“Alas, poor YORICK!”: Sterne’s Iconography of Mourning

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Eighteenth-Century Fiction, Volume 28, Number 2, Winter 2015-16, pp. 313-344 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

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ABSTRACT
Commemorating the death of Parson Yorick, Laurence Sterne’s black page in *Tristram Shandy* (1759) is often perceived as the pre-eminent symbol of his experimentation. But Sterne’s device may be less innovative than previously supposed, descending instead from two distinct traditions of depicting death in print: funeral literature and the typographic epitaph in the mid-century novel. In tracing inventive examples of memento mori iconography and identifying a profusion of novelistic epitaphs appearing during the 1740s and 1750s, this article situates the black page and Yorick’s epitaph in Sterne’s immediate literary context. In so doing, it demonstrates that his innovation in commemorating Yorick’s death lies in his deployment of a typesetting trend in the mid-century novel while simultaneously referencing a longstanding tradition of funeral publications. Through the mourning borders around Yorick’s epitaph and the black page’s double-sided covering of black ink, Sterne engages with the clichés of mourning iconography while playing on—and pushing to its limits—the novelistic epitaph’s self-conscious manipulation of the printed page.

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Alas, poor YORICK!

The death of Parson Yorick is one of the best-remembered moments of Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), owing mainly to the visual markers of mourning that accompany Sterne’s detailed description of the grave:

> He lies buried in a corner of his church-yard, in the parish of ——, under a plain marble slabb, which his friend Eugenius, by leave of his executors, laid upon his grave, with no more than these three words of inscription serving both for his epitaph and elegy. Alas, poor YORICK!

Sterne bordered the parson’s epitaph with black leadings and offset the inscription from the rest of the text (see Figure 1). He printed Yorick’s epitaph twice in *Tristram Shandy*, first as an illustration of the monumental inscription bound with black and second—without the leadings—as that same inscription read aloud by passers-by. Sterne’s first iteration of “Alas, poor YORICK!” is printed to resemble a physical inscription through white space and centralized text while also illustrating the tombstone or grave through its surrounding black leadings. In addition to this typographic artistry, Sterne made directions for an entire leaf of *Tristram Shandy* to be printed on each side with a solid rectangular woodcut (see Figure 2). He had the margins of the black page correspond exactly in size with the margins on the other, text-filled pages and instructed the typesetter to replace the moveable type with a plain wooden block, retaining the page number in its usual place in the top margin in order to mimic the format of the rest of the pages in the novel. With the plain black rectangle shape Sterne encourages the reader to consider the blackness of the ink, the typesetting of the page, and the novel as a material object. This device, the “black page,” soon came to epitomize Sterne’s innovative approach to the novel form.

The black page has long been cited as the pre-eminent symbol of Sterne’s literary experimentation. The narrator of Charles

Jenner’s 1770 novel, *The Placid Man: or, Memoirs of Sir Charles Beville*, records laughing at the black page, calling Sterne an “inimitable ... eccentric genius.”32 Joseph Hunter, an apprentice in a Sheffield warehouse, wrote in his journal for 1798 that, despite “the fashion to cry down Sterne as the greatest plagarist [sic],” one of his favourite parts of *Tristram Shandy* was “Yorick’s death.”3 But by the end of the century, readers were pondering the possible origins of this seemingly innovative device. In 1791, John Ferriar raised concerns (which would escalate in their severity) about the potentially plagiarized status of the black page and many of Sterne’s other passages. He noted that “every one knows the black pages in Tristram Shandy,” before going on to argue that the seemingly original device had been inspired by the black woodcut in Robert Fludd’s *Utriusque cosmic maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technical historia* (1617).4 Sterne’s earliest biographer, Percy Hetherington Fitzgerald, revisited potential sources for Sterne’s visual commemoration of Yorick and agreed with Ferriar in 1864 that Sterne’s sources were probably seventeenth-century esoteric publications.5

While Richard Terry has investigated the plagiarism accusation against Sterne more broadly and Melvyn New’s Florida Edition of the novel glosses the sources of the many textual echoes in *Tristram Shandy*, little attention has been paid recently to the origins of Sterne’s visual commemoration of Yorick. Alexis Tadié, in line with Ferriar and Fitzgerald, suggests in a footnote that Sterne may have been aware of innovative typesetting in seventeenth-century mourning publications, but scholars rarely compare the black page and Yorick’s epitaph to publications contemporary with Sterne’s.6 One exception is Martha F. Bowden, who recognizes that Sterne may have drawn from longstanding

iconographic traditions of commemoration still in practice at the time he was writing *Tristram Shandy*. Bowden calls the black page “an intensification of the black border that often framed the title-page of funeral sermons.”

Scholars have also been relatively slow to align Sterne’s treatment of death and commemoration with that of his fellow novelists. Thomas Keymer’s study, *Sterne, the Moderns, and the Novel* (2002), rectifies this gap in the scholarship by situating *Tristram Shandy* firmly in Sterne’s immediate literary context, and in the process Keymer aligns the black page with the textual conventions of mourning evident in the anonymous *Ephraim Tristram Bates* and William Toldervy’s *Two Orphans* (both 1756).

This article considers Sterne’s engagement with both the contemporary novel and the print culture of his own profession as parson. Drawing together and developing suggestions by Tadié, Bowden, and Keymer, I begin by considering the conventions and innovations of mourning iconography from 1612 to the mid-eighteenth century before exploring typographic epitaphs in novels from Samuel Richardson to Sterne. I demonstrate that Sterne’s innovation in commemorating death lies in his deployment of a contemporary typesetting trend while simultaneously referencing a longstanding tradition of funereal iconography. Sterne dealt with the difficulties of innovation when representing death and grief by innovatively employing the tools of a stale and clichéd tradition of commemorative writing. He engaged with both contemporary and traditional forms of commemoration proving that, even when creating something truly innovative, it remains impossible to entirely escape convention.

