

# Orna Me: Laurence Sterne's Open Letter to Literary History

CELIA BARNES

**Abstract:** This essay considers the curious way Laurence Sterne communicates with and reflects on his literary predecessors, most often Alexander Pope, by writing love letters to women. Focusing primarily on his correspondence with Elizabeth Draper, Barnes contends that, even as Sterne looks back to Pope to guarantee himself a place in literary history, he looks forward to women like Draper to ensure his name will survive. Thus, erotic correspondence becomes an important way of ensuring Sterne's literary estate, or as he terms it, his "futurity." "Orna Me"—a phrase that means, roughly, "ornament me" or "set me off," and that Sterne got from Pope and Swift, who got it from Cicero—allows Sterne to plug in to a literary tradition that privileges collaboration: append something of yours to something of mine. It is this idea of letter-writing as correspondence, a collaborative process between friends or lovers, that unites Sterne to his female correspondent and to literary tradition all at once.

**Contributor Biography:** Celia Barnes is Assistant Professor of English at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin. She has published essays on Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, Hester Thrale, and bluestocking letter-writers Elizabeth Carter and Catherine Talbot, and is currently editing with Jack Lynch an Oxford Classics edition of Johnson and Boswell's accounts of their 1773 trip to the Hebrides.

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In a 1767 letter to Elizabeth Draper, Laurence Sterne proudly relates the story of how he came to dine that evening at the home of Allen Bathurst, that "protector of men of wit and genius" whose dinner guests had included the most famous men "of the last century, Addison, Steele, Swift, Pope, Prior, &c. &c." He had met Lord Bathurst at the Princess of Wales' court, where the famous octogenarian had approached him with these words:

I want to know you, Mr. Sterne; but it is fit you should know, also, who it is that wishes this pleasure. You have heard...of an old Lord Bathurst, of whom your Pope's, and Swift's, have sung and spoken so much: I have liv'd my life with genius's of that cast, but have surviv'd them; and, despairing ever to find their equals, 'tis some years since I clos'd my accounts, and shut up my books, with thoughts of never opening them again: But you have kindled a desire in me of opening them once more before I die; which I now do—so go home and dine with me. (8.540)

Bathurst, the only (barely) living connection between Sterne and "your Pope's, and Swift's," declares Sterne their "equal" and legitimizes Sterne's authorship by guaranteeing him a place at his illustrious dinner table—and, it would seem, a place in literary history.

But Draper, too, makes an appearance of sorts at Bathurst's table, for Sterne reports that he cannot stop talking about her: "Thou, Eliza, was the star that conducted and enlighten'd the discourse! and when I talked not of thee, still didst thou fill my mind, and

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warm ev'ry thought I utter'd!" (540-541).<sup>1</sup> Bathurst may cement Sterne's link to the past, to a formidable literary tradition of male authors, but it is Draper who will ensure his future. It is she whom Sterne wishes "a spring of youth and cheerfulness, more than thou has hardly yet tasted" (541) and whom he charges to "[w]rite to me, my child," letters that "speak the easy cheerfulness of a heart that opens itself, any how, and every how, to a man you ought to esteem and trust" (542). Sterne instructs Eliza to write to him as though they were conversing—to write, that is, like Alexander Pope, whose correspondence became the benchmark of proper letter-writing in the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> In his 1737 *Letters of Mr. Alexander Pope, And Several of his Friends*, Pope had promised to write "as a friend, without apology or study, without intending to appear anything but what I am" (1.415). In this essay, I want to suggest that Sterne's letter to Elizabeth Draper dramatizes what occurs throughout his correspondence, in which he communicates with and reflects on his literary predecessors, most often Pope, by writing love letters to women. Focusing primarily on Sterne's letters to Draper, I contend that, even as he looks back to Pope to guarantee himself a place in literary history, he looks forward to women like Draper to ensure his name will survive.

For Sterne, erotics is his way of ensuring his literary estate, or as he terms it, his "futurity" (7.130). In other words, Sterne's letters epitomize the way in which writing to an "interested" reader capitalizes on nearness and farness simultaneously, the way that, to quote David Clark, "[a]mong close friends, something far away comes; in memory of the intimacy those friends afforded me...I found myself promised to the future" (293). Like Pope, with whom he identifies closely, Sterne harnesses the power of friendship to "promise" him "to the future"—and for Sterne, the greater the intimacy, the greater the future.

