

Networks of Reception in Eighteenth-Century Newspapers and Magazines: Laurence Sterne

Abstract for the General Public

Literary adaptation – sometimes known as ‘literary afterlife’ or, more popularly, ‘fan fiction’ – has taken place across all periods of history. Contemporary phenomena ranging from the Harry Potter ‘craze’ to fan-fiction sites such as *Archive of Our Own* have revealed the extent to which readers imaginatively immerse themselves in the fiction they read, bringing it into new life with sequels, new adventures, and in some cases merchandise. However, academic research has by now established quite how lively and dynamic literary adaptation was throughout the long eighteenth century, as the reception of *Pamela*, numerous ‘Robinsonades’, and the repackaging of perhaps now neglected eighteenth-century writers’ works demonstrate. Creative material frequently moved from one genre, form, or type of work into another: characters, scenes, motifs and ideas shifted between novels (an as-yet embryonic genre), and plays, paintings, poems, songs, and material objects. Many popular and successful publications ignited the creative imaginations of their readers to experience afterlife in new, surprising forms, and many what we might now consider ‘canonical’ works experienced adaptation in ways that might strike us as irreverent or extreme – and which might make us question how and why we view some works and authors as ‘canonical’ at all.

Although adaptation was widespread through this period, the work of Laurence Sterne (1713-1768) experienced ‘afterlife’ in arguably more extensive and imaginative ways than that of any of his contemporaries. This project provides one route into that history by focussing on the often neglected role of the popular press in shaping eighteenth-century reception histories, namely newspapers and magazines, a prime locus for the circulation of imaginary afterlives. In turn, this contributed to the spread and rapidity of a nascent eighteenth-century celebrity culture, within which Laurence Sterne was a key figure.

Sterne’s work has provoked interest since its first public appearance in the 1760s. What made readers’ responses to his fiction – especially *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67) and *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768) – particularly striking was how far they adapted, imitated, and parodied what were seen to be key features of his work. This body of material, known as ‘Sterneana’, comprises a wide variety of genres, art-forms and media, from textual imitations to paintings, drawings, songs, drama, and material objects. This narrative has been extensively discussed in the considerable literature on Sterne’s reception. Some areas of this history nevertheless remain under-studied, and as such, the story of Sterne’s reception plays in wider eighteenth-century literary and cultural history is incomplete. Sterne, and Sterneana, do not exist in a vacuum, but in a lively and dynamic period of creativity in which material feeds off and back into another.

This project will build on recent scholarship relating to newspapers and magazines to lay pathways for grasping the role that they played in the circulation and recirculation of ‘brand Sterne’. As such, it will partly suggest that whilst integral to the ‘-ana’ that bears his name, the concept of ‘networks’ simultaneously de-centres Sterne, making him one of a constellation of creative elements. It will also address key issues relating to the access to and interpretation of historical literary materials that are often dispersed, held in members-only library collections, or behind a paywall. It will bring the fruits of this research to a wider audience through using the potentialities of Open Access publication, and by linking into Open Access resources. The idea of ‘networks’ is therefore germane both to the interconnections between reviews and responses in the circulation of ‘brand Sterne’, and to the research tools and methods whereby we can access and understand narratives of the literary past.