

Laurence Sterne and the Erotic: The Depiction of Sensibility in 'A Sentimental Journey'

'The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas –
for my body does not have the same ideas I do.'
- Roland Barthes¹

Yorick is a 'man of feeling'.² Laurence Sterne's protagonist in *A Sentimental Journey* is highly sensitised as he travels through France and most alive when he is feeling something. Laurence Sterne expands the realms of sensibility, a typically feminine domain, to include a man who not only experiences emotions, but a man who literally feels his blood pump and his heart race, one who is not reticent about coyly suggesting the causes or outcomes of his physiological reactions to sexual excitement. In this essay I shall argue that Laurence Sterne's depiction of sensibility satirically subverts the moralistic overtones of sensibility. Sterne's depiction suggests that the sexual responses of the 'sensible being', one who exemplifies the notion of sensibility through his or her concentration on feeling, are more valid than the idealised conceptual notions of propriety inherent in the typical eighteenth-century notion of sensibility. It is this concentration on the physical reaction of the body which would be taken up by the Romantics, whilst the high esteem for didacticism would decline towards the end of the eighteenth-century.

Initially I shall elaborate upon the contemporary context in which sensibility arose and explain how it was considered to be most applicable to women, pertaining largely to their sexual conduct and respectability. Then, I discuss the emergence of "The Man of Feeling", and the contrast of Sterne's depiction of The Man of Feeling, Yorick, to Samuel Richardson's portrayal of The Woman of Feeling, Pamela: due to a more explicit presentation of the physical responses of sexual arousal and a lack of

¹ *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 17.

² Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An introduction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 88.

the didacticism seen in Richardson's *Pamela*, Sterne subverts the moralising overtones of sensibility by focusing on the actual rather than the abstract. Finally, I suggest that Sterne's differences to other contemporary authors of sensibility were due to his belief in Latitudinarianism, a belief which shunned the idealisation of rationality, instead lauding the importance of 'the passions'.

Sensibility hinged upon an epistemology propounded by figures such as John Locke and David Hume, a 'theory of knowledge [which] rested on sensations derived from the external world'.³ These sensations were experienced by the nervous system, which was considered to be 'the source of many ills of both body and mind'.⁴ Sensibility, then, related to 'the faculty of feeling, the capacity for extremely refined emotion and a quickness to display compassion for suffering'.⁵ It became 'the key term of the period'⁶ as right-mindedness and physiological health became a paramount concern. However, this notion of sensibility was an inherently gendered one: women were believed to possess a more fragile nervous system than men and were therefore considered 'more passionate'.⁷ Sensibility was not to remain strictly feminine, although it was to remain feminised: "The Man of Feeling" came to represent a man who, 'in an unfeeling world, avoided manly power and assumed womanly qualities of tenderness and susceptibility'.⁸ Such qualities were, however, intrinsically linked to ideas of sex and virtue, and didactic authors attempted to guard susceptible women from besmirching their reputations.

³Martin Fitzpatrick, *The Enlightenment World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 254.

⁴Harry Whitaker, C.U.M. Smith and Stanley Finger, *Brain, Mind and Medicine: Essays in Eighteenth-century Neuroscience* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 2007), p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Todd, p. 7.

⁷ Carol MacCormack and Marilyn Starthern, *Nature, Culture and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 48.

⁸ Todd, p. 88.

Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) highlights the difference between Sterne and a more conservative view of sensibility. Despite a plot which focuses on the 'near-rape'⁹ of Pamela, sexual feelings are never focused upon; only emotional reactions to Mr B's advance are described, and link more to the moralistic notion of propriety than to the physicality of sexual arousal. During such advances, Pamela's body prevents sexuality from conflicting with her virtue, instead 'faint[ing] away'¹⁰ in order to protect it. For Richardson, bodily responses are merely the result of an adherence to the strict ethical code of female sensibility; for Sterne, these responses are the primary mode through which sensibility exists or is experienced. Indeed, Sterne is aware of the disregard of the physicality of sensibility, and questions the association of sensibility to abstract ideas. In *A Sentimental Journey*, Sterne subverts sensibility's inherent moralism by focusing on the physical reactions to the sexual feelings of men *and* women.