### ***Orna Me: Sterne and the Ciceronian Tradition***

When Sterne released the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy* in December of 1759, he was an overnight sensation, his London residence at "every hour full of your great People of the first Rank who strive who shall most honour me" (7.134). Peter M. Briggs argues that Sterne "deliberately chose to present himself upon the stage of London society not as a literary candidate for slow fame" as Pope had done, "but as a theatrical candidate for sudden fame" in the tradition of a David Garrick or a Colley Cibber (90). However, I suggest that, while it may be true that Sterne's fame was sudden, it was also Popean, and his letters present us with a man very much aware of his indebtedness to that first epistolary author-celebrity.

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<sup>1</sup> Sterne had met Eliza, the twenty-two-year-old wife of a government official in Bombay, in January of 1767, when she was visiting London with her children. His infatuation was immediate, and he addressed numerous letters as well as a diary to her after her return to India, all of which detail his expectation that they might marry when they were both conveniently widowed. Sterne's *Bramine's Journal*, the surviving portion of which was discovered in an attic in the nineteenth century and published in 1905 under the title *Journal to Eliza*, was written while Sterne was composing *A Sentimental Journey*, "and certainly is an important clue to that work" (New). Sterne's letters to Draper, this one included, were first published in *Letters from Yorick to Eliza* (1773).

<sup>2</sup> Those letters, Samuel Johnson would later claim in the *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, expressed Pope's "candour, tenderness, and benevolence, the purity of his purposes, and the fidelity of his friendship" (1120). But Johnson also cautions that "[i]t is indeed not easy to distinguish affectation from habit," and adds somewhat backhandedly that "Pope may be said to write always with his reputation in his head" (1123).

Pope, as mercurial as his verse, crafted a celebrity persona based on what David Morris calls a “troublesome multiplicity...Like Proteus, his nature seems centered, if a stable center exists, in the power to assume different shapes” (2). He celebrated his correspondence as a faithful and extemporaneous self-rendering, remarking in his preface to his 1737 edition that “had he sate down with a design to draw his own Picture, he could not have done it so truly” (1.39). Of course, given that he painstakingly prepared his letters for publication and then surreptitiously arranged for Edmund Curll to print them so that he could sue Curll for copyright infringement and release his own authorized edition of correspondence, such declarations are disingenuous at best. However, Pope’s aim in publishing his letters was to create a public persona founded in improvisation, sincerity, and virtue, a persona that could repair his literary reputation in the wake of the *Dunciad*.

In selecting Pope as his epistolary forebear, Sterne is, to use Robert Pogue Harrison’s lovely phrase, “choosing [his] ancestor” (90). Harrison defines an “elective” ancestor as “someone whom one ‘makes one’s own’ through elective affiliation and unconditional allegiance” (103). In this formulation, literary inheritance is a “meeting” in which both ancestor and descendant play a role—each can potentially “[seek] out” the other—and yet paradoxically the opposite is true, for this meeting can only take place in the imagination of the descendent, “in some deep recess of his selfhood” (104).

Harrison’s conception of literary inheritance as a cooperative process between the living and the dead sheds light on the way Sterne seems to understand both his relationship with Pope’s correspondence and the workings of literary history more generally. In a 1760 letter to famous horseman and author Richard Berenger, Sterne explains why he wants Hogarth to illustrate his novel: “I would give both my Ears (If I was not to loose [sic] my Credit by it) for no more than ten Strokes of Howgarth’s witty Chissel, to clap at the Front of my next Edition of *Shandy*.” He continues by referencing Pope and Swift’s famous friendship: “Oft did Swift sigh to Pope in these Words—Orna me—Unite something of Yours to mine, to transmit us down together hand in hand to futurity” (7.130).