**Experiments and Conventions in Funeral Iconography**

By the 1750s, the golden age of funereal iconography had long since passed. Mourning literature was decorated with old and tired memento mori images and leadings. The fashion of mourning literature had reached its peak in the early seventeenth century, when whole books, sermons, and commemorative anthologies

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were printed with ever more elaborate memento mori designs, reminding readers of their mortality so they might more effectively prepare for the Christian afterlife. In 1612, the death of the eighteen-year-old Henry, Prince of Wales, sparked a flood of such publications. As prospective heir to his father's throne, his death by typhoid fever caused widespread public mourning and inspired numerous commemorative works. This 1612 tragedy caused a commemorative-publishing phenomenon unparalleled in its creative combination of ink and paper, with printers working to distinguish their works from the mass of available material through innovative and extravagant visuals.

Some such experiments share startling similarities with Sterne's black page. Joshua Sylvester printed the title page of his *Lachrimae Lachrimarvm* (1612) entirely black, from edge to edge, with the text left white, as did Cyril Tourneur, John Webster, and Thomas Heywood in their *Three Elegies on the Most Lamented Death of Prince Henrie* (1613). Using woodcuts, these authors produced expanses of black ink resembling modern photographic negatives. Inside, Sylvester printed the pages of *Lachrimae Lachrimarvm* with black rectangular woodcuts similar to those Sterne used for the black page in *Tristram Shandy* (see Figure 3). Sylvester printed the versos of his text with an emblem denoting the Prince of Wales and the rectos with a white text box framed with skulls, skeletons, and mummies. The anonymous *Great Britaine, Alle in Blacke* (1612) also bears similarities to Sylvester's text. The *Great Britaine* title page depicts a marble tomb and obelisks along with an inscription that symbolically identifies the deceased through the letters “H P” and three feathers marking him as Prince of Wales. The pamphlet pages are printed with solid rectangular blocks of black ink, each surmounted by a black arc (see Figures 4a and 4b). Despite the absence of any evidence that Sterne saw these works, the resemblance of some of those designs to the black page is striking.

Rather than becoming increasingly innovative, by the early eighteenth century the iconography of funeral literature had settled into a routine of unimaginative borrowings, and by mid-century more of this material was circulating than ever before. According to Ralph Houlbrooke, the 1750s and 1759 in particular, such anthologies were sometimes presented in mourning wrappers. Scott L. Newstok, *Quoting Death in Early Modern England: The Poetics of Epitaphs beyond the Tomb* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 83.
the year of Sterne’s composition and publication of those volumes of *Tristram Shandy* in which Yorick is commemorated, witnessed the production of vast quantities of popular memento mori publications. Many of these memento mori texts display thick, black mourning borders that frame the information on the title page, with some of those borders measuring seven millimetres wide. The most popular volumes of 1759 included William Sherlock’s *A Practical Discourse Concerning Death* (1689), which Joseph Addison considered the most-read book in English; it went through thirty-two editions by 1759 and eleven reprints in the 1750s alone. Elizabeth Rowe’s *Friendship in Death* (1728) was also popular in that decade, going through seven editions in the 1750s, and William Romaine’s *Knowledge of Salvation Precious in the Hour of Death* (1759), a sermon published on the death of devotional writer James Hervey in January of that year, went through twelve London editions alone before the year was out. Each edition of Rowe and Romaine’s texts, and most of the London editions of Sherlock’s, were printed with mourning borders on the title page. While the early seventeenth century marks the peak of elaborate funeral design, and the point at which the designs became most experimental, we can see that in the mid-eighteenth century mourning literature remained extremely popular while continuing to employ the same memento mori visuals, particularly the mourning borders that Bowden sees Sterne exaggerating into the black page woodcut. Houlbrooke calls this moment “the age of the epitaph.”

This appetite for funerary publications at mid-century coincided with, and contributed to, a “mania for graveyard literature,” accounting in part for the popularity of such literary texts as Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Wrote in a Country Churchyard* (1751),


11 For a publication history of these items, see Houlbrooke, “The Age of Decency,” 179.


which went through fourteen editions before 1759. The Elegy’s title page was printed with skulls within heavy black leadings, which the printer likely used in order to exploit the mid-century cult of mourning and the selling power of texts stamped with its iconography. Memento mori woodcut images and printers’ devices were fashionable in mid-century literary works, where they were often divorced from their original contexts of grief and mourning. Such images decoratively (and arbitrarily) punctuated eighteenth-century novels, including Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) and John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748–49), ornamenting section breaks and filling the white space between chapters. In a 1754 issue of his magazine *Connoisseur*, George Colman responded to a recent outburst of illustrated elegies printed to commemorate the death of Prime Minister Henry Pelham by criticizing the use of woodcut images for the purpose of spinning out literary texts:

They are encompassed with dismal black lines, and all the sable emblems of death ... These little embellishments were originally designed to please the eye of the reader, as we tempt children to learn their letters by disposing the alphabet into pictures. But in our modern compositions, they are not only ornamental but useful. An angel or a flowerpot, at the beginning and end of every chapter or section, enables the bookseller to spin out a novel, without plot or incident, to a great number of volumes; and by the help of these decorations properly disposed I have known a little piece swell into a duodecimo, which had scarce matter enough for a six-penny pamphlet.

