Character or caricature? Depicting sentimentalism and Richard Newton's illustrations of Laurence Sterne's A Sentimental Journey

Mary-Céline Newbould

To cite this article: Mary-Céline Newbould (2009) Character or caricature? Depicting sentimentalism and Richard Newton's illustrations of Laurence Sterne's A Sentimental Journey, Word & Image, 25:2, 115-128, DOI: 10.1080/02666280802489814

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02666280802489814

Published online: 16 Feb 2011.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 243

View related articles
Character or caricature? Depicting sentimentalism and Richard Newton’s illustrations of Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*

MARY-CÉLINE NEWBOULD

For Henry Fielding, pitching his stance in a familiar, longstanding and entangled debate, the relation between character and caricature was simple: the ‘Comic History-Painter’ produces ‘the exactest Copy of Nature; insomuch, that a judicious Eye instantly rejects any thing outre…. Whereas in the *Caricatura* we allow all Licence.’¹ One faithfully records and represents ‘Nature’, whilst the other fancifully distorts it to create what J.P. Malcolm was later to term ‘a new order of beings and things’.² Whilst these two artistic modes are seemingly incompatible, however, Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768) offers one means of considering them in conjunction, which has significant implications both for how Sterne’s novel was and might be read in terms of its ostensible guiding principle, sentimentalism, and how some of its readers have realised their interpretations of it visually, in the numerous illustrations that *A Sentimental Journey* has inspired.

I suggest that visual responses to Sterne’s novel are intimately connected with the way in which its readers reacted to *A Sentimental Journey*’s inherently ambiguous treatment of sentimentalism, and that this emerges in the chosen artistic mode of the image. This indicates how *A Sentimental Journey* was read but often evades concrete definitions to present images that are as multiple as the novel’s treatment of sentimentalism.³ I explore here one instance of how Sterne’s novel was received in terms of how it was ‘seen’ in the reader’s mental eye, and how those visualisations were subsequently reproduced, in Richard Newton’s double series of illustrations to the novel of 1794 and 1797.

Newton (1777–1798) was a prolific caricaturist over the brief span of his career and, like his publisher William Holland, was connected with radical politics; his graphic satire encompassed both political and social topics, whose targets included recognisable celebrities and stock figures alike (mostly clergymen or lawyers), as found in prints such as *A Sketch of the Highlife* (1791), *Liberty and Equality* (1792) and *Treason!!!* (1798). Newton’s illustrations of *A Sentimental Journey* have hitherto attracted little scholarly attention, besides a brief discussion by David Alexander in *Richard Newton and English Caricature in the 1790s* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery and Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 40–1, p. 122.


It is perhaps appropriate to survey briefly the rather trampled ground occupied by such over-familiar terms as sentiment and sensibility so as to gauge how they may be appropriate to a discussion of Sterne’s novel and some of the images it inspired. Alongside such novels as Mackenzie’s *Man of Feeling* (1771), *A Sentimental Journey* has generally been considered a major catalyst in the formulation and popularity of the fashion for sentimentalism, the ‘reasonable feeling’ described by R.F. Brissenden, whose characteristics include profound compassion, tender-heartedness and the ability to be moved easily, usually manifested in the sighs, tears and faintings that were soon to shed their connection with ‘reason’ to become ridiculed as clichés. Janet Todd suggests a subtle distinction between the more reasonable ‘sentiment’ and ‘sensibility’, which she describes as ‘an innate sensitiveness or susceptibility’, and which was supported in eighteenth-century fiction through the increased focus upon the pathetic scenes and stories that would provoke a response of heightened emotion. Sterne was a commercially astute author who, attuned to the newly emerging taste for such tender moments amongst his readers, gradually shaped the new fictional narratives he produced to appeal to this emerging sensibility. Whilst the earlier parts of his first novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (published in instalments from 1759 to 1767), were often rebuked for their bawdiness, sexual innuendo and irreverence, in later volumes Sterne notably adjusts the novel’s tone, increasing its affective pitch by focusing on scenes that overtly appeal to the sentimental, a change of direction he was to follow in *A Sentimental Journey*.

