that he might write about the African slave trade with the West Indies: 'that subject, handled in your striking manner, would ease the yoke (perhaps) of many—but if only of one—Gracious God!—what a feast to a benevolent heart!'<sup>14</sup> Sterne's response to Sancho's request appears in a dialogue between Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim, in the final volume of *Tristram Shandy*: 'Why then, an' please your honour, is a black wench to be used worse than a white one? / I can give no reason, said my uncle Toby—— / ——Only, cried the Corporal, shaking his head, because she has no one to stand up for her——' (IX.vi.748) This shows Sterne's readiness to engage with the issue of slavery, and perhaps inaugurates the use of sentiment towards the victims of slavery, later apparent for instance in the famous medallion by Josiah Wedgwood: 'Am I not a man and brother?'<sup>15</sup> The growing familiarity and friendship between narrator and reader enables Sterne to tap into the reader's sensibility to generate sympathy towards 'a black wench' rather than launch into abstract discourse about slavery.

In 1767, Sterne met Elisabeth Draper, the wife of an official in the East India Company, with whom he became infatuated and started a correspondence. In reference to Eliza's time in India, Sterne would use the name of 'Bramin' while Eliza would be referred to as 'Bramine'. The correspondence displays the passion in which Sterne seemed to have been absorbed. When she sailed for India, Sterne started a journal, originally published in the early years of the twentieth century under the title of *Journal to Eliza*. The parts he sent to Eliza have been lost, the surviving portion being now called *Continuation of the Bramine's Journal*. It was written at the same time as Sterne was composing *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, which was published in late February 1768.

From the very first sentence '—They order, said I, this matter better in France—'<sup>16</sup> Sterne's second extensive work can be seen as an exploration of sociability. Writing and travelling appear as similar endeavours, '*the Novelty of my Vehicle*' (15) describing in equal measure the narrator's progress through France and his writing. The decision to travel is prompted by the curiosity of Yorick, the narrator, who progressively engages in social and sentimental intercourse with the various characters he meets on his journey: a monk, to whom he first refuses charity, before exchanging snuff-boxes, a master of a hotel in Calais, 'a poor devil' (41) who becomes his servant, a Duke, a baker, a Count, and above all a number of ladies, with whom the borders between sentiment, sociability, and sexuality are explored. With a lady he meets in Calais, he spends more than half-a-dozen chapters holding her hand. A *grisset* who sells gloves affords him the opportunity to examine the flow of blood in the arteries of her hand, and to reflect, naturally, on the social nature of man: '—Surely—surely man! It is not good for thee to sit alone—thou wast made for social intercourse and gentle greetings, and this improvement of our natures from it, I appeal to, as my evidence' (73). (Wo)Man's natural sociability is both reasserted and used by the narrator to suggest a discreet

form of eroticism. This is carried further when a *fille de chambre* offers a moment of ambiguous social intercourse, where ‘the temptation’ leads to ‘the conquest.’ Although this may possibly refer to the restraint exerted by Yorick over his own emotions, it may equally refer to Yorick’s ‘conquest’ of the *fille de chambre*. The encounter with Maria, whom Tristram had met in volume VII of his narrative, affords one of the most celebrated moments of sentimentality in the eighteenth century, with painters finding inspiration in the episode.

### Image



### Legend

Angelika Kauffman, *Insane Maria*, 1780, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

And the sentiment is not devoid of eroticism, with the dashes, so characteristic of Sterne’s sense of narrative rhythm, pulsating through the description: ‘Maria let me wipe [her tears] away as they fell with my handkerchief.—I then steep’d it in my own—and then in hers—and then in mine—and then I wip’d hers again—and as I did it, I felt such undescribable emotions



within me, as I am sure could not be accounted for from any combinations of matter and motion.’ (151) Sterne’s narrator uses the language of sentiment to suggest the (erotic) complexities of certain forms of social intercourse and to offer a gentle satire of the sentimental novel. In the final chapter, Yorick extends his generosity to a lady and her servant, who share his room, but in the confusion of the night, he stretches out his hand and ‘I caught hold of the Fille de Chambre’s.’ The chapter, and indeed the book, close on ‘END OF VOL. II.’ (165).

Three weeks after the publication of *A Sentimental Journey*, on 18 March 1768, Sterne died in London. Garrick, in his epitaph, captured the singularity of Laurence Sterne:

‘Shall Pride a heap of sculptur’d marble raise,  
Some worthless, unmourn’d titled fool to praise;  
And shall we not by one poor grave-stone learn

Where genius, wit, and humour sleep with *Sterne*?’ 17

1. To David Garrick, March 19, 1762, Laurence Sterne, *The Letters*, ed. by Melvyn New and Peter de Voogd, *The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne*, vol. VII, p. 242.
2. ‘Ce livre si fou, si sage et si gai est le Rabelais des anglais. Il est intitulé La Vie, les mémoires et les opinions de Tristram Shandy.’ Lettre à Sophie Volland, 7 octobre 1762, *Oeuvres de Denis Diderot*, tome V: Correspondance, Coll. Bouquins (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1999), p. 456.
3. On trans-channel literature, see for instance Margaret Cohen and Carolyn Dever, eds., *The Literary Channel: The Inter-National Invention of the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
4. To Robert Dodsley, October 5, 1759, *Letters*, vol. VII, p. 96.
5. See Jack Lynch, *Deception and Detection in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 2016).
6. To Dr. \*\*\*\*\*, January 30, 1760, *Letters*, vol. VII, p. 114.
7. Letter from Thomas Gray to Thomas Warton, quoted by Ross, 247.
8. It is now home to the Laurence Sterne trust <https://www.laurencesterne.org.uk/>
9. Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. by Melvyn New and Joan New, *The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne*, vol. I, chapter VII, p. 10. Subsequent references appear under the form (I.vii.10).
10. To David Garrick, January 31, 1762, *Letters*, vol. VII, p. 224.
11. Id.
12. Laurence Sterne, *The Beauties of Sterne: Including All His Pathetic Tales, and Most Distinguished Observations on Life: Selected for the Heart of Sensibility*. England: Printed for T. Davies and ... G. Kearsley, 1782 was reprinted on numerous occasions.
13. A former slave, Ignatius Sancho (1729?–1780) was associated with the dukes of Montagu, and later had a grocery shop in Westminster. He is remembered through his letters, published in 1782 by one of his correspondents, Frances Crewe: *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*.
14. Ignatius Sancho to Laurence Sterne, July 21, 1766, *Letters*, vol. VIII, p. 697.
15. On the relation between sentiment and slavery see Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

16. *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, ed. by Melvyn New and W.G. Day, *The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne*, vol. VI, p. 3. Further references are given in the text.

17. Quoted by Ross, 419.

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## Citer cet article

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[Sterne's ghost at the Hôtel d'Angleterre \(1862\)](#)

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