

# Paper Houses:

## Originality, posterity, lineage and celebrity in Laurence Sterne's marbled page and Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill House

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*Laurence Sterne and Horace Walpole are popularly thought of as two of the great originators of the eighteenth century – Sterne a precursor to contemporary ideas of the non-linear narrative, and Walpole the founder of a certain English Gothic style. This article will explore the narrative performativity that shapes the reputations of these two men as creators of taste, arguing that their apparent originality is wholly grounded in tradition. Laurence Sterne's well-known marbled page in *Tristram Shandy* becomes a springboard for the discussion of a narrative temporality that is inseparable from the novel's trajectory towards its characters' mortality. This provides a rich parallel with Horace Walpole's use of his 'castle' and collection to curate (and create) ancient lineage for himself, all the while being conscious of his 'paper' House's acute ephemerality.*

Horace Walpole, in a letter dated 4 April 1760, writes of *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67) as 'a kind of novel [...] the great humour of which consists in the whole narration always going backwards'.<sup>1</sup> Walpole's comment on the narrative structure of Sterne's bestseller is symptomatic of a popular view of *Tristram Shandy* as the 'original' non-linear novel, revolutionary in its uses of digression, punctuation, and typographical detail. This plays into an opposition identified by Duncan Campbell in his 2002 work *The Beautiful Oblique* in which Campbell differentiates between time itself and temporality – crucially – as the tangible and representable experience of time.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as Campbell notes, the imagery of time recurs on numerous occasions in *Tristram Shandy* in the image of the straight line – and yet always within a context that 'casts doubt upon linear progression and successivity'.<sup>3</sup> Sterne writes, in true digressive form:

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Keymer, *Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy: A Casebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Duncan Campbell, *The Beautiful Oblique: Conceptions of Temporality in Tristram Shandy* (Oxford, New York: P. Lang, 2002), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Duncan Campbell. p. 69.

I defy the best cabbage-planter that ever existed, whether he plants backwards or forwards, it makes little difference in the account (except he will have more to answer for in the one case than in the other) – I defy him to go on coolly, critically, and canonically, planting his cabbages one by one, in straight lines, and stoical distances, especially if slits in petticoats are unsewed up, – without ever and anon straddling out, or sidling into some bastardly digression.<sup>4</sup>

Time indeed is laid open to the manipulations of Sterne's devices. Tristram, in presenting his own story to the reader, spends a year of his life writing a single day in the lives of Walter and Toby – meaning that, as William Holtz notes, the pair cannot possibly die in the story.<sup>5</sup> Thus the manipulation of temporality is utterly inseparable from an acute awareness of mortality and death.

This article will use Sterne's famous marbled page in *Tristram Shandy* as a lens to consider the issues surrounding posterity in the eighteenth century, particularly as exemplified in Horace Walpole's creation of his Gothic castle at Strawberry Hill, Twickenham. Walpole, like Sterne, is popularly considered as an originator and a taste-maker, his novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) being widely renowned as the first example of Gothic fiction in England.<sup>6</sup> And yet there is a peculiar oxymoronic tension in the branding of Walpole's Gothic as 'new', for as well as being grounded in medievalism, it is invariably bound up with the concepts of lineage and hereditary succession. Indeed, *The Castle of Otranto* centres on the quest by Manfred, the Castle's Lord, to continue his line – and thus, importantly, retain familial control of the Castle – grounding Walpole's creation of the Gothic tradition in England firmly in the past and in tradition itself. This article will argue that both Walpole's presentation of a Gothic style in the building and curation of Strawberry Hill House and its collection, and Sterne's acute attention to typographical detail (including the insertion of the marbled and black pages) in *Tristram Shandy*, are forms of self-presentation by which these writer-artists seek to situate themselves in a certain creative tradition.