One of the most familiar examples of this awakened attention to sentimentalism’s popularity is the story of Maria, which proved to be so successful in attracting the applause of *Tristram Shandy*’s readers that Sterne reused it in *A Sentimental Journey*, dwelling even more luxuriously on those features likely to heighten sentimental affect. Just as Sterne selected Yorick as the narrator of *A Sentimental Journey*, the parson whom Tristram eulogises in his narrative’s first volume (and under which pseudonym Sterne had published his own sermons), so Maria once again makes her appearance in an encounter that Yorick presents with even more feeling. A tourist familiar with a now-famous publication, and in some sense using the volumes in which Tristram undertakes his travels as a guide-book, Yorick seeks out the very same spot and attraction described earlier by his ‘friend’:

> The story he had told of that disorder’d maid affect’d me not a little in the reading; but when I got within the neighbourhood where she lived, it returned so strong in my mind, that I could not resist an impulse which prompted me to go half a league out of the road to the village where her parents dwelt to inquire of her.

Whilst consolidating the generally positive assessment of this passage in *Tristram Shandy* amongst contemporary readers Yorick also promotes his role as a writer, encouraging a similarly favourable reception for his narrative by touching even more deeply the pathetic chords his precursor had struck; a scene that ‘affect’d me not a little in the reading’ is more impressive when experienced first hand, and is subsequently retold with an intensified awareness of its emotive impact.

---


6– Todd, p. 7.

Maria embodies one significant aspect of how *A Sentimental Journey* was (initially at least) read and appreciated for its overtly sentimental qualities; Ralph Griffiths, in an unsigned article in the *Monthly Review*, exclaims ‘What delicacy of feeling, what tenderness of sentiment, yet what simplicity of expression are here!’.

The character certainly appealed to the public imagination: several spurious continuations of her life story appeared in the wake of *A Sentimental Journey*, amongst them Miss Street’s *Letters of Maria* (1790) and the anonymous *Sterne’s Maria: A Pathetic Story* (c.1800), both of which rewrite and even conclude the heroine’s history.

Yet the manner in which Sterne presents the character also opened up a different facet of the public imagination: Maria is one of the literary figures embodying the sentimental most frequently depicted in the visual arts, and her image reappears countless times in various media. In *Laurence Sterne and the Visual Imagination* W.B. Gerard provides a succinct record of illustrations depicting Maria, describing how the alternative styles adopted at different periods responded to changing attitudes towards the sentimentalism she embodies: at first she is an object of sympathetic compassion with whom Yorick interacts, but later she becomes an isolated, socially ostracised figure. *A Sentimental Journey*, rather than *Tristram Shandy*, was most frequently selected as the textual source for these visualisations, indicating readers’ awareness that the second novel offers the most affecting passage of the two.

Initially, at least, *A Sentimental Journey*’s ‘Maria’ episode offered a principal source of inspiration for painters who respond to the realistic tendency characterising Yorick’s verbal picture-painting. He carefully supplies descriptive details which allow the reader to assemble a complete picture of the scene in his or her mind’s eye; Maria is ‘dress’d in white’, ‘her hair hung loose’, and ‘She had, superadded likewise to her jacket, a pale green ribband which fell across her shoulder to the waist; at the end of which hung her pipe’. Sterne draws here on an established convention of ways of representing sentimentalism visually that stems from an understanding of how its literature represents the observable world verbally. As Todd writes:

> In all forms of sentimental literature, there is an assumption that life and literature are directly linked, not through any notion of a mimetic depiction of reality but through the belief that the literary experience can intimately affect the living one.

Yorick’s attempt at heightened realism encourages the reader to identify with the character depicted, to experience sentiments similar to those he describes, and to glean a moralising lesson from its pathos.