Blushing is one of the most prominent sexually charged physical responses in the novel and is inherently linked to sexual arousal in both sexes, with female characters directly opposing the chastity of *Pamela's* eponymous heroine. Sterne playfully hints at Yorick's sexual desires, leaving Yorick's blushes to 'the few who feel to analyse'.¹¹ Yet this analysis need not be a subtle or complex one. Blushing a desirable trait in women, and there was 'scarcely a tribute to the modest woman that did not mention blushing'¹² in eighteenth-century literature. However, the blushing women of Sterne's text are certainly more forthright in linking their physical responses to sexual arousal, something which Pamela would not dare attempt: the

⁹ G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), p. 32.

¹⁰ Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, ed. Peter Sabor (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 64.

¹¹ Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, ed. Graham Petrie (London: Penguin, 1986), p.43.

¹² Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel*, 4th ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), p. 65.

lady from Brussels ‘solemnly declare[s]’¹³ whilst blushing that Yorick ‘[has] been making love to [her]’¹⁴ throughout their conversation. Clearly, Sterne is not concerned with a moralised reading of sensibility which denies the presence of sexuality; instead, he portrays sensibility ‘in all of its wealth of ambiguous expression’¹⁵ with didacticism ‘clearly absent’.¹⁶

The lack of didacticism in *A Sentimental Journey* was due to Sterne’s ‘embrac[ing of] the traditions of Latitudinarianism’.¹⁷ Sterne’s religious adherence to Latitudinarianism offers a curious link to Yorick’s apparent licentiousness: Latitudinarianism opposed stauncher branches of Anglican ecclesiasticism, and instead positioned itself ‘against the exaggerated assumptions concerning man’s rationality’¹⁸ and the ‘distrust of the passions’.¹⁹ Sterne’s depiction of Yorick displays this belief in the passions over the rational as Yorick affirms that ‘[he] generally act[s] from the first impulse’.²⁰ Compared with Richardson’s *Pamela*, who writes down her innermost ideas rather than acting upon them, Sterne’s privileging of sensibility’s role in the moment rather than the moral is clear. The immediacy of feeling coupled with its contentious moral ambiguity is seen when Yorick feels the pulse of the lady from Brussels: as the pulse marks each moment of Yorick’s ‘sensible ecstasy’, he suggests that ‘if it is the same blood which comes from the heart, which descends to the extremes...I am sure you must have one of the best pulses of any woman in the

¹³ Sterne, p. 50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Christopher Nagle, ‘Sterne, Shelley, and Sensibility’s Pleasures of Proximity’, *English Literary History*, 70 (2003), 813-845 (p. 820).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Arthur H. Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Early and Middle Years* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 31.

¹⁸ R.S. Crane ‘Suggestions Toward A Genealogy of the “Man of Feeling”’, *English Literary History*, 1:3 (December 1934), 205-230 (p. 214).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Sterne, p. 46.

world'.²¹ The Romantics would later favour Sterne's attention to the idiosyncrasy of the moment, and Sterne's brand of sensibility 'became quickly identified with the "sentimental" of the Romantics.'²² In contrast, Samuel Richardson's depictions of bland women who were 'not thought of as possessing absolute authority, or indeed absolute anything'²³ would be radically re-worked by Jane Austen in the nineteenth-century.

Sterne's notion of sensibility differed from more traditional views, like those of Richardson, due to its lack of an easily perceptible moral code. As the 'sensible female' was considered weak, the sensibility involved in didactic novels carried with it a notion that women were to be protected, and that sex was always damaging to their virtue. Sterne's male and female characters are more equal; despite the first-person account from only Yorick's perspective, the women he meets not afraid to hint at their sexuality. The characters exist in the world of the actual and not of the abstract, quite unlike Pamela, who lives in a quasi-conceptual world of virtue and propriety. It is this focus on the physical which earned Sterne a lasting power which Richardson did not receive: the Romantics would later elaborate on the idea of physical reactions to love, and sexual stimulus, whilst Jane Austen felt it necessary to reinvigorate the role of the female character in light of Richardson's style which by the nineteenth-century comprised an archaic form of didacticism. Without the erotic element of Sterne's sensibility, didacticism would have simply ignored sexual arousal, leaving Pamela as sensibility's perfect paragon.

²¹ Sterne, p. 75.

²² Peter Jan de Voogd and John Neubauer, *The Reception of Laurence Sterne in Europe* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 203.

²³ Margaret Anne Doody, 'Samuel Richardson: fiction and knowledge' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-century Novel*, ed. John Richetti (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 90 – 119 (p. 97).

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