Colman refers to printers’ reuse of woodcuts (urns, flowerpots, and “all the sable emblems of death”) in order to fill pages, complaining about the overuse of images not only in elegiac works but also in novels, where they appeared irrelevant. He prints this section under the epigram “O quanta species cerebrum non habet! PHÆDR. A beauteous head, but oh! devoid of Brains” (43), implying that Grub Street productions set greater store by a work’s appearance than by its content. As Colman complained,

14 McGuire, 281n2.
15 Mr Town [George Colman], *Connoisseur* 8 (21 March 1754): 45. References are to this edition.
stock images, such as urns and flowerpots, were everywhere, not only because they made literary works appear longer but also because repurposing woodcut images was cheaper than commissioning fresh artwork. It was not just mourning publications that continued to use the same iconography as had been employed during the previous century, but novels too were using the same images.¹⁶

The comic potential of recycled images can be seen in what scholars call the “Sterne volume.” This file, held in the Oates collection at Cambridge University Library, contains 132 miscellaneous paper cuttings, including printed broadsides that Sterne supposedly owned. The items were mostly printed in Dublin between 1720 and 1736 and include a manuscript ballad apparently annotated in his hand. Many of the broadsides and pamphlets anthologized in this volume are mock-elegies, employing much-recycled memento mori designs, such as *Elegy on the Much-Lamented Death of Jaquo’ the Monkey Keeper of the Black-Dogg: Who Was Barbarously Murther’d Last Night by a Hard Hearted Gentlewoman* (1725), *An Elegy on the Deplorable Death of Mr. Thomas Sheridan* (1722), and a punning elegy on the death of Matthew Buckinger (1722), “the famous little-man (without arms or legs),” sometimes attributed to Jonathan Swift. Even if Sterne was not the person who collected the contents of this “Sterne volume,” he would have certainly been aware of the ways in which the printers of mock-epitaphs and satiric elegies, such as those anthologized in the Cambridge file, employed oft-repeated images and formatting in new and surprising contexts, creating humour and satire out of old leadings and woodcut designs.

Sterne was an active participant in the print culture of his profession as a parson, having published *The Case of Elijah and the Widow of Zerephath* and his *Abuses of Conscience* sermons in 1747 and 1750 and, later, *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick* in 1760 and 1766. He would have been aware of the wealth of memento mori

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¹⁶ As outlined by Alexandra Franklin in a bibliographical study at the Bodleian Library on broadside illustrations, publishers often reused woodcuts, giving rise to incongruities between text and repurposed image. Franklin demonstrates that woodcut technology was usually associated with trite broadside elegies and was most innovative when employed against the grain, in the sense of being self-consciously used out of context. Franklin, “The Art of Illustration in Bodleian Broadside Ballads before 1820,” *Bodleian Library Record* 17 (2002): 327–52.
literature available in the years leading up to his publication of *Tristram Shandy*, and his exposure to this cult of mourning may have coloured his innovative bordering of Yorick’s epitaph and his use of the black page woodcut. Unlike Dodsley, however, who marketed Gray’s *Elegy* with conventional funereal icons, Sterne decorated pages 73 and 74 of *Tristram Shandy* with an image that self-consciously drew attention to the tools perpetuating those conventions. With the black-page device, Sterne creatively hints at hack-work, or the kind of literary production that cannot afford new designs and uses available materials such as leadings and a blank printing block. Yet he also nods towards the ongoing debate over the visual appearance and production costs of the novel with his extravagant use of ink and paper. The black page represents the raw material of book design—the wood block on which designers would trace and then engrave their images—in a way that shows how print conventions, materially, are simultaneously insufficient and excessive. That Sterne’s black page is in one sense blank suggests an inability to come up with an appropriate manner of commemorating a character at a moment when the print market was saturated with memento mori iconography and symbolism.

**Sterne and the Clichés of Commemoration**

By the time Sterne was writing *Tristram Shandy* in 1759, the images accompanying commemorative writing had long been predictable. In 1713, a century after the experiments commemorating Henry, Prince of Wales, Addison mocked the ubiquity of mourning iconography in a letter published in the *Spectator* responding to the death of the fictional Sir Roger de Coverly. The correspondent specifically demands the use of the requisite print conventions to commemorate Addison’s best-loved character:

> It is with inexpressible Sorrow that I hear of the Death of good Sir Roger, and do heartily condole with you upon so melancholy an Occasion. I think you ought to have blackened the Edges of a Paper which brought us so ill News, and to have had it stamped likewise in Black. It is expected of you that you should write his Epitaph, and, if possible, fill his Place in the Club with as worthy and diverting a Member.17

17 Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, letter to the *Spectator* no. 518 (24 October 1713): 251.
The letter argues that de Coverly deserves commemoration with the clichéd methods of marking death through print. Addison pokes fun in particular at the mourning borders and black woodcut stamps that were “expected” of the printer at such a pivotal moment. The letter-writer’s very specific requests regarding the writing of an epitaph, and a page stamped in black, its edges printed with mourning borders, describe with startling accuracy the very conventions Sterne would later use to commemorate the death of his own much-loved character Yorick. The *Spectator* letter-writer’s expectations reveal how far Sterne was dealing with the staidness of iconography in commemorative literature when creating the black page.

