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Ignatius Sancho, Laurence Sterne, and Antislavery Discourse in the Eighteenth-Century Press in Britain and America

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Abstract

The letters exchanged between Ignatius Sancho and Laurence Sterne in 1766 have encountered considerable attention, as have those passages in Sterne's works that seemingly engage with antislavery discourse. Some critics suggest these passages fail to address slavery directly; Sterne, in turn, has been viewed as readily capitalizing on his connection with Sancho to promote a philanthropic image that his writings do not support, and even to exploit it for financial gain. This article suggests a recalibration, partly based on the chronology of this exchange and its first public appearance in 1775. It argues that a richer understanding of Sancho's and Sterne's reception histories, and especially the role played by the eighteenth-century press in recirculating reviews of and excerpts from this exchange, helps to establish a more nuanced approach toward how the public image and the texts of both writers were subsequently incorporated into anti-slavery and Abolitionist debates.

Keywords: Ignatius Sancho; Laurence Sterne; Abolitionism; newspapers; magazines

The publication in 2022 of Paterson Joseph's historical novel *The Secret Diaries of Ignatius Sancho* reinforced the enduring fascination this eighteenth-century writer, composer, and businessman inspires, and his role in postcolonial literary studies as much as in popular culture.¹ Joseph, a British actor noted for his performances on stage and screen, has described how discovering Sancho in his thirties made him realize how significant the presence of Black Britons was in previous centuries, an aspect of Britain's historic ethnic diversity that Joseph's school education and wider experience in Britain at the time had typically

¹ Paterson Joseph, *The Secret Diaries of Ignatius Sancho* (London: Dialogue Books, 2022).

submerged with more monocultural narratives of the past.² Joseph's touring one-man show "Sancho & Me" continues to tell the story of his encounter with Sancho, and why he remains a compelling figure who offers a portal into Black experience in eighteenth-century Britain. In parallel, Joseph's appearance as a keynote speaker at the annual conference of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (the period's flagship scholarly organization), held at the University of Oxford in January 2024, provided an intersection between popular culture and academia that combined Joseph's account of personal discovery with ongoing critical concerns in eighteenth-century studies about how to challenge, and how to adopt new perspectives on narratives of the past and the materials and personalities that shape them. This was an urgent reminder of the significant responsibility academic enquiry holds in the stories it (re)constructs, and of the role of postcolonial enquiry in that process, especially at a time when the Humanities are called upon to answer why they matter, however unfairly or ignominiously motivated such questions may seem.

Here, I explore another intersection in this context—that between (Charles) Ignatius Sancho (c.1729–1780) and Laurence Sterne (1713–1768)—to introduce a fresh perspective on long-running scholarly discussions, driven by postcolonial studies, about the texts and contexts that unite them, using underexplored material to examine the role the contemporary press played in shaping the celebrity identity and posthumous fame of both writers against the backdrop of Abolitionist debate. Sancho wrote to Sterne in 1766, commending the humanitarianism he discerned in his writings, and asking this influential author to publish something decrying the horrors of slavery; Sterne replied sympathetically, claiming that he had already written just such a piece. The exchange was first made public in 1775 in the posthumous *Letters of the Late Rev. Mr. Laurence Sterne to his Most Intimate Friends*, the first official correspondence under the editorship of Sterne's daughter, Lydia.³ Sancho's letter (but not Sterne's reply) subsequently appeared in the posthumous *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho* in 1782.⁴ In the gap between these two publications, and then subsequently, this correspondence swirled around in reviews and in excerpts reprinted in newspapers and magazines, both in Britain and America, reaching a vast and dispersed audience, a dissemination that consolidated both writers' public image and their perceived position in antislavery discourse.⁵

² SanchoProductions (<https://www.sanchoproductions.co.uk/>).

³ A mostly spurious collection had been published earlier that year. Laurence Sterne, *The Letters, Part 2: 1765–1768*, ed. Melvyn New and Peter de Voogd, The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, vol. 8 (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), xlvi–ix.

⁴ The letter to Sterne is misdated as July 1776 rather than 1766 (and remained so in subsequent editions). See Madeleine Descargues, "Ignatius Sancho's Letters," *The Shandean* 3 (1991): 153.

⁵ Ryan Hanley, *Beyond Slavery and Abolition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 36; W. B. Gerard, "Laurence Sterne, the Apostrophe, and American Abolitionism, 1788–1831," in *Swiftly Sternward: Essays on Laurence Sterne and His Times in Honor of Melvyn New*, ed. W. B. Gerard, E. Derek Taylor, and Robert G. Walker (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 190–1; Alex Solomon, "The Anti-Slavery Legacy of the Sancho-Sterne Correspondence in the Periodical Press," *The Life and World of Ignatius Sancho*, Rutgers, March 18, 2024 (<https://sancho.rutgers.edu/antislavery-legacy/>).

This remains contested terrain. Critique of Sterne's supposed stance on slavery as inflected by sentimentalized sympathy, expressed in his sermons and his two major fictional works—*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67) and *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768)—has inevitably filtered into evaluations of the correspondence exchanged with Sancho, which interrogate how justifiably Sterne can be co-opted into antislavery discourse, and whether he exploited his link with Sancho to bolster his image as a moralistic philanthropist. It is worth first revisiting those interpretations and the key passages from Sterne on which they are based, and ironing out some chronological ambiguities, to understand more fully the relation between Sterne's reception and Sancho's—a reception significantly crafted through the press.

I. Ignatius Sancho writes to Laurence Sterne

The blend of fact and uncertainty in the known history of Ignatius Sancho, possibly born aboard a slave ship around 1729, and subsequently a noted writer and composer, partly stems from the first “Life of Ignatius Sancho” written by Joseph Jekyll as a preface to the 1782 *Letters*.⁶ Sancho was employed by George, first Duke of Montagu in the new creation, before establishing his own independent grocery business. He was, it appears, the first African-Briton known to have voted in parliamentary elections, and the first to receive an obituary in the British press upon his death in 1780.⁷

Sancho's decision to write to Sterne in 1766 came at a crucial moment in the emergence of antislavery discourse. For Markman Ellis, “discussion of slavery and the slave trade in literature prior to the 1760s” is not “in any straightforward sense anti-slavery literature.” That “crystallised” in “a relatively short period” from 1757 to 1772, and solidified “into a coherent and active opposition to the slave trade in the period from 1773 to 1787.”⁸ The 1760s witnessed the key period of Sterne's literary activity and celebrity. Born in Ireland and, by the 1730s, a clergyman in rural Yorkshire, he gained unexpected public fame when the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy* sold out in London in January 1760, attracting sustained critical attention and numerous imitations, many of these responses

⁶ Vincent Carretta, “Introduction,” in *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2015), 13–14. On Jekyll's problematic account, see Brycchan Carey, “‘The extraordinary Negro’: Ignatius Sancho, Joseph Jekyll, and the Problem of Biography,” *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 26, (2003), 1–14.

⁷ Vincent Carretta, “Sancho, (Charles) Ignatius (1729?–1780), author,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, April 18, 2024 (<https://www-oxforddnb-com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-24609>).

⁸ Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Commerce, and Gender in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 54–5. See also Elahe Haschemi Yekani, *Familial Feeling: Entangled Tonalities in Early Black Atlantic Writing and the Rise of the British Novel* (Cham: Springer International, 2021), 123; Ramesh Mallipeddi, *Spectacular Suffering: Witnessing Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 86.

channeled through the press.⁹ It was, then, to an established celebrity that Sancho wrote on July 21, 1766, expressing his admiration for Sterne's work:¹⁰ eight volumes of *Tristram Shandy* and four volumes of sermons had appeared so far.

Sancho briefly summarizes his own background—his early employment, his love of “books”—as a prelude to explaining what he finds most compelling in Sterne: “—Philanthropy I adore.”,¹¹ a significant cornerstone of Sterne's philosophy and writings, as G. J. Barker-Benfield explains.¹² Sancho sees this virtue embodied in *Tristram Shandy*'s “amiable uncle Toby” and his servant, Trim, both much-loved, injured war veterans. Described by Vincent Carretta as “a religious and patriotic man of feeling and sentiment and an avid reader of eighteenth-century literature,”¹³ Sancho's admiration of these characters chimes with that of many contemporaries, for whom Toby and Trim embodied patriotic loyalty, amiable humor, and, indeed, tender-hearted “Philanthropy.” Like many eighteenth-century readers of prose fiction,¹⁴ Sancho imagines these novelistic characters coming to life, and immerses himself in the fantasy of meeting them: “—I declare, I would walk ten miles in the dog days, to shake hands with the honest corporal.”