Strawberry Hill House was bought by Horace Walpole in 1748, and over a period of fifty years was transformed by Walpole into his very own rendition of a 'little

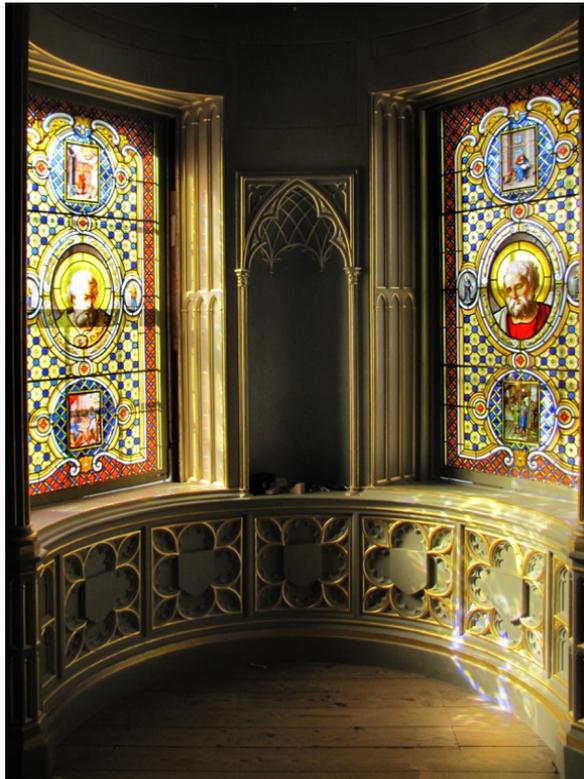
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<sup>4</sup> Laurence Sterne, *Works of Laurence Sterne; Containing the Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent., A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy, Sermons, Letters, &c* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1851), Google Books <[https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=Ym\\_TC8IjCewC&hl=en\\_GB&pg=GBS.PP11](https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=Ym_TC8IjCewC&hl=en_GB&pg=GBS.PP11)> [accessed 2 October 2019], p. 324.

<sup>5</sup> William Victor Holtz, *Image and Immortality. A Study of Tristram Shandy* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1970), p. 129.

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Mack in Michael Snodin, Cynthia E. Roman, and Yale Center for British Art, Lewis Walpole Library, and Victoria Albert Museum, *Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill / Edited by Michael Snodin; with the Assistance of Cynthia Roman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 8.

Gothic castle’ with towers, battlements, and medieval stained-glass windows.<sup>7</sup> Strawberry Hill was not only a house, but also an *objet d’art* in itself and a space in which Walpole could build his collection. In fact, as Michael Snodin notes, the house as ‘domestic setting’ was ‘consciously constructed [...] to create a journey through British history and British and European art, both ancient and modern’. Snodin goes on to write that ‘all segments of the collection were part of a larger, calculated scheme’.<sup>8</sup> This idea of the house as a journey, in fact as a space with narrative running through it, provides an interesting parallel with the ways in which Walpole himself conceived of the house and of his collection within it.



*Figure 1. Restoration of stained-glass windows by William Price the Younger, The Holbein Chamber, 2014. Strawberry Hill House, Twickenham. Reproduced with permission from The Cathedral Studios.<sup>9</sup>*

Walpole writes frequently of Strawberry Hill House as a ‘paper’ building, noting in a letter to Henry Seymour Conway that: ‘My buildings are paper, like my writings’.<sup>10</sup> This is, in part, a true assessment; much of Strawberry Hill was constructed from papier-mâché and Gothic patterned wallpaper, designed to give the effect of a medieval-inspired castle. Moreover, Walpole transferred his ‘castle’s’ image to paper over and over again, most notably in the extra-illustrated

*A Description of the Villa of Mr. Horace Walpole, at Strawberry Hill near Twickenham. With an Inventory of the Furniture, Portraits, Curiosities &c.* Yet there is also a sense in which Walpole

<sup>7</sup> David Dungworth and English Heritage, *Horace Walpole’s House at Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, Middlesex: Chemical Analysis of Window Glass* (Portsmouth: English Heritage Research Department, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Snodin in Michael Snodin, Cynthia E. Roman, and Yale Center for British Art, Lewis Walpole Library, and Victoria Albert Museum, p. ix.