The reader’s mental visualisation of Yorick’s textual picture was frequently realised in illustrations of the scene and its characters that respond to and emulate Sterne’s descriptive realism, and its role in the composition of a sentimental narrative; Angelica Kauffman’s ‘Maria near Moulins’ (1777) (figure 1) is a familiar and important embodiment of the conjunction between realism and sentiment upon which this passage in *A Sentimental Journey* draws, and which opens up one facet of how the scene might be represented visually. Kauffman’s painting set a precedent for subsequent artists who reproduce with variations her visualisation of Maria’s...
pose, clothing, and disposition in a rural setting, and influenced book illustrations that similarly adopt a naturalistic style.

Sterne’s work in general inspired a phenomenal number and range of visual responses, many of which have been comprehensively catalogued in an ongoing bibliography published in *The Shandean*.15 Besides providing fascinating visual counterparts to Sterne’s work, the diversity of styles adopted and the types of scenes selected for artistic depiction enable them to act as an important means of gauging patterns of readers’ response to his work. Catherine Gordon’s illuminating studies of some of these images document a development from the initial perception of Sterne as an overtly comic writer (promoted by the earliest volumes of *Tristram Shandy*) to that of an author who appeals to the heart, a reassessment of his fiction that arose in

response to the emerging vogue for sentimentalism, and which is evident in the large number of images depicting such episodes as ‘Maria’. As John Mullan (amongst others) has pointed out, volumes such as The Beauties of Sterne (1782) that extracted and collected the most touchingly sentimental passages of Sterne’s writings were seminal in consolidating his reputation as a particularly talented author in the genre. Gordon and Gerard observe that the episodes included in this popular volume provided an important source for many subsequent visual images, such as the Maria vignette (extracted from both Tristram Shandy and A Sentimental Journey), which helped to support the status of Yorick’s narrative in particular as an exemplary sentimental text.

Yet this is only one facet of how A Sentimental Journey might be (and was) read and understood; not only does the novel layer such affective passages as the Maria episode with those of a decidedly different nature, which appeal alternately to bawdy innuendo, slapstick humour or satirical wit, but its very presentation and treatment of sentimentalism eludes such seemingly straightforward responses as finding it moving or expressive of universally felt, admirable emotions. It has often been remarked that whilst many late eighteenth-century readers may have embraced sentimental fiction as promoting the ‘rational feeling’ Brissenden describes and the sympathy between human beings that can motivate benevolent actions, or may have enjoyed being moved to tears when reading particularly touching passages, it was equally subject to hostile critique or, indeed, ridicule; Todd, for instance, notes the late eighteenth-century reaction against sensibility voiced by such figures as Hannah More.

Gordon suggests that in the early years of the nineteenth century sentimentalism was becoming unfashionable: Sterne, as one of its principal exponents, was subsequently viewed with increasing suspicion. The Critical Review accuses Yorick ‘of imposing upon his countrymen whims for sentiment, and caprice for humour!’, and Elizabeth Carter writes to Elizabeth Vesey that his celebrated ‘benevolence’ is ‘a word so wretchedly misapplied, and so often put as a substitute for virtue’. Wilberforce claimed that Sterne’s sentimentalism pandered to popular taste, whilst Lamb and Hazlitt agreed that he used it to manipulate his readers. Later commentators have similarly suggested that A Sentimental Journey offers a double-sided approach towards the sensibility its narrator embodies: Yorick’s apparently benevolent actions could be motivated by selfish altruism; his encounters with women might possess an erotic rather than innocent dimension.