The problematic aspects of the philanthropic impulses underlying Abolitionist sympathies in this period—sometimes seen as self-indulgent or condescending—have long informed postcolonial critiques of the literary works related to them.¹⁵ The same could be said of the sentimental affect that, for Sancho, characterizes the philanthropy found in Sterne's sermons, which “have touch'd me to the heart.” He quotes one “very affecting passage” from Sermon 10, “Job's Account of the Shortness and Troubles of Life, Considered,” which had appeared in *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick* in May 1760. Sterne swiftly brought out this two-volume collection of sermons he had already preached following *Tristram Shandy*'s unprecedented success earlier that year, using the name of its fictional parson, Yorick—not without some critical backlash, although the sermons' content was admired for their religious sentiment and affecting style, the qualities that Sancho appreciates in Sterne.¹⁶ The passage from which Sancho quotes asks the audience or reader to “Consider” the impact of war and of

⁹ Mary Newbould, *Networks of Reception in the British Press and Laurence Sterne*, Elements in Eighteenth-Century Connections (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 1–2. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009238465>

¹⁰ G. J. Barker-Benfield, *Ignatius Sancho and the British Abolitionist Movement, 1729–1786: Manhood, Race and Sensibility* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 17.

¹¹ Ignatius Sancho, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2015), 128–9.

¹² Barker-Benfield, *Ignatius Sancho*, 32–5.

¹³ Carretta, “Sancho,” ODNB.

¹⁴ David Brewer, *The Afterlife of Character, 1726–1825* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2005), 1–6.

¹⁵ Tobias Menely, “Acts of Sympathy: Abolitionist Poetry and Transatlantic Identification,” in *Affect and Abolition in the Anglo-Atlantic, 1770–1830*, ed. Stephen Ahern (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), 62–78.

¹⁶ Newbould, *Networks of Reception*, 16–17.

tyranny on humanity, and to “——Consider slavery——what it is,——how bitter a draught, and how many millions have been made to drink of it;——.”¹⁷ For Sancho, Sterne strikes a chord: “Of all my favorite authors, not one has drawn a tear in favour of my miserable Black brethren—excepting yourself, and the humane author of Sir George Ellison.—” (i.e., Sarah Scott). He encourages Sterne “to give one half-hour’s attention to slavery, as it is at this day practised in our 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!—.” Usually read as an incitement to harness affective writing in the cause of emancipation, if couched in the complex posture of gratitude Sancho seemingly adopts,¹⁸ the letter—like other responses that appeared during *Tristram Shandy*’s serialized publication—inserted itself in the evolution of Sterne’s text.

Sterne replied to Sancho relatively quickly, on July 27. His tone and style are characteristic of the conversational manner he adopts in his sermons, correspondence, and fiction; it allows him to enter a familiar, imaginary discussion with Sancho, whom he tells that his letter’s arrival is “a strange coincidence, ... for I had been writing a tender tale of the sorrows of a friendless poor negro-girl; and my eyes had scarce done smarting with it, when your Letter of recommendation in behalf of so many of her brethren and sisters, came to me——”.¹⁹ Sterne goes on to develop an argument for a universal right to benevolence:

It is by the finest tints, and most insensible gradations, that nature descends from the fairest face about S^t James’s, to the sootyest complexion in africa: at which tint of these, is it, that the ties of blood are to cease? and how many shades must we descend lower still in the scale, ’ere Mercy is to vanish with them?

This passage has attracted critique in the evolving postcolonial interpretation of Sterne’s writing, not least on account of what Barker-Benfield calls Sterne’s “hierarchalizing of colour.”²⁰ For Carol Watts, Sterne’s use of analogy is characteristic of white British writers of this period, who privilege “representations” of the causes that incite sympathetic, “humanitarian” response over direct description.²¹ Ellis articulates the difficulty effectively: “Sterne’s argument is a powerful denial of racial difference, but embedded within it are the still more powerful remnants of the language of racial difference,” making ambiguous the “broadly sentimental and humanist” position Sterne seeks to adopt.²² These ambiguities

¹⁷ Laurence Sterne, *The Sermons of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Melvyn New, The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, vol. 4 (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 99–100.

¹⁸ George Boulukos, *The Grateful Slave: The Emergence of Race in Eighteenth-Century British and American Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 173–5.

¹⁹ Sterne, *Letters*, 504–7. See also 696–700.

²⁰ Barker-Benfield, *Ignatius Sancho*, 52.

²¹ Carol Watts, *The Cultural Work of Empire: The Seven Years’ War and the Imagining of the Shandean State* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 175.

²² Ellis, *Politics of Sensibility*, 65.

modulate Sterne's apparent challenge to this hierarchy of "shades" in suggesting that he will fulfil Sancho's request in a way that will shame those nations that allow oppression to thrive: "it casts a sad Shade upon the World, That so great a part of it, are and have been so long bound in chains of darkness & in Chains of Misery." He promises that, "If I can weave the Tale I have wrote into the Work I'm ab^t—tis at the service of the afflicted."

In volume 9 of *Tristram Shandy*, subsequently published in early 1767, Trim and Toby explore universal "Mercy" in relation to race. Trim outlines the story of his brother Tom, first mentioned in volume 2 of *Tristram Shandy* as a victim of the Portuguese Inquisition—although in the narrative's back-and-forth chronology, volume 9 recounts events that occurred in 1713, whereas the action of volume 2 takes place in 1718. Fast-forward from 1760 to 1767, if backwards in Shandy-time from 1718 to 1713: Trim suggests that Tom fell foul of the Inquisition either for marrying the widow of a Jew who owned a sausage shop in Lisbon, or for then observing kosher practices, for "if Tom had not married the widow—or had it pleased God after their marriage, that they had but put pork into their sausages," he would never have been "dragg'd to the inquisition."²³ The explanation, woven into the story of Toby's attempted romance with Widow Wadman, serves as a prelude to the passage that apparently answered Sancho's request. Trim describes how Tom courted the Jew's widow:

WHEN Tom, an' please your honour, got to the shop, there was nobody in it, but a poor negro girl, with a bunch of white feathers slightly tied to the end of a long cane, flapping away flies—not killing them.—'Tis a pretty picture! said my uncle Toby—she had suffered persecution, Trim, and had learnt mercy—

—She was good, an' please your honour, from nature, as well as from hardships; and there are circumstances in the story of that poor friendless slut that would melt a heart of stone, said Trim ... (747)²⁴

This aestheticized "pretty picture" of a Black servant girl, typical of emotive sentimentalism, creates what Stephen Ahern has described as "a surplus of meaning" that is "at once aesthetic and political" when real human suffering intersects with the pictorialism of affective writing.²⁵ The supposedly picturesque scene prompts between Toby and Trim "a dialogue which must have pleased Ignatius Sancho," according to Arthur H. Cash:²⁶

A Negro has a soul? an' please your honour, said the Corporal (doubtingly).

²³ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Melvyn New and Joan New, The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, vols. 1&2 (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1978), 2:742. Mallipeddi, *Spectacular Suffering*, 95.

²⁴ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 2:747.

²⁵ Stephen Ahern, "Introduction: The Bonds of Sentiment," in *Affect and Abolition*, 6.

²⁶ Arthur H. Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Later Years* (London: Methuen, 1986), 255.

I am not much versed, Corporal, quoth my uncle Toby, in things of that kind; but I suppose, God would not leave him without one, any more than thee or me——²⁷

All humans have “a soul,” the text reasons, and even if thereby co-opted into (Anglican) Christianity, Toby’s somewhat hesitant theology, as it emerges in the dialogue, echoes Sterne’s letter in suggesting that every human being deserves mercy and compassion, but (recalling sermon 10) that the contingencies of historical circumstance (such as warfare) lead to the inhumane treatment of some peoples by others.

In the crisscross of conversational epistolarity—part of the process of sentimentalized exchange Lynn Festa observes in Sterne and Sancho’s mutual influence, as enacted through these letters—one might ask whether Sterne had actually just written the “tender tale” he mentions, entirely coincidentally, or whether Sancho gave him the idea for writing it.²⁸ Their correspondence undoubtedly played a role in the evolution of this episode in *Tristram Shandy*; the nature of that role, however, remains debated.²⁹ While some hold that the arrival of Sancho’s letter was probably the “coincidence” Sterne claims, for Ellis, the “demotion” of his influence on this passage is characteristic of the period’s (and subsequent) racial prejudice.³⁰ Barker-Benfield nonetheless confirms Sancho’s impact, claiming that “Two weeks later, Sterne did weave the tale of the negro girl into chapter VI of the last volume of *Tristram Shandy*.”³¹ Melvyn New and Peter de Voogd are more skeptical of the chronology of composition given in the novel: “Although Sterne provides the date of August 12 for Tristram writing in his study in IX.I ... it is quite likely that he did not write the volume sequentially.”³² In fact, they follow Cash in suggesting that this passage was not actually the promised “tender tale,” contrary to some interpretations that assume it was.³³ “Sterne never found a way to work the story of this gentle Black girl into his narrative,” Cash writes, while for New and de Voogd whether the untold “story of that poor friendless slut” was the promised “tender tale” or not remains unknown.³⁴ Marcus Wood draws a similar conclusion, but argues that this girl’s overlooked story means “slavery is written out of *Tristram Shandy*,” indicative of Sterne’s inadequate response to Sancho’s request.³⁵

²⁷ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 2:747–48.