Sterne was remarkably self-aware about commemoration in print. His concerns about the insincerity of mourning iconography are most evident when he addresses death and grief in his writing. When his friend Anne James died in 1767, he wrote an epitaph for her that focused on contrived or “labour’d” imagery:

Columns, and labour’d urns but vainly shew,  
An idle scene of decorated woe.  
The sweet companion, and the friend sincere,  
Need no mechanic help to force the tear.  

In this epitaph, penned in the same year the final instalment of *Tristram Shandy* was published, Sterne disdains “mechanic help,” by which we may infer printed or engraved designs. Sterne’s epitaph for his friend also functions as a kind of epitaphic manifesto and may be seen as the culmination of his attempts in *Tristram Shandy* to distance his work from trite memento mori conventions.

After Yorick’s early death and commemoration in the first 1759 instalment of the novel, Sterne’s anxieties regarding the “labour’d” imagery of death continued to surface in later volumes as Tristram realizes he must eventually record the demise of the

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previous generation of Shandys. By the sixth volume, published in 1762, Tristram begins to imagine reaching that “dreaded” point in his autobiography, the death of his uncle Toby:

—But what—what is this, to that future and dreaded page, where I look towards the velvet pall, decorated with the military ensigns of thy master—the first—the foremost of created beings;—where, I shall see thee, faithful servant! laying his sword and scabbard with a trembling hand across his coffin, and then returning pale as ashes to the door, to take his mourning horse by the bridle, to follow his hearse, as he directed thee;—where—all my father’s systems shall be baffled by his sorrows; and, in spite of his philosophy, I shall behold him, as he inspects the lackered plate, twice taking his spectacles from off his nose, to wipe away the dew which nature has shed upon them—When I see him cast in the rosemary with an air of disconsolation, which cries through my ears,—O Toby! in what corner of the world shall I seek thy fellow? (6.25.109)

This long, disconnected, double question is symptomatic of Tristram’s distress at the prospect of commemorating his uncle Toby. The “velvet pall,” “rosemary,” and “lackered plate,” which might elsewhere for Sterne prove inadequate to the task of commemoration (becoming what he might call the decorations of “idle woe”), are here inflected with his distinctive sentimental tone. The detail with which Tristram anticipates describing the future scene evokes engravings of funeral parlours, such as The Funeral, plate 6 of William Hogarth’s A Harlot’s Progress (1732), and yet this is simultaneously a non-description. Sterne presents clichéd images—coffin, hearse, drapes—as components of an uncertain future narrative, a point at which Tristram might never, and, in fact, does not, arrive due to his own failing health: “—Gracious powers! which erst have opened the lips of the dumb in his distress, and made the tongue of the stammerer speak plain—when I shall arrive at this dreaded page, deal not with me, then, with a stinted hand” (6.25.110). Tristram appeals for inspiration to enable him to rise above the stale (verbal and visual) terminology of funereal discourse. Sterne suggests that assistance from the muses is most urgently required at the moments in which he is writing about death. Yet he seems to answer Tristram’s plea in implying that the solution to the problem lies not in the wielding of the pen, but in the creative use of
the page. In looking ahead to the “dreaded page” (a phrase he repeats) upon which Tristram must inscribe the details of Toby’s funeral, Sterne reminds us of the black page and his iconographic commemoration of Yorick, suggesting that the most lasting and most successful commemoration is bestowed not by words nor images but by the page itself.

An author’s powers of inspiration were most on trial in writing about death. Despite *Tristram Shandy*’s references to the stale and clichéd conventions of commemorative works (including the “coffin,” “ashes,” and “rosemary” of Toby’s funeral and the black inky woodcut commemorating Yorick) Sterne avoids such conventions as “Here lies,”19 “ever to be lamented,” and images of urns or scythes; Tristram, after all, undertakes a non-rendering of the funeral, and the woodcut depicts no icon. Sterne uses the very tools of a tradition fraught with insincerity and unoriginality as a point of departure for his own iconographic contribution, showing his consciousness of the fact that commemoration often falls short of innovation. At the same time, he produces an icon of remarkable, and now renowned, originality. It is because of the simultaneous presence and absence of recognizable funereal signposts that as readers we easily recognize that the figure of the skull, the memento mori icon par excellence, lies beneath an unfathomable double-sided page of black ink.

**Typographic Epitaphs**

With the black page and Yorick’s epitaph, Sterne combined the woodcut images typical of seventeenth-century commemorative volumes with typographic epitaphs emerging in a corpus of mid-century novels, many of them comic. Novels such as Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1747–48), Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749), Thomas Amory’s *Life of John Buncle* (1756), Tobias Smollett’s *Peregrine Pickle* (1751), and Edward Kimber’s *The Juvenile Adventures of David Ranger* (1757) typographically commemorate characters’ deaths while calling attention to the conventions of commemorative engravings.20 Master printer Samuel Richardson established the trend for typographic epitaphs in *Clarissa*.

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19 Newstok identifies this phrase as the core statement of all epitaphs (34–35).
In *Clarissa*, Belford records seeing Clarissa’s self-devised coffin inscription, which Richardson offset from the rest of the text and centred on the page (see Figure 5):

The principle device, neatly etched on a plate of white metal, is a crowned serpent, with its tail in its mouth, forming a ring, the emblem of Eternity, and in the circle made by it is this inscription:

*CLARISSA HARLOWE.*

APRIL X.

[Then the year]

ÆTAT. XIX.