Ornament me, embellish me, set me off: *orna me*, just as Sterne wishes Hogarth to do. This desire, Pope informs us, was “Cicero’s desire to a friend” (3.492), a call he extended to lower-status writers who might wish to share in his prestige. In an undated letter to the French tragic poet Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon, Lord Chesterfield is more explicit about the unequal power dynamic at the heart of *orna me*: “I am very sensible that all this is just the same, as if I were to say, Pray, Sir, flatter me as much as you please, I shall be heartily glad of it. I do not deny the charge, nor am I ashamed of it...and Tully, writing to such another as yourself, tells him more than once, *orna me*” (Stanhope 46). Dustin Griffin writes in *Swift and Pope: Satirists in Dialogue* that the phrase “is a theme of a number of Swift’s letters in the early 1730s...Swift apparently made his first use of it in a letter to Pope in January 1733, known only in the truncated version Pope published” (140).<sup>3</sup> And it is in that version that Swift invites Pope, the younger writer, to take his work as his own, to revise it according to his needs. By echoing Cicero, Swift imagines a past for himself, but he also imagines a “futurity”: a future of friendly transmission, of a blending of “yours” and “mine.”

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<sup>3</sup> Thus, even as Sterne focuses on Swift and not Pope in the posted letter to Berenger, he’s actually referring directly to Pope’s correspondence, which is my reason for maintaining that Pope is the literary and epistolary model here.

Sterne copied an earlier version of this letter into his letter book, and this section is quite altered: “*Orna me*, sigh’d Swift to Pope,—unite something of yours to mine to wind us together in one sheet down to posterity—I will, I will; said Pope—but you don’t do it enough said Swift” (8.679). Here, the “sheets” of Pope’s verse become a winding sheet, or shroud,<sup>4</sup> and the two poets are bound together, in death and in text, forever. In the posted version, they are “hand in hand,” but here they are “united” in an eternal embrace. And, while the posted letter included only Swift’s voice, this one has Pope answer his friend with the double vow “I will, I will.” In effect, Pope and Swift enter into a verbal contract, one negotiated in the now but resolved at some point in the future. Pope’s writing of his friend will ensure their mutual reanimation—will ensure, that is, their posterity.

Sterne invokes Pope and Swift, who invoke Cicero, to present a version of literary tradition that allows for a sort of collaboration: append something of yours to something of mine. In other words, what could have been simply literary inheritance or allusion is starting to look a bit more like conversation, even correspondence. For Sterne, literature itself is letters “transmitted” to future generations of readers and writers. Sterne places the writer in a tradition that does not simply reproduce the past, nor does it end with the writer himself: Sterne and Hogarth, and Swift and Pope and Cicero before them, would be joined “hand in hand” in the pages of *Tristram Shandy* for posterity. Future writers and future texts would ensure the conversation continues.

But Sterne’s introduction of the winding sheet that is also the sheet of verse, the anticipation of death that is also the writing of poetry, makes this correspondence a writing-toward-death, a memorial that at once freezes the present relationship for posterity and leaves it open to revision. In this way, *orna me* is less a command than a desperate deathbed plea for a correspondent with whom to share this sheet, to keep the correspondence open: “I will, I will,” writes Sterne’s Pope to Swift, with the harried tone of one who knows what he should be doing but isn’t. “You don’t do it enough,” replies Swift, because time runs out presently.

Sterne’s Swift is looking for someone to write *with*, not simply *to*: he is searching for the collaboration that secures the future. Jacques Derrida is interested in precisely this kind of friendly, writerly dynamic in his epistolary novel-cum-philosophical treatise *The Post Card* (1980). For Derrida, literature is created out of a mutual, unspoken agreement between writer-friends that he refers to as Plato’s dream, and it is a vision of literary inheritance as a confusing reversal of roles and ambiguous power relationships: “Plato’s dream [is] to make Socrates write, and to make him write what he wants, his last command, his *will*. *To make* him write what he wants by letting him write what he wants...This is their contract” (52). This is the space of *orna me*, a command that is also an invitation: Swift can “make” his friend “write what he wants by letting him write what he wants.” *Orna me* preserves this mixture of “making” and “letting” insofar as it is a command for which the speaker gives up a degree of authority even as he exercises it. It is a command to write *to* that is also a plea to write *with*. “Unite something of yours to mine,” Swift “sighs”: write what I want by writing what you want. Sterne twice quotes Swift who quotes the phrase Cicero uttered “more than once” (Stanhope): this is literary history as a hall of mirrors. We are invited to remember that this

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson defines winding sheet as “a sheet in which the dead are enwrapped,” and the *OED* lists the earliest appearance of the term as Lydgate’s *Assembly of the Gods* c.1420.

pair, Pope and Swift, is but one of countless such pairs, all united by writing, all united by the Ciceronian echo of *orna me*.