<sup>9</sup> The Cathedral Studios website, <<https://www.thecathedralstudios.com/conservation/strawberry-hill-house-twickenham/>> [accessed 15.02.2019].

<sup>10</sup> In fact, the collection was auctioned in the Great Sale of 1842, one of the most widely-publicised auctions of the nineteenth century. Stephen Clarke and Ruth Mack respectively in Michael Snodin, Cynthia E. Roman, and Yale Center for British Art, Lewis Walpole Library, and Victoria Albert Museum, p. 261; p. 107.

conceives of his house as akin to a text or novel, curating the collection in such a way as to suggest a cohesive, narrative history. Just as Walpole brings together small pieces of English, Flemish, and Dutch Renaissance glass in his windows, he brings object, space, image, and text together throughout the house to create a whole that performs its originality through its relation to certain British and European artistic and architectural traditions.

Walpole's Will stated that 'the furniture, pictures, books, china, jewels, collections of curiosities and plate at Strawberry Hill should be treated as heirlooms, and kept and preserved entire'..<sup>11</sup> This is not merely the preservation of a collection, then, but of an archive, underlining Walpole's preoccupation with his own posterity. And indeed Walpole expresses this fear of the transience of his project (and implicitly his memory) as he writes:

However, though my castle is built of paper, and though my empire should vanish as rapidly as it has advanced, I still object to peach-colour – not only from its fading hue, but for wanting the solemnity becoming a Gothic edifice: I must not have a round tower dressed in a pet-en'l'air..<sup>12</sup>

Despite his apparent fear of the ephemerality of his creations and, by implication, of his own mortality, Walpole is keen to situate both house and collection in a wider tradition that – perhaps – may give his creations roots to outlive him. One of the ways in which Walpole attempts this is by displaying his own ancestry, dating back to the Crusades. Walpole placed the shield of Sir Terry Robsart, a distant relative who Walpole discovered through genealogical research and who he supposed had fought in the Holy Wars, alongside those of his parents' families. In fact, Walpole had not inherited the shield and other items from a distant family member, but had purchased them himself – and Robsart, Ruth Mack asserts, did not actually fight in the Holy Wars..<sup>13</sup>

Walpole's clear preoccupation with the performance of lineage is emphasised further by the armorials of English glass located throughout the house, but particularly in the Great North Bedchamber windows (here the complete original set has survived)..<sup>14</sup> Walpole commissioned William Peckitt of York to paint these armorials in the 1760s, whilst also collecting shields and badges (Tudor, such as the red rose of Lancaster, in particular)..<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the Library ceiling was painted with heraldic

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Clarke in Michael Snodin, Cynthia E. Roman, and Yale Center for British Art, Lewis Walpole Library, and Victoria Albert Museum, p. 261.

<sup>12</sup> George E. Haggerty in Michael Snodin, Cynthia E. Roman, and Yale Center for British Art, Lewis Walpole Library, and Victoria Albert Museum, p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> Ruth Mack in Michael Snodin, Cynthia E. Roman, and Yale Center for British Art, Lewis Walpole Library, and Victoria Albert Museum, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Peover, *Strawberry Hill: Renaissance Glass* (London: Scala, 2010), p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Peover in Michael Snodin, Cynthia E. Roman, and Yale Center for British Art, Lewis Walpole Library, and Victoria Albert Museum, p. 64.

devices and ancestral references, bearing witness to the ‘roots’ Walpole was embedding within his collection. Thus, as Michael Snodin suggests, for Walpole ‘the past was not only just below the surface of the present, but also preferable to it’.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 2. Laurence Sterne, ‘Marbled Page’ from *Tristram Shandy*, 1759-67. British Library, London.<sup>17</sup>

For Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, this is certainly the case. No matter how hard Tristram tries to tell us his ‘history’, digression and temporal disruption prevent straightforward narrative flow. This is exactly how the black and marbled pages function to intervene in Tristram’s story. In Roger B. Moss’s article on Sterne’s use of punctuation in the novel, Moss points out that it is actually through the disruption of the narrative space that Sterne is able in turn to disorder the novel’s narrative pace.<sup>18</sup> The black page, a ‘grotesque period marking a biological as well as a syntactical full stop’, is immediately indicative of death (Yorick’s) and hints not only at the reader’s own

mortality but at what words or meaning might be hidden under that black ink.<sup>19</sup> Yet the marbled page is a somewhat more complex and unexpected interruption. Firstly, the reader is told that they will ‘no more be able to penetrate the moral of this marbled page (motely emblem of my work), than the world with all its sagacity has been able to unravel the many opinions, transactions, and truths, which still lie mystically hid under the dark veil of the black one’.<sup>20</sup> Thus it is suggested that, as in the emblem tradition, there is a moral meaning hidden within the marbled page – one which should be

<sup>16</sup> Michael Snodin in Michael Snodin, Cynthia E. Roman, and Yale Center for British Art, Lewis Walpole Library, and Victoria Albert Museum, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> The British Library website, <<https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/the-stuff-of-tristram-shandy#authorBlock1>> [Accessed 15.02.2019].

<sup>18</sup> Roger B. Moss, ‘Sterne’s Punctuation’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 15.2 (1981), 179–200. (p. 180).

<sup>19</sup> William Victor Holtz, p. 83.

<sup>20</sup> Laurence Sterne, p. 145.

familiar to the learned reader who may attempt to puzzle it out from the combinations of its parts.

Most notably, however, the marbled page provides two things: the sense of an ending (displaced) and the transformation of the physical, mass-produced manuscript into an original. Indeed, as we well know, marbled pages usually occur as endpapers, marking the beginning and end of our journey through a book. To find an endpaper displaced, halfway through the narrative itself, is to be brought up short, to be confronted with our mortality at the moment we least expect it. Thomas Keymer notes that Sterne was dying slowly from pulmonary tuberculosis throughout the writing and publication of *Tristram Shandy* in serialised form, and he suggests that this may have played a part in Sterne's themes of 'the evanescence of human life and the resistance of human experience to verbal or textual capture'.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, if the marbled page immediately suggests to us the chaos of existence, it also emphasises Tristram's (or perhaps by implication Sterne's) inability to capture in the developing novel form the temporal aspects of life.

It is the material process of creating the marbled pages that lends originality and, importantly, collectability to *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne was specific and rigorous with his printing requirements, and even travelled down to London in severe winter weather to oversee print-runs.<sup>22</sup> It is possible to discern that each of the 4,000 copies of the first edition had marbled leaves prepared individually for them, as the fold marks – used to retain clean margins – are clearly visible.<sup>23</sup> After being folded and marbled, a sheet would have to be rinsed and hung up to dry before the other side could be begun. The page numbers would have been stamped on afterwards. This meant that the entire process would have been undertaken 8,000 times.

It is difficult to get a sense from modern copies of the novel what effect this would have had at the time. As Peter de Voogd writes, the marbled page 'in early editions cleverly subverts the basic principle of the printed book as identical reproduction',<sup>24</sup> arguably undermining Roy C. Caldwell's assertion that:

The mechanistic aesthetic of the Enlightenment occupies a central place in *Tristram Shandy*. Machines not only play a crucial role in Tristram's

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Keymer, *Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy: A Casebook*, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Peter J. de Voogd in Thomas Keymer, *Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy: A Casebook*, p. 109.

<sup>23</sup> W.G. Day, 'TRISTRAM SHANDY: THE MARBLED LEAF', *The Library*, s5-XXVII.2 (1972), 143–45 <<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/library/s5-XXVII.2.143>>, p. 144.