For ornaments: At top, an hour-glass winged. At bottom, an urn.21

Richardson exploits his capacity as a printer to make moveable type signify inscription, through spacing (centring the engraved text) and capitalization. He presents the inscription on Clarissa’s coffin within a series of letters from Belford to Lovelace, where simply the anticipation of viewing the “devices and inscriptions” (*C*, letter 31, 7:129) has Belford frightened. Before viewing the inscription, Belford dreams of flying hourglasses, spades, mattocks, skulls (“deaths-heads”), and “Eternity” (*C*, letter 32, 7:129). Lovelace upbraids him: “But, faith, Jack, thou art such a tragi-comical mortal, with thy leaden aspirations at one time, and thy flying hour-glasses and dreaming terrors at another, that, as Prior says, *What serious is, thou turnst to farce*; and it is impossible to keep within the bounds of decorum or gravity, when one reads what thou writest” (*C*, letter 34, 7:136). Richardson’s description of Belford being terrified by the memento mori imagery turns what had been apparently sincere concerns about mortality into subtle comedy. The reader is encouraged to laugh at Belford as Richardson subverts the melancholic tone of his letter with Lovelace’s sneering response. Like Sterne, Richardson undercuts a potentially hackneyed scene with dark humour.

Through the exchange between Lovelace and Belford, Richardson, like Sterne, reflects in his novel the ubiquity of memento mori iconography in this period. Richardson hints that some icons are more common than others. He spells out to the reader that a circular crowned serpent represents eternity, but the

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brevity with which he describes the hourglass and urn (“For ornaments: At top, an hour-glass winged. At bottom, an urn”) points to their widespread use by mid-century. Unlike the anxious Belford, Lovelace emerges as a reader upon whom memento mori iconography cannot take effect. For Lovelace, these symbols are simply “flying” abstractions. Richardson thereby highlights the futility of memento mori iconography as a device to work on the attitude of a villain who has been little concerned with the Christian afterlife. The virtuous and innocent Clarissa, on the other hand, appears still to accept their effectiveness and to consider them appropriate decorations for her coffin plate. Unlike Sterne, Richardson’s purpose is not to query the effectiveness of memento mori iconography and funereal inscription more generally. Rather, Lovelace’s immunity to this iconography functions as yet another reminder of that character’s distasteful inclination to laugh at Clarissa’s impending fate.

In Belford’s letter, Richardson alludes to the white page of the novel that resembles the “plate of white metal” upon which the iconography is “neatly etched.” Just two years later, in the first edition of *Tom Jones*, Fielding took Richardson’s representation of inscription a step further, allocating Captain John Blifil’s epitaph a page of its own (see Figure 6):

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Here lies,
In Expectation of a joyful Rising,
The Body of
Captain JOHN BLIFIL.
LONDON
had the Honour of his Birth,
OXFORD
of his Education.
His Parts
were an Honour to his Profession
And to his Country:
His Life to his Religion
and human Nature.
He was a dutiful Son,
a tender Husband,
an affectionate Father,
a sincere Friend,
a devout Christian,
and a good Man.
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His inconsolable Widow
hath erected this Stone,
The Monument of
His Virtues,
and of Her Affection.22

Using the epitaphic convention of a speaking gravestone, Fielding makes the epitaph conscious of its status as a typographic representation of a monument to the dead. He plays on the epitaph’s connection with both materiality and content (“this Stone, / The Monument of / [Blifil’s] Virtues”), encouraging his readers to consider the novel, too, on both planes. The reader becomes aware of the novel as not only a narrative but also a physical codex subjected to authorial decisions concerning book design.

Fielding’s epitaph for Blifil highlights the problem of maintaining epitaphic conventions when the deceased conducted a life that was little deserving of commemoration, an issue under debate for some time. In 1642, Thomas Fuller memorably complained of epitaphic falsehoods: “In some monuments ... the red veins in the marble may seem to blush at the falshoods [sic] written on it. He was a witty man that first taught a stone to speak, but he was a wicked man that taught it first to lie.”23 Spectator no. 551 (1712) raised the issue of the difference between truth and fable in the construction of epitaphs, and Alexander Pope, like Fuller, invoked a pun on “vein” in his much-quoted epitaph for Elijah Fenton (1729): “This modest stone, what few vain marbles can, / May truly say, Here lies an honest man.”24 In 1756, Samuel Johnson cited this verse in his “Dissertation on the Epitaphs written by Pope” to emphasize the need for truth. Johnson complained that the epitaphic form at this time was notorious for exaggerating the qualities of the deceased, or even outright fiction-making, while conceding that “the poet is not to be blamed for the defects of his subject.”25 Fielding’s epitaph

23 Thomas Fuller, The Holy State (Cambridge, 1642), 188–89, British Library BL, 694.i.2.
for Blifil in *Tom Jones*, described as “an Epitaph in the true Stile” (1:100), satirizes this ongoing concern about commemorative verse. Fielding puns on the “here lies” convention, having the epitaph both identify the location of Blifil’s body and counterfeit his qualities: “a dutiful Son, / a tender Husband, / an affectionate Father, / a sincere Friend, / a devout Christian, / and a good Man” (1:106). He suggests that a true or representative epitaph lies about the merits of the deceased, rendering Blifil’s epitaph a comic example of the inability of commemorative writing to escape its own conventions.

Like Richardson and Fielding, Smollett employed typography in *Peregrine Pickle*—font, layout, white space, and the centring of the text—to represent the gravestone of Commodore Trunnion. As did Fielding in *Tom Jones*, Smollett had the inscription printed on a single page to signify the marble surface (see Figure 7):

Here lies,
Foundered in a fathom and an half,
The Shell
Of
HAWSER TRUNNION, Esq;
Formerly commander of a squadron
In his Majesty’s service,
Who broach’d to, at five P. M. Octr. X,
In the year of his age
Threescore and nineteen.