²⁸ Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 85.

²⁹ See Brychan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760–1807* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 58.

³⁰ Ellis, *Politics of Sensibility*, 70–1; see also Carey, *British Abolitionism*, 146.

³¹ Barker-Benfield, *Ignatius Sancho*, 54.

³² Sterne, *Letters*, 507. See also Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman: The Notes*, ed. Melvyn New, Richard A. Davies, and W. G. Day, The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, vol. 3 (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1984), 532.

³³ See, for instance, Mallipeddi, *Spectacular Suffering*, 100. See also Yekani, *Familial Feeling*, 146.

³⁴ Cash, *Later Years*, 255; New and de Voogd, ed. Sterne, *Letters*, 507; Gerard, “Laurence Sterne,” 190.

³⁵ Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 16.

Would Sterne have included this passage without Sancho's encouraging letter? Alongside his interest in philanthropy and mercy (human and divine) as manifested across his sermons, Sterne probably became more aware of debates surrounding personal liberty following his meetings in Paris in 1762 with intellectuals such as Baron d'Holbach and Diderot, from whom he "may have caught some of his idealism."³⁶ Statements such as Andrew Green's, though—that "the theme of slavery was a natural one, and it's no surprise that he was already on the point of 'weaving the Tale' into *Tristram Shandy*"—rest on sweeping assumptions.³⁷ Indeed, Ellis stresses how "Numerous Enlightenment *philosophes* denied the intellectual and human equality between Africans and Europeans," seeding "racism" as a conceptual category.³⁸ Other critics come down hard on Sterne by suggesting that his interest in slavery was only casual and opportunistic, while for George Boulukos, at times Sancho seems to have cast himself into "the novelistic trope of the grateful slave."³⁹ For Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Sancho "writes deferentially to his literary idol," conveying his somewhat naïve perception of Sermon 10 as an analogy for slavery—a "(maybe generous) interpretation"—while Sterne, like some contemporaries, adopted the guise of sympathetic sentimentalism to self-exculpate from indirectly endorsing the slave trade by not condemning it outright.⁴⁰ The exchange potentially benefited both Sterne's public image and his commercial viability, Yekani claims, as he was "eager to capitalize on Sancho's supposed authenticity as an admiring Black subject."⁴¹ She accuses Sterne of humanitarian posturing: "he likes to come across in the letter as a modest poet in the 'service of the afflicted'," aided by his self-identification as "his (potentially more) sympathetic fictional counterpart," Yorick. Sterne's self-alignment with Yorick is more complicated than this rather odd claim allows. The correlation, well established by 1766—not only by Sterne, but by his immediate readers and critics⁴²—is not overtly manipulated in his exchange with Sancho. Sterne's tone and style in his letter, indeed, are characteristic of his correspondence more generally—stylistic "posturing" being integral to eighteenth-century epistolarity, including Sterne's, including Sancho's.⁴³

Furthermore, in 1766, Sterne's celebrity status was active but by no means fail-safe: it was still evolving, in tandem with the ongoing publication of his works, which continued to puzzle critics and readers for mixing seemingly

³⁶ Cash, *Later Years*, 141.

³⁷ Andrew Green, "Allies against Slavery: Ignatius Sancho and Laurence Sterne," January 6, 2019, *gwallter*, April 28, 2024 (<https://gwallter.com/history/allies-against-slavery-ignatius-sancho-and-laurence-sterne.html>).

³⁸ Markman Ellis, "Narratives of Resistance in the Literary Archives of Slavery," in *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing*, ed. Susheila Nasta and Mark U. Stein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 26.

³⁹ Boulukos, *Grateful Slave*, 175.

⁴⁰ Yekani, *Familial Feeling*, 142, 144.

⁴¹ Yekani, *Familial Feeling*, 142.

⁴² Newbould, *Networks of Reception*, 16. See, for instance: *London Chronicle* 485, February 2–5, 1760, 124–5; *Public Ledger* 22, February 6, 1760, 4.

⁴³ Hanley, *Beyond Slavery*, 35.

irreconcilable levity and pathos. Sukhdev Sandhu claims that “Contemporary criticism focused on Sterne’s peculiar style and his rather salacious humor. It took Sancho, an ex-slave, to pinpoint immediately the moral core of Sterne’s work and, more than that, to glean how his form and subject matter were so intimately connected.”⁴⁴ But this does not take into account that critical reviews of Sterne throughout the 1760s, which appeared before the exchange took place in 1766 and was first made public in 1775, detect and seek to promote those qualities of philanthropic moralism Sancho admired, spurred on by passages such as the “Story of Le Fever,” which showcases Toby’s sensibility, published in volume 6 of *Tristram Shandy* in 1762 and widely excerpted in the press.⁴⁵ Sterne’s reception history, in fact, deserves more nuanced attention if Sancho’s part in shaping his reputation is to be properly understood in the context of postcolonial approaches to Sterne’s writing, and how to position both authors in relation to them.

Sterne’s handling of slavery has come under even severer scrutiny in assessments of *A Sentimental Journey*, which, for some, demonstrates Sancho’s influence more fully, if problematically.⁴⁶ In a well-known sequence of chapters, the narrator, again Yorick, moves from musing on his potential imprisonment in the Bastille for traveling without a passport to an encounter with a caged bird that acts as a metaphor for captivity, with its plaintive cry: “—“No,” said the starling—“I can’t get out—I can’t get out,” said the starling”; a trail of problematic reflections on incarceration ensues when Yorick tries but fails to picture a human captive.⁴⁷ His encomium on liberty nevertheless became a catchphrase that resonated extensively in Sterne’s absorption into antislavery discourse:

Disguise thyself as thou wilt, still slavery! said I—still thou art a bitter draught; and though thousands in all ages have been made to drink of thee, thou art no less bitter on that account.⁴⁸

These passages have been saturated with critical analysis. Yorick’s inability to imagine human captivity has variously positioned him as a solipsistic, failed sentimentalist, and Sterne as expressing the limitations of sympathetic sensibility, focused on commercialization and commodity exchange.⁴⁹ For Wood, “the bird, as property,” is “treated with brutal and darkly humorous indifference.”⁵⁰ For Festa, as a commodity, it accrues “market value” because of the “sentimental

⁴⁴ S. S. Sandhu, “Ignatius Sancho and Laurence Sterne,” *Research in African Literatures* 29, no. 4 (1998): 96.

⁴⁵ Newbould, *Networks of Reception*, 28. For instance, *Monthly Review* 26 (1762): 31–41; *Critical Review* 13 (January 1762): 66–9.

⁴⁶ Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*, 15–16.

⁴⁷ Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy and the Continuation of the Bramine’s Journal*, ed. Melvyn New and W. G. Day, The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, vol. 6 (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 95–6.

⁴⁸ Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, 96.

⁴⁹ Thomas Keymer, “A *Sentimental Journey* and the failure of feeling,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Laurence Sterne*, ed. Thomas Keymer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 88–9.

⁵⁰ Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*, 18.

value” Yorick’s encomiums on liberty attach to it, relegating the living creature to an object.⁵¹ More recent work on animal affect opens up another possibility, which reasserts Yorick’s capacity not simply to use the bird as a thing conducive to solipsistic introspection but as something for which, and with which, to feel. Glynis Ridley, for instance, sees a more provocative move on Sterne’s part to perceive the bird not only in symbolic terms but as flesh-and-blood, “an individual among a multitude,” amid emerging awareness of animals’ sensibilities and rights.⁵²

The analogies with slavery in this sequence are clear, but it has repeatedly been held to exemplify Sterne’s evasion of tackling it directly.⁵³ Ramesh Mallipeddi, combining critique of *Tristram Shandy*’s volume 9 and *A Sentimental Journey*, states that “Sterne’s reply to Sancho ... suggests that he was aware of the 1760s arguments over slavery and race, yet this awareness doesn’t translate, in the famous antislavery episode of *Tristram Shandy*, into a historically rooted engagement with chattel slavery or racial oppression,” while “chattel slavery is carefully managed out of [*A Sentimental Journey*].”⁵⁴ He concludes that Sterne deploys rhetorical strategies of “displacement” that detract from the realities of slavery, such as might concretize political debate; other authors of the period succeeded in being more direct, exposing the “absence” of similar representations in Sterne’s work.⁵⁵ Mallipeddi concedes that speculating about what a more realistic depiction of slavery “would have looked like” in Sterne’s writing is difficult—and perhaps unhelpful;⁵⁶ the accusations of aestheticization and, indeed, of exploitation for literary ends that can be leveled against some contemporaneous writers who engage with what Brycchan Carey has described as the performative “sentimental rhetoric” often deployed in Abolitionist discourse would undoubtedly concern Sterne, too.⁵⁷

Ellis, by contrast, argues that throughout the starling/captive sequence “Slavery, in the extended political sense, not Sterne, is the topic,” and that this is not “a discussion of abstract notions of liberty”: “it is what it says it is: a discussion of chattel slavery.”⁵⁸ Indeed, the starling/captive sequence concludes with a “short history of this self-same bird” centering on the commodification and commercialization of living beings and of the stories others create around them.⁵⁹ A defenseless creature trapped “before it could well fly,” taught a language that was not its own, traipsed across Europe, bartered between various owners in England—Lord A, Lord B, Lord C, and Lord D, “and so on—half round

⁵¹ Festa, *Sentimental Figures*, 87.