<sup>24</sup> Peter de Voogd in Thomas Keymer, *The Cambridge Companion to Laurence Sterne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) <[doi:10.1017/CCOL9780521849722](https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521849722)>, p. 145.

destiny, but they become his dominant metaphor for describing the functioning of the textual system he constructs.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, I would suggest that the insertion of the marbled page – which can only be created by hand and which is celebratory in its difference – is a declaration of the random, the extemporal, and thus represents the inadequacy of the machine to exemplify life. It might also be argued that the marbled page is an intentional move on Sterne's part to ensure the legacy of his text by making it material, unique and therefore collectible. This plays into the connoisseurly attitude of the eighteenth century, the attitude with which Walpole fills Strawberry Hill House with 'collectible' objects, and shows Sterne asserting his own legacy – like Walpole – through his material creation. Christopher Fanning writes:

Sterne is our first author to achieve celebrity status in the modern sense of the term: a popular phenomenon in and of himself, and one who grounds his fame in public performance and market manipulation, rather than like 'the celebrated Mr. Pope' earlier in the century, in commendatory poems, collected editions, and claims to canonical status in the classical tradition.<sup>26</sup>

Sterne, Fanning asserts, is entirely conscious of his own ability to influence and manage public perception – and is able to listen and respond to public comment, as *Tristram Shandy* was released in serial form. We know that in publication Sterne was conscious of his self-presentation; Moss notes that Sterne suppressed any mention of place of publication (York) from the first edition, thus hiding the novel's 'provincial' origins. He also notes Sterne's 'connivance' in forging a letter from David Garrick that praised the book, lending it his 'imprimatur'.<sup>27</sup> There is a similar moment in Horace Walpole's own journey of performativity. Eleanor Hughes details an episode in which Walpole falsifies the attribution of a painting of the Madonna and Child that he encounters on his Grand Tour, tacitly approving the erasure of the painter, Sassoferrato.<sup>28</sup> Material objects and collections are here made to serve a purpose – to tell a story, not necessarily of themselves, but to preserve beneath the surface of the present the memory of their curators.

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<sup>25</sup> Roy C. Caldwell, "'TRISTRAM SHANDY'", BACHELOR MACHINE', *The Eighteenth Century*, 34.2 (1993), 103–14. (p. 103).

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Fanning in Thomas Keymer, *The Cambridge Companion to Laurence Sterne*, p. 125.

<sup>27</sup> Roger B. Moss, p. 182.

<sup>28</sup> Eleanor Hughes in Michael Snodin, Cynthia E. Roman, and Yale Center for British Art, Lewis Walpole Library, and Victoria Albert Museum, p. 4.

John Keats, buried in Rome in 1821, requested that on his tombstone should be inscribed only: ‘Here lies one whose name was writ in water.’<sup>29</sup> Keats here taps into a longing for posterity much-associated with the Romantic poets. And yet we see here, in the previous century, this same intense need for posterity in the material world, as exemplified by a series of collectors and curators who use their collections and creations for performative purposes. Both Sterne and Walpole tread a fine line between a certain ‘collaging’ of references and styles, and between becoming the originators of new forms. This allows them to ground their creative work in tradition, generating a lineage on which they can build and from which they can differentiate their craft. James E. Swearingen argues that in Sterne’s novel: ‘Tristram’s whole enterprise is a hermeneutics, a process of self-interpretation which is required by his awareness of being part of a family and of a tradition in which there has been serious misinterpretation.’<sup>30</sup> Swearingen goes on to note that Tristram’s enquiry is ‘shaped by a need to understand himself through discovering his relations to a tradition’.<sup>31</sup> This creative manipulation of history by these two innovative and original eighteenth-century connoisseurs is evidence of a masterful curation of the collecting mindset, using tradition both to underpin and to provide the contrasting medium for the formulation of new styles and new selves.

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<sup>29</sup> ‘John Keats’, *Poets’ Graves*

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<sup>30</sup> James E. Swearingen, *Reflexivity in Tristram Shandy: An Essay in Phenomenological Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> James E. Swearingen, p. 14.

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