Gordon comments, ‘the first-person narrative of A Sentimental Journey is remarkable for its suggestion of motives and desires within Yorick which he does not divulge explicitly, or which run counter to those he claims underlie his actions’. Sterne’s novel is attuned to an inherent contradiction at the centre of its apparently principal concept: the so-called realism of sentimentalism, embodying ideas that were universally felt and understood, is continuously antagonistic with the highly subjective or fictively constructed nature of the experiences it recounts. A tense relation between the real and the fictional, the believable and the incredible is maintained throughout, as the novel occasionally offers glimpses of naturalism but refracts them through the ironic self-consciousness of its narrative voice. Readings of A Sentimental Journey can
thus waver between a desire to immerse in the escapism of the sensible feelings ostensibly projected and awareness that its sincerity is malleable.27

Sterne’s treatment of sentiment is more complex and confusing than simple advocacy or subversion, producing an ambivalent response to the sentimental that in turn emerges in visual representations of the novel. These offer a more diverse and mottled picture than some studies might hitherto have claimed, and which, I suggest, is demonstrated by the artistic mode adopted in the images, discussed here as the perhaps reductive alternatives of the ‘naturalistic’ or ‘realistic’ style, and caricature, the attempt to produce a faithful record of nature on the one hand, and the wilful distortion of its representation on the other as, according to Malcolm, the caricaturist is ‘borne away by his fancy’.28

Whilst Kauffmann’s oil painting, which frequently reappeared in engravings circulating on the print market, offers a conveniently familiar focus-point representing the sentiment-realism tradition and its relation to depictions of A Sentimental Journey, Richard Newton’s double series of illustrations for the novel offer an intriguingly alternative way of viewing the novel that belongs to a very different artistic tradition, mode of dissemination, and perhaps potential reader/viewer. The discernible naturalism of some of Newton’s images may be related to the tradition embodied in Kauffmann’s, but when the two artists’ work is compared in this respect his can in no way be considered as equally accomplished. Newton’s images excel, by contrast, in the ebullience of their caricature, the style most natural to the artist and which ensured his success within his own particular practical sphere of late eighteenth-century graphic satire; his attempts at emulating the realistic tradition suited to paintings displayed at the Royal Academy seem ineffectual by comparison, but nonetheless play an important role in how Newton envisaged that he might present A Sentimental Journey’s visually in the context of book illustration using the techniques with which he was most familiar.

Newton’s illustrations of A Sentimental Journey possess a stylistic versatility that allows him to register its appeal to the very different kinds of verbal picture-painting, by promoting comic and sentimental qualities alternately, and sometimes combining the two using alternative artistic styles. This emerges in the different states in which Newton’s illustrations of A Sentimental Journey appear, which present a confusing bibliographical history: 12 plates (dated 1794) were first published by William Holland in an edition of A Sentimental Journey of 1795, later reissued as a series of loose-leaf plates bound together in a folio, published by J. Wallis c.1812. Holland printed a second series of illustrations in 1797 in which significant changes were made to the earlier images, although the sheets are confusingly dated 1792 (Alexander suggests Holland may have used old paper),29 and the plates can be found in different editions of the novel.30 The alterations Newton introduces in the second series of 1797 are particularly significant in terms of the types of response to A Sentimental Journey that might be traced through its illustrations; they refuse to follow a coherent pattern or promote one particular reading, revealing that Sterne’s novel activated the transgression of already permeable boundaries between different modes of depiction when coming to represent sentimentalism visually.

27 – See, for instance, Brissenden, pp. 7–9; Todd, p. 133 ff; and, with specific reference to A Sentimental Journey, Goring, pp. 182–301.


29 – Alexander, p. 122.


The copy held by the Laurence Sterne Trust at Shandy Hall contains Newton’s twelve plates published by Holland, 1797. I am indebted to Patrick Wildgust, curator of Shandy Hall, Coxwold, for his invaluable assistance and patience in providing me with reproductions of the plates of these extremely rare texts, and to the Laurence Sterne Trust for permission to use them here. Designs to Illustrate Sterne’s Sentimental Journey (London: J. Wallis, 1812[?]). Twelve plates after Newton’s 1795 illustrations.
As Yorick’s description of Maria revealed, he earnestly grasps the naturalist painter’s brush when the conjunction of sentiment and realism most fruitfully serves his purpose, enabling him to create scenes that are most powerfully affective; but he can at other points equally be labelled a caricaturist. Similarly, whilst Newton’s images might be described as predominantly caricatures, he also reinforces the reception of *A Sentimental Journey* as an overtly sentimental work by adopting a naturalistic style in some of the 1797 alterations, particularly in his representation of Maria. The later version of ‘Maria Entering Moulines’ (figure 2) subdues the more overtly humorous elements found in the 1795 image (figure 3), promoting instead the touching sensibility of the scene. Newton exchanges the urban for a rural setting, perhaps to evoke paintings such as Kauffman’s and the increasingly familiar scenery adopted by other artists depicting Maria, although here executed with less skilful precision.