### On (Not) Writing Like Pope: Sterne's Female Correspondent

Sterne may have imagined himself in the Ciceronian tradition of male authors like Pope and Swift, but he wrote primarily, and rather more dynamically, to women. In a 1761 memorandum “left with Mrs [Elizabeth] Montagu, In Case I should die abroad,” he directs her attention to “[t]he large piles of Letters...to be sifted over, in search for some either of Wit, or Humor—or what is better than both—of Humanity & good nature—these will make a couple of Vols more.—and as not one of ‘em was ever wrote, like Popes or Voitures to be printed, they are more likely to be read” (7.214). Those letters most “likely to be read” are the ones written without the intent to publish, and yet, by 1761, Sterne himself could write no more such letters (if in fact he ever did). Now a celebrity, he invites the Queen of the Blues to “sift” through the “large piles” of correspondence to construct from them a coherent set of volumes that would be a monument to her distant relation’s “Humanity & good nature,” certainly, but also to his lack of affectation. And so, in a letter possibly stained with tears (7.216.n1), Sterne charges her with the responsibility of keeping his memory alive.

Sterne’s stab at Pope’s affectation above is not the only time he proves suspicious of Pope’s epistolary sincerity. Indeed, he enjoys instructing his female correspondents in the art of artless letter-writing—instructing them, that is, in the art of writing like an artless Pope. Such lessons litter Sterne’s correspondence, but he reserves his most detailed teachings for Elizabeth Draper: “dear Lady,” he enjoins Draper in 1767, “write anything and write it any how, so it but comes from yr heart, twil be better than the best Letter that ever came from Pope’s head” (6.254). Sterne, writing like Pope, trains his female reader to write like Pope—by, ironically enough, suggesting she write *unlike* Pope.

Certainly, when Sterne tells Draper to write “from yr heart” so as to create a letter “better than the best Letter that ever came from Pope’s head,” he is donning the mantle of the epistolary tutor, advising Draper in the art of artless letter-writing, but he is also, curiously, writing himself. That is to say, he seems to lean over Draper’s shoulder, directing her to write (to) him as he himself wants to be perceived: spontaneous and easy, never “leaning with my head on my hand” (8.406).<sup>5</sup> In this moment, Sterne may be imitating Pope (or self-consciously *not* imitating him, which amounts to the same thing), but he is also addressing him, engaging him in a cross-generational conversation about self-authorship and writing. This is, in other words, a conversation taking place in many moments at once and with various audiences in mind, as Sterne inserts himself between—and simultaneously addresses himself to—Pope and Draper.

In an undated letter originally addressed to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Pope had written that he “would as freely give you my heart in a Dish” and then had proceeded to perform a kind of textual striptease, “loving to have as little Drapery as possible (3.353).

<sup>5</sup> Sterne references a letter from Pope to Swift again here. “[N]either of us,” Swift had written to Pope in a letter Pope later edited and published, “ever leaned our head upon our left hand to study what we should write next” (3.492). Sterne’s allusion to this letter is doubly ironic when we consider the fact that Reynolds’ famous 1760 portrait of Sterne depicts the author doing just that: leaning his head on his hand (albeit his right, not his left).

Sterne subtly alludes to this image throughout his correspondence. “You are a most engaging Creature,” he writes to Catherine Fourmantel in 1760, “and I never spend an Evening with you, but I leave a fresh part of my heart behind me—You will get me all, piece by piece, I find, before all is over” (7.142). In Sterne’s version, the writer doesn’t simply disrobe; he cleaves, offering himself up to his female reader one piece at a time to be reassembled by her skillful hand.

In other words, Sterne exploits fully the erotic potential of Popean vulnerability and familiarity. But I would suggest we understand Sterne’s penchant for sexual play on the page as more than the scribblings of a sexually frustrated lover or would-be adulterer, for it serves a couple of important rhetorical functions in the letters. First, it puts into high relief the erotic potential of epistolary writing, summed up so beautifully by John Donne almost two centuries earlier: “Sir, more than kisses, letters mingle souls; / For thus friends absent speak” (1-2).<sup>6</sup> To write to a friend is to imagine a physical proximity that does not actually exist in the present, which is located in the past and promised in some unknown future. And yet the letter itself plays on this juxtaposition, making a certain kind of proximity possible in the here and now—what Donne terms a “mingling of souls”—while nevertheless reminding both writer and reader of their physical and temporal separation.<sup>7</sup> Sterne’s sex talk only takes this paradox one step further; the space of letters, Sterne reminds us, is one of impossible encounters and faraway closeness.

