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The ***** 17--; or, the Expletive Eighteenth Century

A Presentation delivered to the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies

My dissertation looks at the ways eighteenth-century texts use visual cues such as asterisks and dashes to draw attention to what they can't or won't say in print. This practice encompassed much more than just dirty words: it extended to proper names and place names, dates, oaths, and more. My hypothesis is that each of these strains has its own history and functions, yet I've found it useful to group them all under the umbrella term 'expletive'. As you can see in the *OED* definition, expletive does not signify the supposedly "bad words" themselves but anything used to take the place of something else on the page. It can thus cover a wide range of content, but in every case, it draws attention to what can't or won't be printed:

expletive, *adj.* and *n.*

A. *adj.*

1. Serving to fill out; introduced merely to occupy space, or to make up a required quantity or number.
2. Having the attribute of supplying a deficiency. *Obs.*
3. Tending or seeking to supply a loss; compensative. *rare.*

B. *n.*

1.

- a.** An expletive word or phrase, one used for filling up a sentence, eking out a metrical line, etc. without adding anything to the sense.

This project as a whole blends an historicist study of expletives—finding out where they came from and how they were used throughout print history—with a narratological analysis of how specific works of literature use them creatively. For this presentation, I will focus on Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. In many ways, this is an obvious place to start: it’s well known for its exuberant and excessive use of dashes. I’m attempting to recover the contexts and precedents for Sterne’s expletives, and in so doing, to better understand their meaning and function in the work itself. Considering these asterisks in the context of related print conventions illuminates how Sterne’s joking with expletives contributes to one of the book’s central preoccupations: what I’m calling the “paradox of prudery,” a satirical commentary on the perceived power of the printed word to corrupt the morals of readers.

The following is what I’ve found so far; it’s still very much a work in progress, so I hope you will share your ideas and suggestions for further research. Expletives in the work are so copious and varied that I will limit today’s consideration to asterisks and sexual humor, leaving aside the topic of oaths and profane swearing in the interest of time.

Scholars who discuss the use of asterisks in *Tristram Shandy* usually take them at face value, either as Sterne’s inventions or as mere exaggerations of a commonplace feature in eighteenth-century print culture. Christopher Flint, for example, uses them in the service of a psychoanalytic reading, where he argues that they signal Tristram’s obsession with impotence. Wolfgang Iser posits that they help to establish an intimacy between Tristram and the reader. But neither of these accounts places the asterisks within their historical context, as the flowerings of particular and distinct conventions that took

root much earlier in print history. In fact, it seems that in many cases Sterne is consciously alluding to that history and drawing it into his satire, as we shall see.

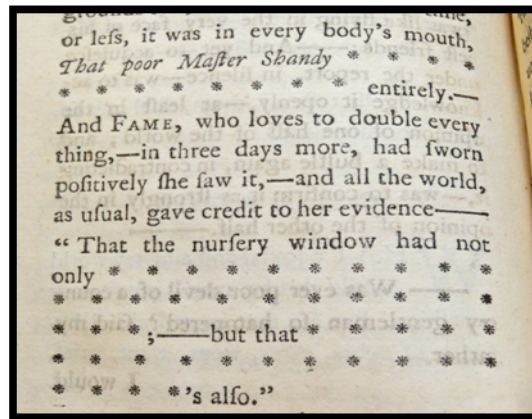
First, let's turn to **a brief history of the asterisk.**

As M. B. Parkes outlines in his work *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West*, the asterisk (or asterism) can be found in manuscripts as early as the ninth century, where its original function was as a *nota*, drawing the reader's attention to omissions in the text or to some particular difficulty with them. This use of the asterisk survived the transition to print, but it increasingly took on a second function as a *signe de renvoi* (sign of return), which enabled readers to consult material in the margin and return to the point in the text where they left off. These two uses both appeared in the body of the text itself. There was also a third use, though not quite as prevalent, whereby an asterisk was used in the margin as a *nota sententiarum*, signaling a *sententia* (or important passage) in the text. Notice that in all of these cases, the asterisk is used to get the reader's attention for some reason, to break the flow of the text, and to point elsewhere.

When we take a closer look at the asterisks in *Tristram Shandy*, which appear throughout all nine volumes, it's clear that they most often function as *notae*, marking the omission of something. For the most part, they pretend to cover up indecorous or coarse material relating to sexual activity or private parts. I say "pretend" because, of course, the joke is that the reader can often decipher them. They fall into two main types: lacunae and "directed" expletives.

1. Lacunae

Frequently, Sterne employs large swaths of asterisks used to represent a whole passage that is “missing” from the textual record. More often than not, the text gives big hints as to the content by providing plenty of context clues that all but guarantee the reader will guess the gist, if not the particular words being omitted:



The context clues surrounding these lacunae make it all too obvious what the local gossips were saying about Tristram’s accident with the window-sash (VI.xiv). *University of Virginia Special Collections*.