Figure 2. Richard Newton, ‘Maria Entering Moulines’ (London: Holland, 1797).

Figure 3. Richard Newton, ‘Maria Entering Moulines’, in *A Sentimental Journey* (London: Holland, 1795).
Her figure is significantly different in Newton’s two illustrations: in the 1795 version, her gown is low-waisted and her hair falls over her shoulders, but in the later image the ethereal muslin of her dress clings to her body, resembling the drapery of classical sculpture, as if to monumentalise her. Maria’s long hair flows even more loosely about her shoulders and her facial expression is more sorrowful, reinforcing the impression of pitiful abandon. She is not yet the isolated figure in the landscape she was to become in later illustrations, however, as Yorick responds to the heightened sympathy she arouses with a pained concern that lacks his earlier, tender smile. 31

The surroundings also harmonise with the enhanced pathos of the scene, as the animated street setting of the 1795 plate is replaced with leafy foliage, consonant with Maria’s detachment from civilised urbanity, which is only distantly recalled in the church and cultivated fields of the far distance. A rustic trio replaces the comic pair of the earlier version who observed Yorick and Maria with quizzical curiosity from a two-storied house; now, an elderly peasant couple and young girl look upon them with the furrowed brows that suggest moved concern.

The facial features of all the figures in this image express perhaps too obviously the emotions they are intended to indicate, rather like the classical actor’s comic/tragic mask, and show evidence of the caricaturist’s style; nonetheless, the sincerity of Newton’s intentions seem clear: he is not using caricature to mock sentimentalism, but attempts to emulate the naturalistic style to emphasise the more delicate qualities it possesses in his representation of human responsiveness through bodily gesture and facial expression, albeit crudely. Furthermore, the shortcomings of Newton’s image in this respect are more particularly central to the alternative artistic style that dominates his realisation of how A Sentimental Journey could be visualised, with more successful results. Whilst ‘Maria Entering Moulines’ reflects how Yorick delicately sketches such scenes with pathetic realism to inspire a sympathy consonant with that which he claims to experience, other images respond to the very different tone of those moments at which Yorick eagerly grasps the caricaturist’s pencil to reinforce the inherent comic quality of his narrative.

Although the role of caricaturist might more easily be ascribed to Tristram Shandy than to Parson Yorick (for instance, in such heavily caricatured portraits as that of Dr Slop), A Sentimental Journey’s narrative displays an artistic versatility that makes him an equally suitable candidate for the title of caricaturist. Whilst heightening the realism of some of the scenes that he paints to foreground his own immersion in their sentimental intensity and to encourage a similar response in his reader, in others he is a detached observer who records what he sees with the caricaturist’s eye, selecting the most strikingly unusual features of his subjects and exaggerating his description to provoke a humorous reaction.

Yorick-as-caricaturist appears in a passage describing the multitude of dwarves that, he claims, populate Paris in remarkable abundance. Although in his musings upon the ‘unaccountable sport of nature in forming such numbers of dwarfs’ Yorick seems to describe the figure with pathetic sympathy, his observations mirthfully dwell upon the most strikingly ugly aspects of this seeming phenomenon:

31 – Gerard, p. 113 ff.
As I carried my idea out of the opera comique with me, I measured every body I saw walking in the streets by it — Melancholy application! especially where the size was little — the face extremely dark — the eyes quick — the nose long — the teeth white — the jaw prominent — to see so many miseries, by force of accidents driven out of their own proper class into the very verge of another, which it gives me pain to write down — every third man a pigmy! — some by rickety heads and hump backs — others by bandy legs — a third set arrested by the hand of Nature in the sixth and seventh years of their growth — a fourth, in their perfect and natural state, like dwarf apple-trees; from the rudiments and stamina of their existence, never meant to grow higher. 32

Simon Dickie, writing on the surprisingly cruel nature of eighteenth-century humour, considers ‘Yorick’s reflections’ to be sincerely sympathetic towards deformity, and so they ‘occupy an entire chapter of Sterne’s Sentimental Journey’; however, this passage possesses a gleeful undertone that more readily accords with a prevalent cultural attitude towards physical abnormality otherwise evoked by Dickie, which saw it as a legitimate object of amusement. 33

Dickie provides evidence gleaned from the large number of jest-books popular in the period, which ‘offer innumerable jokes about cripples, dwarfs, and hunchbacks; about amputees and other mutilées; about the blind or the one-eyed; about decrepit old people, paupers, and invalids’. 34 Similarly, publications such as William Hay’s On Deformity (1754) present the various bodily defects belonging to its author as legitimate objects of comic entertainment. 35

Tobias Smollett’s Travels through France and Italy (1766) more trenchantly uses derisive accounts of the deformity that he particularly notices abroad, including dwarfishness, to comment negatively upon other nations; for instance, he exposes the pernicious foreign method of ‘swaddling’ infants by describing its harmful effect on the adult body:

… those accursed bandages must heat the tender infant into a fever; must hinder the action of the muscles, and the play of the joints, so necessary to health and nutrition…. What are the consequences of this cruel swaddling? the limbs are wasted; the joints grow rickety; the brain is compressed, and a hydrocephalus, with a great head and sore eyes, ensues. I take this abominable practice to be one great cause of the bandy legs, diminutive bodies, and large heads, so frequent in the south of France, and in Italy. 36

Yorick’s observations seem directly to respond to Smollett’s comments, and yet he sweetens their sour flavour with good humour. 37 He recycles Smollett’s language, repeating ‘bandy legs’, whilst ‘large heads’ become strangely ‘rickety’ (Smollett’s term to describe ‘the joints’), and so exposes the pompous tone of their original source to amused critique; whereas Smollett judges, Yorick only describes the foreign practices that produce the phenomenon, but uses the account to create a vividly comic picture of this aspect of his experiences abroad.

Whereas descriptive details heighten the realism of Yorick’s meeting with Maria, here they accumulate to create an intentionally unwieldy list of attributes, incongruously juxtaposed with metaphorical phrases (‘every third man a pigmy’) and pseudo-philosophical, elevated diction (‘Melancholy application!’; ‘arrested by the hand of Nature’, ‘in their perfect and natural state’). Yorick’s inventory of physical deformities brings them to even greater...
prominence; he dispenses with conjunctions to hyperbolise and compact his observations, intensifying the series of impressions as though he were almost unable to describe such boundless variety coherently, yet revels in its most amusing elements.

Yorick acts here as a caricaturist who lavishes his account with striking details for greater comic effect. He produces a highly pictorial composition, in which sizes and proportions are carefully ‘measured’ but also distorted in their drawing, allowing the reader to conceptualise the motley scene in a manner that explicitly appeals to caricatured illustration. Hogarth’s commentary for The Bench (1758) similarly identifies the dwarf as a particularly suitable target for caricature: ‘A Giant [or a Dwarf] may be call’d a common man Outre’ [sic], recalling the language used by Fielding in his preface to Joseph Andrews; Hogarth’s death-bed essay suggests that he still grapples with the knotted relation between character and caricature, despite his assured support for Fielding’s preface in such prints as Characters/ Caricaturas (1743).38 Deviations from the norms of appearance (such as a prominent jaw or bandy legs) appeal to the caricaturist who, by emphasising and distorting such faults makes them even more unattractive in his verbal or pictorial description and so draws them to the reader or viewer’s attention for his or her entertainment.