⁵² Glynis Ridley, “Sterne’s Journey into Animal Affect,” in *Laurence Sterne’s “A Sentimental Journey”: A Legacy to the World*, ed. W. B. Gerard and M-C. Newbould (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2021), 71.

⁵³ Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*, 14–15.

⁵⁴ Mallipeddi, *Spectacular Suffering*, 94.

⁵⁵ Mallipeddi, *Spectacular Suffering*, 97, 112.

⁵⁶ Mallipeddi, *Spectacular Suffering*, 114.

⁵⁷ Carey, *British Abolitionism*, 1–2. On Henry Mackenzie, see Barker-Benfield, *Ignatius Sancho*, 56.

⁵⁸ Ellis, *Politics of Sensibility*, 77.

⁵⁹ Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, 99.

the alphabet”⁶⁰—and valued or depreciated depending on whether its master-owners could gain social capital from the novelty factor of a talking bird: the starling is a more effective metaphor for chattel slavery than the picture of the captive Yorick fails to describe in the preceding chapters. If literary texts are able to engage with topics they (or their authors and readers) can only partially comprehend, then metaphor and analogy work more successfully than faux reportage, and can retain a powerful sense of the “real” thing they represent.⁶¹ Sancho’s request concerning his “brother Moors,” in fact, endorses this literary practice as a means of inciting what he suggests is an ultimately pragmatic sympathy in the “balance of sentimental commerce”: he encourages Sterne to imaginatively “—figure to yourself their attitudes;—hear their supplicating addresses!—”⁶²

One further element of the starling’s history is worth noting in terms of how not only objects, but lives (in the narratives that represented them) recirculated with negligent ease in eighteenth-century society through the pages of press publications. Birds, especially those that could “talk,” which were most prized, were often advertised in newspapers, alongside exotic and domestic animals (dogs, cats, parrots, monkeys).⁶³ Just as the starling’s story in *A Sentimental Journey* is commodified and passed around—a deliberately ironic parallel to the objectification of the bird itself—so stories were packaged up in newspaper columns in ways that aligned them with goods bought and sold. The publication of the exchange between Sancho and Sterne operates in a parallel way. First appearing in book form, then reprinted in newspapers and in magazines as excerpts, these letters entered a commodity market that turned them into items that could be extensively recirculated and reused in new settings.⁶⁴ As Alex Solomon points out, “eighteenth-century readers could move idly from sentimental contemplation of the atrocities that enable their quality of life to analysis of stock and commodity prices.”⁶⁵ The republication of Sancho and Sterne’s exchange in the pages of contemporary newspapers replicates these patterns, part-fictionalizing the lives these letters represent as sellable objects, and turning their authors into marketable gambits fitted to new commercial—but also political—contexts.

II. Sancho and Sterne’s correspondence recirculated

Although the connection between Sancho and Sterne in these contexts, in relation to Sterne’s writing and as filtered through their correspondence, has

⁶⁰ Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, 100.

⁶¹ Gerard, “Laurence Sterne,” 187–8.

⁶² Sancho, *Letters*, 128. “[The] balance of sentimental commerce” appears in Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, 13.

⁶³ Ridley, “Sterne’s Journey,” 67–9. See, for instance, an advertisement for a talking starling in *Public Advertiser* 8257, Friday, April 10, 1761, 4.

⁶⁴ See also Charlotte Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender, and British Slavery, 1713–1833* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁶⁵ Solomon, “Anti-Slavery Legacy.”

been widely discussed, the notable role the press played in publicizing this connection has not, despite the significance of periodicals, newspapers, and magazines in eighteenth-century networks of literary production, consumption, and reception, and in shaping celebrity status.⁶⁶ The press typically features in discussions of Sancho and Sterne in passing rather than as a focus of attention.⁶⁷ However, during the seven years that intervened between the publication of *Letters of the Late Rev. Mr. Laurence Sterne* in 1775 and *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho* in 1782, the relation between the two men exerted a sustained presence in the public eye thanks to the press: The letters Sancho and Sterne exchanged were reprinted numerous times, either together or separately, whether embedded in critical reviews or as freestanding excerpts.⁶⁸ An online essay by Alex Solomon summarizes this recirculation, citing both British and American newspapers, and drawing some important conclusions about the nature and consequences of that dissemination: These letters “constitute a viral text with a wide popular appeal, reaching a massive readership.”⁶⁹ This rapid diffusion was facilitated by an active press trade with a highly developed international network of distribution and consumption.⁷⁰ As the remainder of my discussion shows in greater detail, the fact, and the contexts, of these letters’ recirculation played a weighty part in contemporaneous antislavery discussions as they evolved: Sancho and Sterne’s exchange, and these writers’ public image, were increasingly recontextualized in the Abolitionist movements that gained momentum in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in ways that shaped public discourse and the post-humous personae of both men alike.

One mechanism for these letters’ dissemination came in the critical reviews they received in periodicals and magazines: Reviews often included lengthy excerpts from the work under scrutiny, bringing texts into a wider circulation than the book publication alone could attain, and popularizing certain interpretive approaches.⁷¹ The *Monthly Review*’s generally favorable account of Sterne’s *Letters* in November 1775, for instance, presents “a curiosity” in the form of “a Letter to Mr. Sterne, from a very sensible Black, in the service of the Duke of Montague [sic],” which it reprints, as if to consolidate the article’s claims about its “authenticity”—an underlying concern regarding published correspondence, which gains extra force here for its implicit commentary on the intellectual capacities of the “sensible Black” who wrote the letter.⁷² The *Gentleman*’s

⁶⁶ On celebrity in the press, see Uriel Heyd, “Fifteen Lines of Fame: Theatrical Representations of Eighteenth-Century Celebrity and the Press,” in *Social Networks in the Long Eighteenth Century: Clubs, Literary Salons, Textual Coterie*s, ed. Ileana Baird (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 100–01.

⁶⁷ Hanley, *Beyond Slavery*, 39.

⁶⁸ Newbould, *Networks of Reception*, 30.

⁶⁹ Solomon, “The Anti-Slavery Legacy.”

⁷⁰ Paul Goring, “A Network of Networks: Spreading the News in an Expanding World of Information,” in *Travelling Chronicles: News and Newspapers from the Early Modern Period to the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Siv Gøril Brandtzæg, Paul Goring, and Christine Watson (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 1–23.

⁷¹ Newbould, *Networks of Reception*, 26.

⁷² *Monthly Review* 53 (November 1775): 403–13. As Ellis points out, this reviewer alters Sancho’s “Negurs” to “Negroes”; *Politics of Sensibility*, 62. The reviewer claims in a footnote that Sancho had

Magazine also transcribed Sancho's letter in its review of Sterne's *Letters* in January 1776, but it did not print the reply, noting instead that "Sterne's answer is, as might be expected, equally sensible and humane."⁷³ This celebrated author's reputation could supposedly speak for itself without proof, compared with the apparent need to print Sancho's words; in fact, while the excerpt helped to showcase the style of a then-unknown author, it also adds to the impression that his identity made anything he produced something of an amusing "curiosity," which could casually detain the review's reader.

Beyond their more overtly functional purpose of bolstering an informative book review, the consumable entertainment these letters seemingly provided was complemented by their extensive reappearance in newspapers and magazines as standalone fragments. The *Annual Register* of 1775 was among the first to print them, with a title identifying Sancho as a "free Black in London," a fleeting but important detail in what, as Carey has explained, is the uncertain chronology of Sancho's biography.⁷⁴ Both the "free Black" title and the letters' texts resurfaced in the *Monthly Miscellany* and the *Sentimental Magazine* in September 1776—borrowing between press publications was prevalent.⁷⁵ The letters appeared beyond London, too, in the *Chester Chronicle* in December 1775 (which also reprinted one of many poetic eulogies to Sterne),⁷⁶ and in the *Edinburgh Magazine* the same month, which echoes the *Monthly Review* in highlighting Sancho's noble patrons, with a modified title: "A Letter to Mr. Sterne from a Black, in the Service of the Duke of Montague [sic]."⁷⁷ As Solomon suggests, how the letters were "packaged," including which titles they were given, indicates editorial intentions and designated readerships: "we can discern a significant difference, for instance, between, 'Letter from Ignatius Sancho, a free Black in London, to the late Rev. Mr. Sterne' and 'A LETTER from a NEGROE to the late MR. STERNE'."⁷⁸

The connection between Sterne and Sancho, then, and the text of their letters, was in the public domain from the appearance of *Letters of the Late Rev. Mr. Laurence Sterne* onwards, but how that relation was perceived was heavily embedded in Sterne's lifetime and posthumous reception, of which Sancho was just one element. By 1766, when Sancho wrote to Sterne, he was already a celebrity; by 1775, he had become renowned, if still subject to critique. That status undoubtedly helped to promote Sancho's own public visibility, itself promulgated through the press. He, too, "became quite renowned" in the brief period between Lydia's edition in 1775 and his death in 1780, Yekani writes.⁷⁹

adopted this spelling "to express his contempt of the vulgar pronunciation," *Monthly Review* 53 (1775): 403–13.