But we also can think of this desire to make a sexual confidante of his correspondent as Sterne’s own unique way of writing against death. For even as his sexual body intrudes in the letters—a breathing, even pulsating, reminder that he is very much alive—his dying body haunts them, too. Sterne narrates his physical decline most carefully in letters and diaries addressed to Elizabeth Draper, and he repeatedly figures his death as a kind of erotic awakening. Because both he and Draper were married and in declining health, their deaths become in Sterne’s correspondence a way to consummate what was, in life at least, an impossible relationship; it allows for a final, eternal, embrace—one that should remind us of Swift and Pope’s winding sheet. His March 30 letter begins:

I have been within the verge of the gates of death: I was ill the last time I wrote to you, and apprehensive of what would be the consequence.—My fears were but too well founded, for in ten minutes after I dispatch’d my letter, this poor, fine-spun frame of Yorick’s gave way, and I broke a vessel in my breast, and could not stop the loss of blood till four this morning—I have fill’d all thy India handkerchiefs with it, it came, I think, from the heart—I fell asleep thro’ weakness at six, and awoke with the bosom of my shirt steep’d in tears. (8.567)

Sterne’s vision, one part nightmare and one part sexual fantasy, continues by moving seamlessly into an account of a recent dream in which Draper visits him and, in a rather

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<sup>6</sup> Donne echoes Montaigne, who writes in “Of Friendship,” “In the friendship I speak of [our minds] mix and blend one into the other in so perfect a union that the seam which has joined them is effaced and disappears” (97).

<sup>7</sup> See Bruce Redford’s *Converse of the Pen* in which he claims that the letter creates an “illusion of physical presence” (7).



bizarre gesture, “folded the shawl about [his] waist” and kneels down before him to embrace his knees. Such a vision, prompted by the “weakness” of his uncontrollable blood loss, leaves him rattled to his core.<sup>8</sup> The letter paints the tableau vividly—his knees are “feeble,” her eyes are “fine”—meticulously rendering an erotic embrace that can only “terminate to our heart’s content” in the grave (8.568).

Sterne writes his physical and emotional state all at once, blending the erotic and the visceral in equal doses to create a love letter that is also a death letter. On the one hand, he presents himself in striking corporeal detail. He narrates his sleeping and eating patterns with careful precision (“I have eat my breakfast with hunger,” he proudly proclaims) and even catalogues his bodily secretions: the blood barely staunched by Eliza’s handkerchiefs, the tear-soaked bed shirt. He not only exudes fluids, though: he exudes emotion, interrupting the tale with exclamations—“Oh! my God!” “Dear girl!”—that call attention to his heightened emotional state. Sterne casts himself in the role of the ultimate man of feeling, his “fine-spun frame” feverishly attuned to the vicissitudes of physical and emotional sensation (8.568).

Throughout the letters, then, Sterne fashions a self, bound not by time or even space, but by the pleasure and pain of sensory and emotional experience. This is how the Sterne wants to be remembered: as a friendly, even intimate, correspondent, his body and soul attuned to the vicissitudes of human experience. But of course he cannot control how he is remembered—this task, he knew, would fall to women, like Draper, whom he would leave behind—and so Sterne, anxious and desperate, attempts to school her in how she might author him when he is dead. He has been, he writes to Draper in the *Bramine’s Journal*, “confined to my bed—so emaciated, and unlike what I was.” He continues:

Alas! poor Yorick!“remember thee! Pale Ghost—remember thee—whilst Memory holds a seat in this distracted World—Remember thee,”—Yes from the Table of her Memory, shall just Eliza wipe away all trivial men—& leave a throne for Yorick—adieu dear constant Girl—adieu— adieu—& Remember my Truth and eternal fidelity—Remember how I Love—remember What I suffer.—Thou art mine Eliza by Purchase—had I not earn’d thee with a bitter price. (6.192)