A caricaturist first and foremost, Newton inevitably indulges in the potential such passages of A Sentimental Journey offer for fantastical creativity when illustrating the novel, taking licence to infuse into his depiction of different scenes the spirit of that found in Sterne’s ‘The Dwarf’. In particular, the alterations he introduces in the second series of plates suggest that Newton is particularly keen to emphasise the comic quality inherent in Yorick’s use of verbal caricature, and in response to the comic vitality with which this infuses the narrative he produces his most vibrantly successful illustrations in the context of their relation to the traditions of graphic satire. The 1797 version of ‘The Wig’ (figure 4) makes significant changes to the 1795 image (figure 5) that enhance its comic effect, employing caricature in a more marked fashion partly by drawing on the stock humour of the deformed dwarf figure found in A Sentimental Journey, and also by exaggerating certain grotesque facial features. Whereas Newton’s depiction of the pained glances of Yorick and Maria may stretch credulity as naturalistic portraiture, here the abandoned distortion of facial expression sanctioned by caricature contributes effectively to the scene’s humorous dimension. A squat figure of ambiguous age accompanies the wig-maker, his cramped posture and distortedly ugly face making him an object of comic amusement. The perruquier’s features display the caricatured quality present in the earlier version, but Newton now emphasises them more strongly: the nose is larger, the chin more prominent, the eyes goggling.

Altered facial expression reappears as one of the principal means by which Newton enhances his use of caricature throughout the later series. ‘Yorick and the Fille de Chambre’ of 1797 incorporates a more strikingly grotesque collection of heads in the group gathered around the coach than the earlier plate. Physical ugliness appropriately suggests the unpleasant characteristics of a quarrelling couple in ‘Le Patisser’ [sic] of 1797; the figure arguing in the street with a friar (risibly fat with bulging eyes) possesses

particularly monstrous features: a jutting jaw, jagged bone structure, hooked chin and protruding nose. A similar figure reappears in the subsequent plate, ‘Le Dimanche’, gesticulating with a fellow servant in the doorway; they replace the couple who conduct a more sedate discussion in the earlier ‘Dimanche’ of 1795, whose faces are less grotesque.

The boisterous humour of these scenes, originally inspired by Sterne’s narrative, represents the multi-faceted nature of Yorick’s role as an artistically inclined narrator when considered alongside more overtly sentimentalised tableaux, such as ‘Maria near Moulines’. Yet whilst comparing plates illustrating the same scene produced a few years apart permits the detection of such contrasting responses to Sterne’s novel, single plates in themselves merge naturalistic and caricatured styles to confuse even further the artist’s interpretations of *A Sentimental Journey*, and the public taste they manifest. These accordingly respond to the mixture of pathos and comedy that Sterne entwines in his text, such as found in a passage describing Yorick’s pained encounter with a dead ass on the road to
Nampont and his subsequent compassion for the muleteer who grieves for the lost animal, which is suffused with bathetic humour. He begins the account with a melodramatic, melancholic exclamation, before introducing a less elevated tone:

— But what is happiness! what is grandeur in the painted scene of life! A dead ass, before we had got a league, put a sudden stop to La Fleur’s career — his bidet would not pass by it — a contention arose betwixt them, and the poor fellow was kick’d out of his jack-boots the very first kick.

La Fleur bore his fall like a French Christian, saying neither more or less upon it, than, Diable! so presently got up and came to the charge again astride his bidet, beating him up to it as he would have beat his drum.39