⁷³ *Gentleman's Magazine* 46 (January 1776): 27–9.

⁷⁴ Carey, "Ignatius Sancho," 4–5.

⁷⁵ *Monthly Miscellany* (September 1776): 405–6; *Sentimental Magazine* (September 1776): 405–6. On borrowing, see Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (Aldershot: Croom Helm, 1987; repr. Brookfield, VT: Gregg Revivals, 1991), 96.

⁷⁶ *Chester Chronicle* 33, Monday, December 11, 1775, 4.

⁷⁷ *Edinburgh Magazine* 4 (December 1775): 696–8.

⁷⁸ Solomon, "The Anti-Slavery Legacy."

⁷⁹ Yekani, *Familial Feeling*, 127. See also Carey, *British Abolitionism*, 57–8.

Ellis observes of his authorial reputation that “Sancho’s writings first found a public through Sterne’s literary fame.”⁸⁰ The *Gentleman’s Magazine* notes in May 1781 that Sancho’s “history ... is no secret”—meaning, in part, his reputed origins, employment, and correspondence with Sterne—while it weaves in critical comment on his talents as a writer, evident in the letter to Sterne, his “manner” being considered admirable.⁸¹ Sterne evidently provided a selling point for the subsequent publication of Sancho’s letters. The *New Annual Register*’s short review of the volumes in January 1782 underlines that he “has heretofore been made known to the public, by an excellent letter or two, relative to his unhappy countrymen, written to Mr. Sterne.”⁸² For the *Gentleman’s Magazine* in September 1782, Sancho was “first known to the public by an humane and sensible epistle (here reprinted) which he wrote to the late Mr. Sterne, of facetious memory,” the excerpt serving as an advertisement.⁸³

Indeed, while the fact of their correspondence allied the two writers in the public eye, its nature further cemented the connection by their comparable styles: Numerous commentators, at the time and subsequently, have noted Sancho’s adoption of Sternean characteristics and “Shandyism.”⁸⁴ The *Gentleman Magazine*’s review in September, for instance, uses its reprinted excerpt to position Sancho as one in a long line of Shandean followers; however, in keeping with the critical commentary up to this point, the reviewer warily assesses not only Sternean imitations, but also Sterne’s own written style, its typographic quirks included: “—Among other imitations of Sterne, who seems to have been his idol, we wish that honest Ignatius had not followed him in his blanks or dashes—.”⁸⁵ The *Monthly Review*’s account in December 1783 of the second edition of *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho* also draws attention to its Shandean typography, situating the appraisal of Sancho’s work in the context of this periodical’s longstanding critique of Sterne as an unruly writer, “ignorant, like many another genius, of the right use of commas and colons,” a “volatile spirit” who went about “getting rid of every point at once, by one all-sufficient—dash —.”⁸⁶ For Ellis, the reviewer (Ralph Griffiths) suggests Sterne’s style embodies the accusation of “libertinism” that dogged him: he “notes with concern that the looseness of Sterne’s punctuation seemed irrevocably connected to the looseness of his morals.”⁸⁷ Ellis goes on to argue that the Sancho exchange showed Sterne in a better light than many of his other letters, confirming him as a benevolent philanthropist rather than a “rakish libertine.”⁸⁸ Although Sterne’s reputation

⁸⁰ Markman Ellis, “Ignatius Sancho’s *Letters*: Sentimental Libertinism and the Politics of Form,” in *Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic*, ed. Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 201. See also Descargues, “Ignatius Sancho’s Letters,” 157–8.

⁸¹ *Gentleman’s Magazine* 51 (May 1781): 219–20.

⁸² *New Annual Register* (January 1782): 245–6.

⁸³ *Gentleman’s Magazine* 52 (September 1782): 437–9.

⁸⁴ Carey, *British Abolitionism*, 57–8.

⁸⁵ See, for instance, *Grand Magazine* 3 (April 1760): 194–8; *Public Ledger* 2.343, February 14, 1761, 1; *Monthly Review* 26 (January 1762): 31–41.

⁸⁶ *Monthly Review* 49 (December 1783): 492–7.

⁸⁷ Ellis, “Ignatius Sancho’s *Letters*,” 203. See also Sandhu, “Ignatius Sancho,” 97–8.

⁸⁸ Ellis, “Ignatius Sancho’s *Letters*,” 201.

was unstable at this point, accusations of perceived immorality were leveled more at the disjuncture between his profession as a clergyman, the innuendo-rich *Tristram Shandy* (including its bawdy typography), and the publication of his sermons under the pseudonym “Mr. Yorick” than at his personal life. Lydia, after all, had carefully curated her father’s correspondence to cleanse it of putative accusations of indecency. The caricature of the “rakish libertine” did not really take hold in Sterne’s reception until the nineteenth century, when figures such as Leslie Stephen lampooned him as Yorkshire’s “rustic Don Juan of the district.”⁸⁹

The critique of a wayward style as indicative of unstable self-control nonetheless inflected not only how Sterne was perceived, but also Sancho: The notion that Sancho benefited from his association with Sterne as a celebrated, and increasingly as a canonical author, must be tempered by Sterne’s still uncertain critical status in the 1780s, and indeed subsequently. Eccentric metanarrative modes appreciated as experimentally postmodern now attracted a less enthusiastic response among many (but by no means all) eighteenth-century readers. For present-day critics, though, Sancho’s imitative practice paradoxically serves as a means of individualistic self-fashioning and as a subversive tool. For Sandhu, Sancho saw in Sterne’s style an idiosyncratic nonlinearity that enabled him, through parody, to satirize the unruliness supposedly belonging to Black intellect;⁹⁰ for Yekani, imitating Sterne provided a means of interrupting “the supposed linearity of white superiority.”⁹¹ When situated in the context of Sterne’s reception, however, Sancho’s strategies of appropriation and imitation are typical rather than unique: Many early readers mimicked Sterne’s style for a multitude of purposes, with critical reviews themselves adopting a “Shandean” manner to project a parodic critique.⁹² It does not diminish Sancho’s originality to suggest that—like many contemporaries—he too manipulated the opportunities that literary adaptation afforded, and which involved exploiting a celebrity author’s recognizable mode and his popularity, no matter the ambiguities that persistently surrounded assessments of his written style.⁹³

More significant than his imitation of Sternean idiosyncrasy, in fact, was Sancho’s incorporation of sensibility, a widespread phenomenon, of course, but one which—as his letters to Sterne show—he particularly admired in the sermons and *Tristram Shandy*. Moralistic pathos, indeed, was the most compelling feature of Sterne’s output for contemporary critics and readers, for whom the Le Fever and Maria episodes in *Tristram Shandy* redeemed Sternean bawdry and superficial gimmicks, an evaluation decidedly strengthened by *A Sentimental Journey*’s much-praised affectivity.⁹⁴ Hanley points out that, in turn, Sancho’s “epistolary enactments of sensibility,” part-modeled on Sterne’s, were “widely

⁸⁹ Leslie Stephen, *Hours in a Library*, new edn. (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1892), 3:145.

⁹⁰ Sandhu, “Ignatius Sancho,” 98–9.

⁹¹ Sandhu, “Ignatius Sancho,” 101–2; Yekani, *Familial Feeling*, 152.

⁹² Among numerous examples, see *Critical Review* 21 (February 1766): 141; *Edinburgh Magazine* 54 (27 December 1781): 379–81.

⁹³ Ellis, “Narratives of Resistance,” 29–30.