He kept his guns always loaded,
And his tackle ready manned,
And never shewed his poop to the enemy,
Except when he took her in tow;
But, his shot being expended,
His match burnt out,
And his upper works decayed,
He was sunk
By death’s superior weight of metal.
Nevertheless,
He will be weighed again
At the Great Day,
His rigging refitted,
And his timbers repaired,
And, with one broad-side,
  Make his adversary
  Strike in his turn.26

Both Fielding and Smollett manipulated page breaks and type-setting in order to make use of a single piece of paper on which to print or inscribe the epitaph. With these pages blurring the distinction between text and image, they marked the novel as a material medium rather like the gravestone depicted. But, whereas Fielding’s epitaph interrogates the tendency of epitaphs to speak well of the dead, Smollett’s deals with an altogether different convention, focusing instead on Trunnion’s unexceptional qualities in order to exploit an extended metaphor on the deceased’s career in (and preoccupation with) the navy.

Epitaphs have long metaphorized their subjects and their occupations, but, with the typographic placement of text, Smollett references an entire subgenre of metaphorical epitaphs that were occasioned by the death of printers. Most cast the deceased printer as a book happily stripped of its errata, to be resurrected in a new edition on judgment day. The most famous of this type is the self-composed epitaph of Benjamin Franklin (1727), written some decades before his actual death:

The Body
  of
  Benjamin Franklin, Printer
Like the Cover of an old Book
  Its Contents worn out
And Stript of its Lettering + Gilding
Lies here food for the worms.
Yet the work shall not be lost
For it will (as he believed) appear once more
In a new + most beautiful Edition
  Corrected + amended
  By
  The Author
Born June 6. 1706.27

27 Benjamin Franklin, epistolary epitaph (1727), quoted in Newstok, 70, figure 2.3.
Franklin’s epitaph is representative of the printer’s epitaph, figuring the codex as the perishable body and print as resurrection through the publication of a new edition. Representing his Christian faith in parentheses, Franklin shows his awareness of these epitaphs to favour creative metaphor over listing the piety or virtues of the deceased. Jacob Tonson’s epitaph, printed in Gentlemen’s Magazine in 1736, likens the deceased’s gravestone to a paratext, calling it a “marble index” indicating the location of his body, while invoking the discourse of Grub Street:

And he who many a scribbling elf
Abridged, is now abridged himself.28

This line, aside from its appropriate use of line breaks to represent typographic alteration, is doubly comic in that the epitaph is itself “paraphras’d,” with the parallel Latin text considerably shorter and therefore an abridgement of its English counterpart. Many similar printers’ epitaphs appear in C.H. Timperley’s Dictionary of Printers and Printing (1839), where occasionally the metaphor changes to a different sector of the print industry. The epitaph for Peter Gedge (1818), printer of the Bury and Norwich Post, compares the deceased to a font of type and God as type-founder: “Like a worn out type, he is returned to the founder, in the hope of being recast in a better and more perfect mould.”29 While entertaining, such printers’ epitaphs betray a certain vanity about the trade in that they co-opt God into their occupation as printer or bookseller. The style and strategic typesetting of Hawser Trunnion’s epitaph imply Smollett’s awareness of this genre of epitaphs related to the emerging novelistic epitaph through their shared self-conscious emphasis on the materiality of the printed book.

Perhaps the most self-aware novelist to employ typographic epitaphs in this period was William Toldervy. His expertise in the field of epitaphic inscription had been demonstrated by his publication of Select Epitaphs (1755), the first major English collection of funerary inscriptions, which preceded by eighteen months his novel The History of Two Orphans.30 Three of the four

volumes of *Two Orphans* included at least one epitaph offset from the rest of the text, calling attention to the very material on which he claimed to be an expert. His own death notice, for example, reads: “On Wednesday last died at his Lodgings in Cheapside, Mr. William Toldervy, aged 41, the Editor of a Valuable collection of Epitaphs.” One contributor to *Critical Review* could not forget Toldervy’s editorial project while reading his novel: “It is not long since Mr. Toldervy ... disobliged the World with a collection of old epitaphs, and inscriptions upon tomb-stones; this is a point of learning in which he is deeply skilled, as he has shewn in the *Orphans*; where, by way of novelty, we find many monumental inscriptions; together with several songs, lugged in without rhyme or reason.” This review offers a brief insight into a reader’s response to a typographic epitaph. For all Toldervy’s novelistic epitaphs are much briefer (and smaller on the page) than those by Fielding and Smollett, the reviewer nonetheless recognizes the novelty of such a device. Yet, by mentioning Toldervy’s editorial project in the same breath as *Two Orphans*, the reviewer subtly hints at the source of this seeming novelty on the page. For the reviewer, at least, this does not appear to detract from the novelty of the device appearing within the format of the novel despite the fact that Toldervy’s incorporation of epitaphs lacks artistic finesse (they are “lugged in”). A reader encountering the black page and Yorick’s epitaph in *Tristram Shandy* would have had a similar experience reading *The History of Two Orphans*: one of simultaneous surprise and recognition at the inclusion of print practices from incongruous disciplines within a volume of fictional prose. Such an example goes some way towards demonstrating the manner in which Sterne’s experiments in *Tristram Shandy* were—and still are—considered original within the novel while having an identifiable pedigree from elsewhere in contemporary publishing.