Newton responds to the mixture of registers supplied in this passage (ranging from ‘grandeur’ to the repeated ‘kick’ to the expletive ‘Diable!’) in his accompanying illustration; but the two states in which it appears reveal differences that suggest an oscillation between the alternative readings available. In ‘La Fleur and the Dead Ass’ of 1795 (figure 6), the powerfully emotive impact of the scene is registered in the valet’s bodily contortions and facial expression as he gapes in horrified surprise at the corpse, and in the horse which shies away. The ass’s body is only partially revealed, its head lying beyond the frame of the image as though concealed through delicacy. In the 1797 plate (figure 7), however, no such protection is offered to the viewer’s sensibility: he or she is confronted with the gruesome entirety of the corpse, as though to provoke a reaction comparable to La Fleur’s more effectively. Whilst apparently reaffirming the conjunction of realism and sentiment to heighten the scene’s emotive power, the image also disturbingly prompts a connection with the grotesquely macabre humour for which many of Newton’s contemporaries (in particular Gillray) were famous, and of which his own work yields several examples, both in the dead animal’s body and in the increased use of caricature to depict the scene’s characters. In reformulating his earlier illustration Newton fuses both naturalistic and caricatured art forms in a single image to manifest a confusion between different registers of response and their visualisation.

Thomas Rowlandson later reworked some of Newton’s images from both the 1795 and 1797 plates published by Holland for editions of A Sentimental Journey and The Beauties of Sterne, both issued by Thomas Tegg in 1809.40 The new edition of the latter introduces a change to the subtitle that is interesting for its juxtaposition of the comic with the sentimental, which emerges in Rowlandson’s images; formerly known for Including all his Pathetic Tales, and Most Distinguished Observations on Life, Selected for the Heart of Sensibility in 1782, these Beauties are now described as Comprising his Humorous and Descriptive Tales—Rowlandson re-uses Newton’s 1795 illustration of “The Dead Ass” in his plates for this volume (figure 8); just as Newton had reformulated his earlier image to increase its emotive impact by allowing the ass’s whole body to creep into the frame, so Rowlandson portrays the entire corpse to heighten the scene’s affect, but he similarly suggests that such gruesome fascination has a comical quality by enhancing the caricature used in other aspects of the image.41 A more accomplished artist than Newton, Rowlandson refines his use of these different artistic modes to synthesise...
their compatibility more completely. La Fleur’s rearing horse has more defined musculature and is even more animated than Newton’s; it glares upon rather than shies away from the dead beast, as if to increase the melodramatic horror of the encounter and its morbid fascination. La Fleur is now more clearly aghast, with a grotesquely gaping mouth and flailing limbs that suggest his wildly exaggerated overreaction as he beats the bidet. Just as the episode in Sterne’s narrative is at once touchingly pathetic and comic, so Rowlandson’s illustration (like Newton’s, but more emphatically) fuses natural and caricatured artistic modes to intertwine these two apparently antagonistic responses: the passage cannot definitively be read as either sentimental or humorous.42


The multi-faceted nature of how A Sentimental Journey might be read thus emerges in Newton and Rowlandson’s illustrations of the novel, and to some extent challenges Todd’s assumption that although works of sentimental
fiction ‘may affectionately mock aspects of themselves’, they ‘discourage multiple readings’. Both Newton and Rowlandson’s images register alternative readings of *A Sentimental Journey* in response to its ambivalent treatment of sentiment, and consequently waver between natural and caricatured art forms as the most appropriate means of illustrating the novel, merging these modes to convey readings of Sterne’s text that are as indeterminate as interpretations of his sentimentalism. Newton’s revisions perhaps indicate that the artist may have reconsidered his earlier interpretations, but also that he is aware of how his contemporaries’ response to the novel fluctuated; as a commercial venture, his illustrations must appeal to a broad range of oscillating tastes. The preoccupations of the Sentimentalist, which included compassion for the lame and the diseased, for dead animals and madmen, had lost something of their dignified sincerity; the possibility of reading such qualities ironically is present throughout Sterne’s novel, and emerges fully in artistic responses, such as Newton’s, which suggest that such outlets for sentimental feeling might possess a sinister, macabre, erotically suspicious or merely humorous quality, and so attract the kind of parodic humour that, in visual terms, caricature was most suited to convey.

Figure 8. Thomas Rowlandson, ‘La Fleur and the Dead Ass’, in *The Beauties of Sterne* (London: Tegg, 1809).