⁹⁴ Newbould, *Networks of Reception*, 18–19.

celebrated” for demonstrating “the intellectual potential of African people,” making them “among the most powerful weapons in his antiracist and anti-slavery arsenal.”⁹⁵ In this context, the republication of both Sterne’s and Sancho’s letters as excerpts in newspapers and magazines intensified their likeness to the anthologies of fiction that were highly popular at the time, which typically selected extracts that intensified sentimental affect; these letters’ potential use as political tools promoting antislavery sentiments was energized by their publication in print media with far greater visibility and currency than book anthologies.⁹⁶

For all the undoubted publicity Sancho’s published work and posthumous reputation received through his correspondence with Sterne, widely recirculated across the press in excerpt form, and of the further tie created by those letters’ recognizably Sternean traits, the association potentially compromised Sancho’s independent identity as a celebrity and as a writer detached from Sterne. Sancho’s obituary notice in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* in December 1780, in fact, underscores how his public persona was repeatedly made contingent on Sterne’s: it announces as deceased, “In Charles-str. Westminster, Mr. Ignatius Sancho, grocer and oilman; a character immortalized by the epistolary correspondence of Sterne.”⁹⁷ Even the death of Sancho’s wife Ann, noted in the *European Magazine* in October 1817, is entwined with Sterne’s name: “[SEPT.] 18 In North Audley-street, Ann, the relict of the late Ignatius Sancho, author of ‘Letters to Laurence Sterne, &c. &c. &c.’”⁹⁸ The indelible link with Sterne inevitably conditioned how Sancho continued to be perceived.

Sancho’s status as a writer was nevertheless made distinct from Sterne’s in ways that equally compromised unbiased critical evaluation of his talents, which were often placed in a different category of critical observation on account of the author’s ethnicity: “few of [these letters] are little more than common-place effusions, such as many other Negroes, we suppose, could, with the same advantages, have written,” the *Gentleman’s Magazine* pronounced in September 1782.⁹⁹ The *European Magazine*, the same month, commends the *Letters* with a backhanded compliment for demonstrating the “common elevation of the human race” and disproving those who erroneously believe Africans lack the ability to write well. Sancho’s “genuine patriotism” is admired, but his “manner” is particularly well-illustrated by an excerpt, “a memorial of his newly-departed friend, the benevolent Mr. Sterne”—which, it is claimed, incorporates Sternean elements.¹⁰⁰ The persistent caricature of the “amiable Negro,” “this ingenious, but corpulent African,”¹⁰¹ who was an appealing stereotype but little capable of

⁹⁵ Hanley, *Beyond Slavery*, 35–6.

⁹⁶ Newbould, *Networks of Reception*, 26–7.

⁹⁷ *Gentleman’s Magazine* 50 (December 1780): 591. The same notice is repeated in the *Westminster Magazine* the same month, but with the addition of “Mr. Ignatius Sancho, a Negro,” in December 1780 (727).

⁹⁸ *European Magazine* 72 (October 1817): 373.

⁹⁹ *Gentleman’s Magazine* 52 (September 1782): 437–9.

¹⁰⁰ *European Magazine* 2 (September 1782): 199.

¹⁰¹ *Gentleman’s Magazine* 52 (September 1782): 437–9.

independent literary merit, was likely even more damaging for Sancho's appreciation as a writer than any comparisons (advantageous or not) with Sterne, and his ability to weaponize sensibility to serve antislavery causes is partly compromised by such diminutive appraisals of Black intelligence. Indeed, that Sancho himself, like his writing, remained a "curiosity" emerges in the focus several reviews gave to his biography rather than his work. In October 1782, the *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure* reprinted a redacted version of Jekyll's problematic *Life*, with a brief prefatory headnote informing readers that "This singular literary character was first introduced to public notice in the epistolary correspondence of Mr. Sterne."¹⁰²

The publication of the third edition of Sancho's *Letters* in 1784 suggests ongoing interest in the writer, but reviews continued to be contingent either on the Sternean connection, or on the curiosity appeal of Black intelligence, or both.¹⁰³ The *Town and Country Magazine* of February 1784 focused mainly on the Sternean celebrity link, claiming that "Ignatius Sancho is well known to the literati" on account of "the correspondence that passed between him and Sterne, author of *Tristram Shandy*."¹⁰⁴ Others pursued arguments about intelligence and race. In January, the *Critical Review* opens with the reminder that "The worthy Ignatius Sancho" was first made famous "for his correspondence with the celebrated Sterne," among other famous friends, before claiming that "The original motive for introducing his name to the world, was the desire of evincing, that an untutored African may possess abilities equal to those of an European; and it must be acknowledged that, in support of this proposition, the *Letters* before us afford full and indubitable testimony."¹⁰⁵ The reviewer compares Sancho to Terence (born in Carthage, where Sancho was baptized) and to Epictetus (also born into slavery), and argues that "in these letters ... we meet with the ingenuity of his compatriot, and the philosophical sentiments of the moralist."

Comments such as these chimed with comparable attempts to create a pseudo-pantheon of "African genius" that were wrapped into contemporary debates surrounding Abolition: Thomas Burgess's *Considerations on the Abolition of Slavery and the Slave Trade* (1789) holds that "the poems of PHILLIS WHEATLEY, and the letters of IGNATIUS SANCHO, are singular testimonies that the African mind is susceptible of very superior improvement."¹⁰⁶ As Ellis notes, "Writing was valorised as the paramount mark of civilisation."¹⁰⁷ Jekyll's description of Sancho as an "extraordinary negro" created a sort of catchphrase that frequently resurfaces in such caricatured portraits of the author—it reappears as late as

¹⁰² *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure* (October 1782): 495–6. The biography is also reproduced in the *Weekly Entertainer* 1.11, in March 1783, 241–3, with no explanatory headnote.

¹⁰³ Ellis, "Narratives of Resistance," 26–7.

¹⁰⁴ *Town and Country Magazine* 16 (February 1784): 99–100.

¹⁰⁵ *Critical Review* 57 (January 1784): 43–8.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Burgess, *Considerations on the Abolition of Slavery and the Slave Trade, upon Grounds of Natural, Religious, and Political Duty* (Oxford: D. Prince and J. Cooke; J. and J. Fletcher; London: Elmsly, White, Payne, Cadell, 1789), 131.

¹⁰⁷ Ellis, *Politics of Sensibility*, 54.

1815 in *La Belle Assemblée*, for instance—and helped to cement the enthusiasm for taxonomizing Black figures of note as a distinct category.¹⁰⁸ Sancho is named alongside Wheatley as a more “superior” African writer in the *Anti-Jacobin Review* in October 1818, features on a “List of celebrated Negroes” in Leigh Hunt’s *Examiner* in September 1811, and is distinguished as an exemplary Black figure alongside Gustava Vasa in the *Northampton Mercury* in October 1832.¹⁰⁹ The press clearly helped such ideas and their classifying tendencies to gain even greater currency, while it exposed claims such as Burgess’s to critical opposition when repeated in reviews. The *Critical Review*, in assessing *Considerations on the Abolition of Slavery*, skeptically asserted in June 1789 that “We have attended much to the subject, but can find little except flowing rhymes in the poetess [Wheatley]; [and] the cant of affected sensibility in Sancho.”¹¹⁰ For one commentator writing in 1798, similarly, “The letters of one Ignatius Sancho ... are full of trite observations, and a childish imitation of the fashionable sentimentality of Sterne; otherwise remarkable for nothing but that they were written by a negro.”¹¹¹

While evaluations of Sancho’s work were increasingly dependent on racialized stereotyping, he and Sterne nonetheless remained conjoined not only in the critical discourse that positioned them as representing certain styles of writing, but also of wider contemporary contexts—be they shifting literary tastes (as “affected” sensibility began to fall out of fashion) or galvanizing political issues. The ongoing publication of editions both of Sterne’s letters and of Sancho’s enhanced their availability to this repurposing, but it was undoubtedly propelled by the continued reappearance of this correspondence in excerpt form in newspapers and magazines, whether in London-based titles such as the *Town and Country Magazine* and the *Morning Chronicle* (both April 1792), or the *New London Magazine* (June 1792), or further afield.¹¹²

This ongoing recirculation of excerpts from the Sancho/Sterne correspondence, as well as commentary on these texts (even if negative), no doubt helped with marketing a new edition of Sancho’s printed correspondence in 1802/1803; so too did the enduring celebrity association with Sterne: newspaper advertisements promoted the volume as featuring “a fac simile Letter of the celebrated Sterne.”¹¹³ This costly and distinctive addition was surely used as a selling-point by the bookseller, William Sancho—Ignatius’s son.¹¹⁴ The *Monthly Magazine*, or *British Register* of July 1803 affords a lengthy paragraph to the edition, commending “this extraordinary Negro” (repeating Jekyll’s catchphrase) as “God’s image

¹⁰⁸ *La Belle Assemblée: Or Court and Fashionable Magazine* (November 1815), 205–6.

¹⁰⁹ *Anti-Jacobin Review* 55, 245 (October 1818): 107; *Northampton Mercury* 112, 33, Saturday, October 6, 1832, 3; *Examiner* 194, September 15, 1811, 592–3.

¹¹⁰ *Critical Review* 67 (June 1789): 454.