In evoking the materiality of the tombstone, Fielding and Smollett—and to a lesser extent Richardson and Toldervy—create self-reflexive pages. Through capitalized roman type and white space, these authors encourage their readers to view the

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book as a material object like the tombstone the page purports to depict. The deployment of the page as a commemorative monument, graven like the tomb, materially represents the belief promoted in printers’ epitaphs that literary works have one obvious advantage over their stone counterparts: their ability to be renewed with each subsequent printed edition. In *Tristram Shandy*, Walter romanticizes the concept of mortality through the image of ruined tombs and monuments: “*To die, is the great debt and tribute due unto nature: tombs and monuments, which should perpetuate our memories, pay it themselves; and the proudest pyramid of them all, which wealth and science have erected, has lost its apex, and stands obtruncated in the traveller’s horizon*” (5.3.28). The trope of literature outlasting monuments appeals to Walter, who, like Sterne, is particularly concerned with his posthumous reputation.  

The ambiguous and comic resemblance of the poor-quality visuals printed in ephemeral publications to Sterne’s own visual page was recognized by George Stayley, an early Shandean imitator. He created his own exaggerated black page device in his work *The Life and Opinions of an Actor* (1762), consisting of not one leaf but six consecutive visual pages: two filled with black, rectangular woodcuts depicting the night sky and the other four featuring smaller woodcut images on an expanse of white space representing the sun rising and setting. The black-printed


35 Keymer argues that the marbled page is paradoxical in its evocation of material endurance by means of flimsy paper (*Sterne, the Moderns*, 79).

pages in particular resemble Sterne’s, but Stayley added to his own design a scattering of white stars and a moon. The black illustrations differ from Sterne’s rectangular woodcuts in being printed across a double-page spread, rather than, like Sterne’s black page, on the front and reverse sides of one leaf. On one level, Stayley’s pages showing night and day reflect the passing of time (his text at this point records his narrator’s nap), but they also function on a satiric level. Stayley mocked Sterne’s use of the visual page by claiming within the narrative that such devices were merely filler: “This ... is the new way of writing: A species of composition which will produce you a volume a day, and licence to sleep half the time” (1:212). In other words, visual pages provided a much-needed respite for exhausted authors and enabled them to fill pages—at a time when hack writers were known to be paid per page—without having to exert too much effort. Nevertheless, in exploiting Sterne’s innovations at the same time as he satirized them and in redirecting Sterne’s context of mourning to one of sleep, Stayley suggested that Sterne’s black page assists the development of the narrative while being cost- and time-efficient.

A later imitator of *Tristram Shandy* focused on the typographic rather than the woodcut element of Sterne’s commemoration of Parson Yorick’s death, joining in the typographic tradition of representing death in the mid-century novel. While Stayley presented his work as an imitation of Sterne’s, this anonymous admirer sought to pass off his volume as the actual next instalment of *Tristram Shandy*. This spurious volume therefore aimed to imitate as closely as possible Sterne’s idiosyncratic mode of expression, employing asterisks, dashes, and unfinished sentences in order to sell the text as authentic. To this list of typographic and stylistic characteristics of Shandean writing the author contributed a typographic epitaph as a quintessentially Sternean literary technique. In this volume, it is Corporal Trim who dies and is typographically commemorated:

Here lyes
The body of corporal Trim.
His virtues are recorded in the immortal works of
Tristram Shandy.
This epitaph is a simplified version of Sterne's typographic commemoration of Yorick, without leadings or a self-reflexive page. It resembles more closely the typographic epitaphs by Richardson and Toldervy than those by Fielding and Smollett because it covers half a page, rather than using a whole page to evoke the gravestone. It shares with Smollett's epitaph for Trunnion the reference to printer's epitaphs through its claim that *Tristram Shandy* is immortal, though its proposed reverence for Sterne's text is undermined by the author's seeming ignorance of Tristram's proposed funeral scene, which has Trim outlive Toby to rest his sword and scabbard on his master's coffin. Nevertheless, the imitator situates Sterne, as does this article, in a circle of contemporary authors producing novels that seek to represent death and the complexities of commemoration through creative typesetting.

Sterne's offsetting of the epitaph “Alas, poor YORICK!” follows the contemporary fashion in mid-century fiction for typesetting inscriptions as if they were graven in stone rather than printed on paper. His innovation in *Tristram Shandy* lies in pushing the typographic epitaph's problematic textual/visual status to its limit through printing the epitaph with a black page, which, in its double-sidedness, becomes both text (epitaph, ink) and paratext (illustration, paper). Because the black page is identical on both recto and verso, Sterne emphasizes more than any of his contemporaries the materiality of the novel medium. The black page might better be termed the “black leaf,” in that the term “page” technically refers to the surface of the leaf, of which there are two. Unlike the gravestone pages in *Tom Jones* and *Peregrine Pickle*, typographic illusions quickly shattered with the turn of the page, Sterne's black page is three-dimensional, emphasizing more than any other mid-century novel its material substance. While Fielding and Smollett simply remind the reader of the surface

37 *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman: Vol. IX* (London: Durham, 1766), 142. Two spurious ninth volumes were published in 1766, and this one is not the work of the better known imitator John Carr.
of the page with their seemingly engraved text, with the black page Sterne forces a reconsideration of the entire process of book production: writing, printing, and binding. In making the black page reminiscent of the rest of the pages in the volume through identical margin width and page numbering, Sterne subverts the reader's expectations of what should appear within the margins of a page dealing with a beloved character's death. In keeping with his evasion of the clichés of commemorative discourse, as in his rhetorical non-treatment of Toby's death, the result is a symbolic lack of text or image; the page is devoid even of catchwords. With Yorick's epitaph, Sterne develops a typographic device (a speaking or narrating page) to a more abstract level of self-consciousness, taking earlier authors' experiments with font and layout and their use of a self-reflexive page to a level that—in his distinctive comic tone—questions the ability of ink and paper to sensitively represent death and mourning.