Sterne begins with the usual account of his declining health, but he quickly launches into a barely coherent deathbed elegy, delivered by himself and for himself, a muddled speech indeed. Here, in a passage that reflects on the workings of memory, that “table” from which we “wipe away” what we don’t wish to keep,<sup>9</sup> Sterne seems to enact memory’s imperfection at the level of language. *Orna me* may have been Sterne’s plea to enter into a cross-generational conversation, but “remember me” reads as decidedly more desperate. He worries that Eliza may simply wipe him away from her memory. Memory and forgetting

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<sup>8</sup> We might recall that sopping wet handkerchief passed between Yorick and Maria in *A Sentimental Journey*: “I sat down close by her; and Maria let me wipe them away as they fell, with my handkerchief.—I then steep’d it in my own—and then in hers—and then in mine—and then I wip’d hers again—and as I did it, I felt such undescribable emotions within me, as I am sure could not be accounted for from any combinations of matter and motion” (6.151).

<sup>9</sup> I am reminded, too, of that other table of memory, Lord Bathurst’s, with which I opened this essay.

amount to the same thing, and all Sterne can do is announce and then re-announce his grand exit (“adieu—adieu”) and hope for the best.

But these last lines, a series of disjointed interjections quilted together by dashes, are also his attempt to tutor Eliza once again, to control how she will remember her “Yorick.” In other words, just as he immortalizes Yorick here and in *Tristram Shandy* using the language of Shakespeare, he provides Draper with the language she will use to remember him: she will place him on a throne and keep him there as a symbol of love, suffering, “Truth and eternal fidelity.” While *orna me* was a command that implied collaboration, here Sterne’s vision of posterity amounts to a kind of forced ventriloquism, whereby Draper is only imagined as a vessel, filled up with her epistolary lover’s last words.

By the end of the entry, his pleas become commands, and Sterne’s tortured syntax gives way to the controlled, monitored language of ownership: Eliza is his “by Purchase,” and she would do well to remember the “bitter price” he paid for her as she authors his character in her memory. But, in some sense, the “price” of Sterne’s dissolution, his afterlife, is that Eliza loses her humanity even as Sterne transcends his. This is perhaps why he chooses to write his death in letters and diaries addressed to Eliza, why it is a woman who must witness Sterne’s adieu. For, in the end, this epistolary fantasy is also a fantasy of control—or, more accurately, it exposes the fact that such fantasies are always fantasies of control. If to write to a friend is really to imagine a future, a future in which our friends will be responsible for keeping our memory alive, then Sterne’s subtle manipulation of his female reader only serves to underscore the jockeying for power that lies at the heart of this relationship.

But this is perhaps too cynical a reading, particularly given that, as I have already argued, Sterne’s writing is implicitly a form of self-writing. That is, in writing to Draper here and elsewhere, in asking her to write to and of him using the language of Pope or Swift or Shakespeare, Sterne also writes himself. We could say, then, that Sterne doesn’t simply empty Draper of her humanity; he doesn’t simply put words in her mouth. (After all, he puts words in his own mouth, as well, quoting Shakespeare and his own novel simultaneously.) What might seem at first glance a unilateral command could also be understood as a kind of conversation, one with multiple speakers and multiple addressees: Sterne speaks to and in the voice of Draper, himself, his literary forebears, anonymous readers who might read his letters when he is gone. Perhaps, then, “remember me/thee” isn’t so very different from *orna me*, for it, too, is a call in which the speaker gives up a certain degree of control to the listener, in which the speaker in fact becomes something other than himself. Sterne may pronounce Draper his “by Purchase,” but in the end he is forced to recognize that time is running out, that Draper’s memory is all her own, and that his memory is a text that she will write. Save me a seat at the table of your memory, Sterne pleads: in this way, he seems to ask Draper, as Swift had asked Pope before, to “Unite something of yours to mine”—to write what I want by writing what you want. And so Sterne sees himself through Draper’s eyes, through the eyes of readers of his novel—and even, I’ve suggested, through Pope, Swift, Hogarth, Cicero, Shakespeare, and other figures whose legacies have brushed against his, have corresponded with his. He sees himself, that is, through the eyes of posterity. This is Sterne’s open letter, a text filled with other people’s words, which, taken all together and rearranged and rewritten, curiously produces something original.



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