¹¹¹ William Tooke, *Selections from the Most Celebrated Foreign Literary Journals and Other Periodical Publications* (London: J. Debrett, 1798), 300.

¹¹² *Town and Country Magazine* 24 (April 1792): 180–1; *New London Magazine* (June 1792): 248–9; *Morning Chronicle* 7129, Friday, April 13, 1792, 3.

¹¹³ *Morning Post* 10738, Friday, March 4, 1803, 1; *Morning Post* 10740, Monday, March 7, 1803, 1; *Morning Post* 10813, Wednesday, June 1, 1803, 1; *Norfolk Chronicle* 34, 1726, Saturday, April 2, 1803, 1.

¹¹⁴ Descargues, “Ignatius Sancho’s Letters,” 150. Descargues’s article includes a fold-out facsimile of the letter.

though cut in ebony,” color again a determining factor in evaluating literary merit, but which is steered here in an intensified climate of antislavery sentiment. The review briefly summarizes Sancho’s life, condemning slavery for creating “degraded beings”: “by treating them like brutes, [we] endeavour to make them so.”¹¹⁵ Sancho’s public image, and his writings—their Sternean associations rarely far behind (“Beautifully has Sterne expressed himself in a letter to Sancho,” the *Monthly Magazine*’s review reminds us)—were thus increasingly wrapped within fermenting political debates about Abolition. In June 1804, the *Monthly Visitor* reported on William Wilberforce’s address to Parliament in an essay entitled “On the Slave Trade.” It targets pro-slavery apologists who claimed that Africans were “incapable of civilization” by citing Sancho’s example and emphasizing his authorial skill: “Few, I presume, are unacquainted with the life and writings of Ignatius Sancho, a man who was an ornament to the age in which he lived.”¹¹⁶

While Sancho’s connection with Sterne helped to bolster his celebrity status and the success of his posthumous letters within a complicated range of reactions based on ethnicity, Sterne’s connection with Sancho—through the widely publicized and recirculated letters—helped to cement his position in antislavery discourse more firmly than some critical assessments believe is deserved of his handling of slavery in his fictional works and his sermons. In November 1802, for instance, the *Edinburgh Magazine* describes the “new edition of Ignatius Sancho’s letters” as “containing a *fac simile* of Sterne’s original letter on the Slave trade.”¹¹⁷ Sterne’s letter, of course, is not overtly “on the Slave trade,” but the Sancho connection legitimated its description as such, and Sterne’s enrollment as an Abolitionist. On the other hand, Sterne’s contemporaries tended to perceive him as a suitable candidate for speaking to antislavery contexts based on a wider array of evidence than his posthumously published exchange with Sancho. His status as a writer of moralistic pathos, founded in his fiction and in his sermons, was already recognized by the time Sancho wrote to him in 1766, an image which gained momentum following *A Sentimental Journey*’s publication in 1768 and Sterne’s eulogized death.¹¹⁸ Throughout his expansive but complex reception, Sterne’s alliance between pathos and ethical principle continued to earn him admirers and encouraged many to repurpose his texts in new arenas of reception and application, including those concerned with Abolition, to which Sterne’s works seemed particularly apt to speak.

For one, the excerpt culture that, as we have seen, assisted the recirculation of Sancho and Sterne’s exchange in the press and elsewhere also helped to promote the image of Sterne as a spokesperson for antislavery sentiment by providing readers with digestible nuggets that intensified the moral sentiment or affective impulse. Of the anthologies of fiction previously noted, George Kearsley’s *Beauties*

¹¹⁵ *Monthly Magazine, or British Register* 15, 103 (July 1803), 641.

¹¹⁶ *Monthly Visitor, and New Family Magazine* 8.26 (June 1804): 146, 148.

¹¹⁷ *Edinburgh Magazine* (November 1802): 386. See also the *Monthly Magazine, or British Register* 14, 93 (November 1802): 343.

¹¹⁸ See, for instance, *Monthly Review* 38 (March 1768): 174–85; *Monthly Review* 38 (April 1768): 309–19.

of *Sterne*, first published in 1782—the same year as *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho*—amid a vogue of anthologized extracts designed to appeal to “the heart of sensibility,” selected passages that were both deeply pathetic and morally improving. One excerpt, which the volume gives the title “Slavery,” is an excerpt from “Job’s Account of the Shortness and Troubles of Life, Considered,” the sermon that Sancho had so greatly admired.¹¹⁹ The most affecting passages from *Sterne* often circulated independently of such volumes, reprinted as extracts in newspapers and magazines, or featuring in the public recitals of literary texts enjoyed during the later eighteenth century. “The Monk” and “Maria” made frequent appearances on such programs, but passages such as “On Liberty and Slavery, from *Sterne*”—from *A Sentimental Journey*’s captive/starling sequence—were also popular, recited at, for instance, Coachmakers’ Hall in London in October and December 1786.¹²⁰ “The Story of the Negro Girl, from *Sterne*” (from *Tristram Shandy*) was recited at the Lecture Room, Covent Garden, in January 1789,¹²¹ while “*Sterne*’s Picture of Slavery,” taken from *A Sentimental Journey*, was recited as late and as far from London as 1806 and New York.¹²² Newspapers also advertised public debates in the same columns as these literary recitals, and which often tackled urgent political issues. At Coachmakers’ Hall, a debate on “Which has reflected more disgrace on human nature, Slavery in Foreign Countries, or the frequency of Public executions in our own?” was advertised alongside public readings from *Sterne* in the *Morning Herald* and the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* in May 1786.¹²³

Sterne’s alignment with antislavery debates was further spread through the numerous adaptations his fiction inspired. Isaac Brandon’s *Fragments in the Manner of Sterne* (1797), for instance, “employs *Sterne*’s sensibility to admonish war, slavery, and religious persecution,” Philip Trotter writes.¹²⁴ Dana Lew notes that “six of the nine” *Sternean* adaptations in Ewan Clark’s *Miscellaneous Poems* (1779) “emphasise moments of slavery, captivity, and confinement”;¹²⁵ a versification of the correspondence between *Sterne* and *Sancho* was among them.¹²⁶ Leonard MacNally’s *Sentimental Excursions to Windsor and Other Places* (1781), a *Shandean* journey narrative first serialized in London newspapers, features a

¹¹⁹ *The Beauties of Sterne: Including All His Pathetic Tales, and Most Distinguished Observations on Life. Selected for the Heart of Sensibility* (London: G. Kearsley, 1782), 163–4.

¹²⁰ *Morning Chronicle* 5447, October 28, 1786, 3; *Morning Post* 4276, Tuesday, October 31, 1786, 1; *Morning Herald* 1877, October 31, 1786, 1; *Morning Chronicle* 5491, Tuesday, December 19, 1786, 3.

¹²¹ *The World* 649, Tuesday, January 27, 1789, 1; *The World* 652, Friday, January 30, 1789, 1.

¹²² *The Thespian Mirror* 1, May 31, 1806, 14.

¹²³ *Morning Herald* 1741, Thursday, May 25, 1786, 1; *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* 17,926, Thursday, May 25, 1786, 1, 3.

¹²⁴ Philip Trotter, “Introduction,” *Fragments: in the manner of Sterne* (Oates.528), *Laurence Sterne and Sterneana*, Cambridge Digital Library, April 5, 2024 (<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/PR-OATES-00528/95>).

¹²⁵ Dana Lew, “Introduction,” Excerpt from *Miscellaneous poems* by Ewan Clark (Oates.473), *Laurence Sterne and Sterneana*, Cambridge Digital Library, March 21, 2024 (<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/PR-OATES-00473/1>).

¹²⁶ Ewan Clark, *Miscellaneous Poems* (Whitehaven: J. Ware, 1779), 216. Hanley, *Beyond Slavery*, 38.

chapter entitled “Slave Trade,” which promotes an Abolitionist argument through Sterne-inspired characters.¹²⁷

Alongside passages more overtly adaptable within antislavery discussions, Sterne’s works provided a storehouse of quotable fragments that facilitated his identification as a spokesperson for Abolition: they were woven into numerous new print contexts, while tugging on a residual thread found in the originary work.¹²⁸ The “bitter draught” phrase—found in Sermon 10, quoted by Sancho, and most famously reworked in *A Sentimental Journey* (“still slavery! said I—still thou art a bitter draught”)—became a catchphrase deemed able to encapsulate the Abolitionist argument. The phrase’s formulation in both the sermon and *A Sentimental Journey* features in the *Beauties of Sterne* to which, arguably, more readers turned for grasping an “essence” of Sterne’s writing than to his full works.¹²⁹ The phrase resurfaced extensively during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in newspaper columns and magazine articles in Britain, and in North America, where it served newly forged arguments about ongoing political issues. As W. B. Gerard emphasizes, newspapers, in general, significantly consolidated Sterne’s position within Abolitionist discourse in America, while “The most widespread and creative use of the apostrophe (and the signal term “bitter draught”) is in the American press.”¹³⁰ He notes how it “appears disproportionately in newspapers from states” where slavery was in the process of being “ended” or had already reached that point: “in the 1780s, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont ... and by 1805 New York and New Jersey.”¹³¹ It is worth noting that in Boston, where slavery was made unconstitutional in 1783, Sterne and Sancho’s letter exchange was reprinted in the *Boston Magazine* in June 1784—the coupling again helping to promote Sterne’s position as sympathetic to Abolition, but also securing Sancho in that narrative, both as inseparable from Sterne and as a published author in his own right.¹³²

Complementing its recirculation in the press, the “bitter draught” phrase reappeared in similar antislavery publications in America and in Britain, among them Alexander McLeod’s *Negro Slavery Unjustifiable: A Discourse*, published in New York in 1802, and Scottish poet and Abolitionist Thomas Pringle’s “Slavery” (1827)—“O Slavery, ‘thou art a bitter draught’” appears in the sonnet’s first line—and which was subsequently reprinted in numerous newspapers and magazines.¹³³ Pringle’s obituary in the *Cape Monthly Magazine* in July 1860 describes his

¹²⁷ Leonard MacNally, *Sentimental Excursions to Windsor and Other Places* (London: J. Walker, 1781), 219–24.