The novelistic epitaph as employed by Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, and Toldervy, which has been hitherto underplayed and underexplored in relation to Sterne's print experiments, emerges as much more than a precursor to Yorick's commemoration: it can be seen as essential to a history of the self-conscious page in literature. Sterne accompanied this recent novelistic technique with the iconography of an easily recognizable memento mori tradition through the borders that frame Yorick's epitaph and the woodcuts of the black page. Viewing the histories of these techniques in tandem—typographic placement with woodcut decoration—reveals the full context of Sterne's innovative tribute to Yorick. Through this combination of old and new print traditions, he participated in a widespread cult of mourning at mid-century while commenting on the formulaic staleness of its associated iconography.

Together, the black page and Yorick's epitaph interrogate iconographic traditions such as mourning borders, creative typesetting, and black memento mori woodcut images. Sterne's distinctive combination of available print techniques provokes in the reader a sense of recognition while simultaneously generating surprise over how far the staid conventions of commemorative writing

can be creatively exploited. They demonstrate Sterne’s experimentation with and departure from the prose works of his contemporaries while also revealing how far this experimentation was couched within a long tradition of funeral literature. In his renowned commemoration of Parson Yorick’s death, often taken to epitomize his originality, Sterne shook up the tired imagery of death, all the while reminding the reader of the clichés of commemoration. He satirized the staleness of print by stripping back the act of meaning-making to its most basic components (woodcut, ink, margins, and page number) to create a profoundly experimental and arresting device. In thereby representing the creative act, he undertook at once to commemorate and to send into posterity the artist’s work and its characters, while self-reflexively commenting on that very process of textual memorialization. This process of textual memorialization can only transcend cliché, and therefore have the capacity to be memorable, when it reworks existing traditions through the creative manipulation of widespread tools and techniques.
Figure 1. Yorick's epitaph with mourning borders in the first edition of *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne (1759).
Figure 2. The black page in the first edition of *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne (1759). Image reproduced courtesy of The Laurence Sterne Trust.
Figure 3. The page layout of *Lachrimæ Lachrimarvm* by Joshua Sylvester (1612).
Figure 4a. The frontispiece of the anonymous *Great Britaine, all in Blacke* (1612).
Figure 4b. A representative page of the anonymous *Great Britaine, all in Blacke* (1612).
However, not being able to keep away from Smith's, I went thither about seven. The lady was just gone out; she had kept better, I found, than I, tho' her solemn repository was under her window not far from her bedside.

I was prevailed upon by Mrs. Smith and her nurse Shelburne (Mrs. Lovick being abroad with her) to go up and look at the device. Mrs. Lovick has since shown me a copy of the draught by which all was ordered. And I will give thee a sketch of the symbols.

The principal device, neatly etched on a plate of white metal, is a crowned serpent, with its tail in its mouth, forming a ring, the emblem of Eternity, and in the circle made by it is this inscription:

**CLARISSA HARLOWE.**

**APRIL X.**

[Then the year]

*Étât. xix.*

For ornaments: At top, an hour-glass winged. At bottom, an urn.

Under the hour-glass, on another plate this inscription:

*Here the wicked cause from troubling: And here the enemy be at rest.* Job iii. 17.

Over the urn, near the bottom:

*Turn again unto thy rest, O my soul! For the Lord hath rewarded thee; And why? Thou hast delivered my soul from death; mine eyes from tears; and my foot from falling.* Psa. cxvi. 7, 8.

Over this text is the head of a white lily snapt short off, and just falling from the stalk; and this inscription over that, between the principal plate and the lily:

*The days of man are but as grass. For he flourisheth as a flower of the field: For, as soon as the wind goeth over it, it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.* Psa. ciii. 15, 16.

She excused herself to the women, on the score of her youth, and being used to draw for her needleworks, for having shown more fancy than would perhaps be thought suitable to so solemn an occasion.

The date, April 10, she accounted for, as not being able.
Here lies,
In Expectation of a joyful Rising,
The Body of
Captain JOHN BLIFIL.
L O N D O N
had the Honour of his Birth,
O X F O R D
of his Education.
His Parts
were an Honour to his Profession
and to his Country:
His Life to his Religion
and human Nature.
He was a dutiful Son,
a tender Husband,
an affectionate Father,
a most kind Brother,
a sincere Friend,
a devout Christian,
and a good Man.
His inconsolable Widow
hath erected this Stone,
The Monument of
His Virtues,
and her Affection.

Figure 6. Blifil’s full-page epitaph in Tom Jones by Henry Fielding (1749).
Here lies,
Founeder in a fathom and an half,
The Shell
Of
Hawser Trunnion, Esq;
Formerly commander of a squadron
In his Majesty's service,
Who broach'd to, at five P.M. Oct. X.
In the year of his age
Three score and nineteen.

He kept his guns always loaded,
And his tackle ready manned,
And never shewed his poop to the enemy;
Except when he took her in tow;
But, his shot being expended,
His match burnt out,
And his upper works decayed,
He was sunk
By death's superior weight of metal.
Nevertheless,
He will be weighed again
At the Great Day,
His rigging refitted,
And his timbers repaired,
And, with one broad-side,
Make his adversary
Strike in his turn.

CHAP.

Figure 7. Hawser Trunnion's typographic epitaph in Peregrine Pickle by Tobias Smollett (1751).