¹²⁸ On American Sterneana in this context, see Gerard, “Laurence Sterne,” 197–8.

¹²⁹ M.-C. Newbould, “Wit and Humour for the Heart of Sensibility: The Beauties of Fielding and Sterne,” in *The Afterlives of Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, ed. Daniel Cook and Nicholas Seager (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 133–52.

¹³⁰ Gerard, “Laurence Sterne,” 181, 192, 196.

¹³¹ Gerard, “Laurence Sterne,” 190.

¹³² *Evening Fire-Side* 1.33, July 27, 1805, 262.

¹³³ Alexander McLeod, *Negro Slavery Unjustifiable: A Discourse* (New York: Alexander McLeod, 1802), 40. Pringle’s poem appears in, for instance, *Kaleidoscope, or Literary and Scientific Mirror* (Liverpool),

recourse to Sterne's phrase to encapsulate his abhorrence of slavery.¹³⁴ Iron Gray's *The Gospel of Slavery: A Primer of Freedom* (New York, 1864) decries the "duty" of "the Slave-Overseer" by calling upon Sterne's "bitter draught," asking "Suppose the chalice were commended to the lips of Slaveholders?"¹³⁵ This phrase's perceived political potency is effectively conveyed by a report in *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper* in 1847—subsequently repeated in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*—that "An American editor, in preparing Sterne's works for sale in the slave states, substitutes 'oppression' for 'slavery'! — 'Disguise thyself as thou wilt, still, oppression, still thou art a bitter draught'."¹³⁶

The phrase was, indeed, redeployed in political debates. In March 1796, several papers reported on Wilberforce's Commons motion to consider the "Report of the Committee on the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade." His speech challenges Britain's hypocrisy in decrying "inhumanity" if it overlooks "the sufferings of the poor victims thus dragg'd from the bosom of parental fondness, to drink the bitter draught of Slavery."¹³⁷ In the debate on the Abolition Bill in the House of Commons on February 23, 1807, Walter Fawkes, MP for Yorkshire, argued that the continuance of the slave trade was anti-religious, cruel, and offensive to humanity, and incorporated the Sternean phrase to make his point: "let us, with the sentimental writer of our country, exclaim, 'Disguise thyself as thou wilt, slavery, still thou art a bitter draught; and though thousands in all ages have been made to drink of thee, thou art no less bitter on that account'."¹³⁸

Although Wilberforce uses a micro-quotation, typically, as in Fawkes's statement, this phrase reappears as a condensed version of the formulation in *A Sentimental Journey*, rather than in the earlier sermon. But the phrase is also quoted by Sancho—and, hence, recirculated among the readerships of the newspapers and magazines in which his letter to Sterne was excerpted. It is almost impossible to untangle which of these sources a quoter might have had in mind when reiterating the "bitter draught," even if, in quantitative terms, publications of Sterne's works in America and in Europe exceeded reprintings of the Sancho/Sterne exchange¹³⁹—we cannot definitively state who had most access to what. And, while this single phrase undoubtedly helped to consolidate the image of Sterne as a spokesperson for antislavery sentiment, especially if he was named as its author, it was also reiterated anonymously, a tag detachable

3, 408, April 22, 1828, 352; *Oriental Herald* 12, 39 (March 1827): 472; *Oriental Herald* 20, 63 (March 1829): 500; *The Tourist* 1, 25, Monday, February 11, 1833, 3.

¹³⁴ *Cape Monthly Magazine* 8, July 1, 1860, 58.

¹³⁵ Iron Gray, *The Gospel of Slavery: A Primer of Freedom* (New York, 1864). Emphasis in the original.

¹³⁶ *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper* 26, Saturday, January 9, 1847, 39; *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, 2, 16, April 1, 1847, 16.

¹³⁷ *Morning Post and Fashionable World* 7511, Wednesday, March 16, 1796, 3; *The Star* 2365, Wednesday, March 16, 1796, 3; *General Evening Post* 9793, March 15–17, 1796, 2.

¹³⁸ Slave Trade Abolition Bill, February 23, 1807, *Hansard*, vol. 8, column 964; *Hansard Parliament*, June 7, 2024 (<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1807-02-23/debates/b1da6ca2-d035-4249-a0aa-c6832301d30e/SlaveTradeAbolitionBill?highlight=fawkes#contribution-cecaf68b-1470-4386-804e-2f2e24d93041>).

¹³⁹ Gerard, "Laurence Sterne," 191.

from Sterne himself. Moreover, not every new reader would have recognized any source at all. The phrase became part of a semi-anonymous public discourse.

III. Conclusion

Sancho wrote several more letters to Sterne after 1766. Of Sterne's remaining two letters to Sancho, one presses his friend to intercede on his behalf for the Duke and Duchess of Montagu "to send me the subscription money" promised for *A Sentimental Journey*, necessary to regulating Sterne's "pecuniary accounts."¹⁴⁰ The *Gentleman's Magazine's* review of Sterne's *Letters* in 1776 suggests that "we cannot help thinking that the sensibility, or delicacy at least, of this 'good-hearted' negro was so *real* and *unaffected* as to be hurt by being desired" to act as debt-collector to the Montagus.¹⁴¹ Sterne's final letter, dated June 30, 1767, from Coxwold in Yorkshire, where the terminally ill writer had retreated, mentions "the Task I have set [my pen] this summer"—writing *A Sentimental Journey*—and his belief that keeping his temper was "the truest philosophy, for this we must be indebted to ourselves, but not to our fortunes—."¹⁴² It seems that financial concerns were always to condition these friends' sentimental commerce—each the other's "Debtor."

Critical discussions of the initial exchange between Sancho and Sterne have not always positioned Sterne in a favorable light, with his supposed opportunistic exploitation of the connection variously being ascribed to the promotion of his self-image as a philanthropist and to potential economic benefit. It is important to recalibrate this critical assessment of Sterne, because it risks distorting the chronology of how Sancho and Sterne's correspondence became publicly available, and then formed part of the reception narratives of both authors, and in turn how both men's celebrity featured in Abolitionist contexts. For Gerard, for instance, Sterne's texts could exert influence "in the realm of actual (as opposed to theoretical) politics."¹⁴³ This position clearly runs counter to critical assessments that see Sterne's position in antislavery discourse as based on a distorted, favorably prejudiced interpretation of what his texts actually offer, and which at worst see Sterne the white pseudo-philanthropist as exploiting and marginalizing Sancho, "an admiring Black subject."¹⁴⁴ It is worth recalling Solomon's reminder that inherently imbalanced "cultural dynamics" are perhaps more to "blame" than individual authors.¹⁴⁵ Sancho's role in helping to consolidate the perception that Sterne could be repurposed in such contexts is undeniable. The extent to which that influence can be extrapolated from the diversity of other elements that made up Sterne's reception on such terms—or Sancho's on others—is impossible to determine, just as claims about Sterne's supposed intentions in replying to Sancho must only be

¹⁴⁰ Sterne, *Letters*, 577–78.

¹⁴¹ *Gentleman's Magazine* 46 (January 1776): 27–9.

¹⁴² Sterne, *Letters*, 597–8.

¹⁴³ Gerard, "Laurence Sterne," 198–9.

¹⁴⁴ Yekani, *Familial Feeling*, 142.

¹⁴⁵ Solomon, "The Anti-Slavery Legacy."

speculative. Too much speculation, as too much overdeterministic interpretation, simplifies the reception of Sterne, and of Sancho, and of their conjuncture, and of the wider historical moments in which their words were recirculated through the mechanisms of public discourse and of print that shaped their celebrity identities, and their posthumous capacity to act as spokespeople for antislavery argument.

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