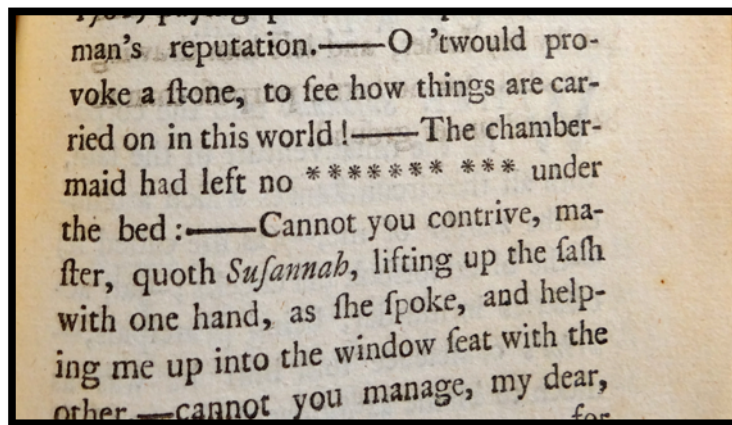
In the first edition, these lacunae appear with eleven asterisks per line for at least three lines of Sterne’s chosen type, Caslon pica. Even though the number of asterisks does not correspond to the number of letters in a word, they are arranged so they appear to “cover up” content of a given length. In other words, the number and arrangement of asterisks are not specific enough for us to decipher individual words, but neither are they arbitrary. In fact, the lacunae often appear to obey the style and form of Tristram’s syntax, with his characteristic dashes and line breaks interspersed (as in the above example).

Sterne wasn’t the first to use lacunae or notae asterisks creatively: Jonathan Swift famously incorporated them into *A Tale of a Tub*:

The footnote notably extends the possibilities for how Swift is using the asterisks in this lacuna, but guessing the specific “missing” content does not appear to be part of the game. (I will devote another chapter to Swift’s use of asterisks, and so will not go into further detail here.) Nor does Swift seem to be suggesting that the “Defect” of the manuscript is that it is bawdy or risqué; that move was Sterne’s particular innovation.

2. “Directed” expletives

The other main style of asterisk in *Tristram Shandy* is what I’m calling the directed expletive, where Sterne appears to substitute one asterisk per letter for objectionable words. I’m calling it “directed” because the number of letters directs the reader to choose from a very narrow range of possible words, usually but not always with the suggestion of primary obscenities (the ones we would call “four-letter words”).



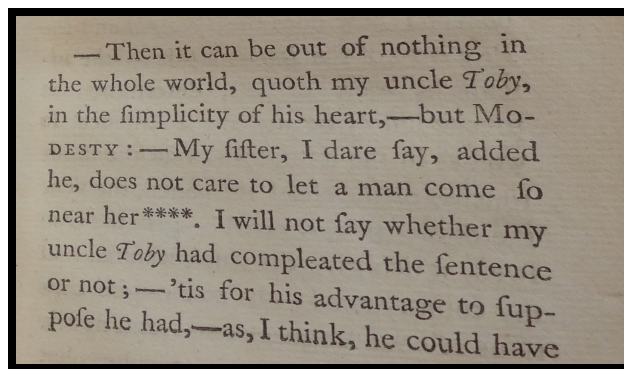
Example of a directed expletive that is easy to decipher because it uses one asterisk per letter (V.xvii).

University of Virginia Special Collections

In the “window incident,” for example, we can easily decipher that “the chamber-maid had left no *****” [*chamber pot*] under the bed, an oversight that leads her to

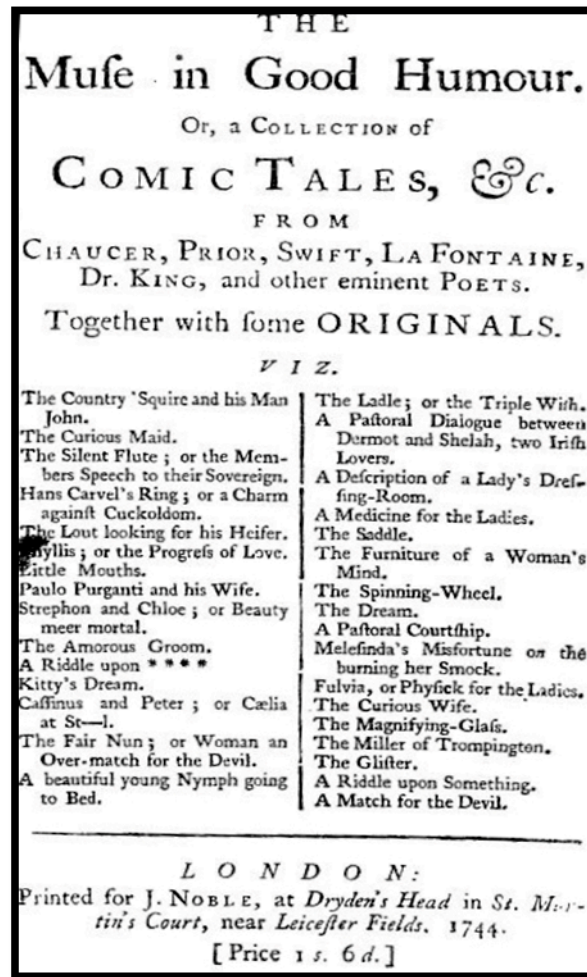
suggest that Tristram “**** ** ** ** *****” [*piss out of the window*], which results in his accidental circumcision by the falling sash (V.xvii).

Such moments where the reader can easily fill in the blanks abound in the novel, but they also contribute to a sense of overconfidence that betrays us at other moments, leading the susceptible reader into ever more suggestive interpretations. One of the most famous examples occurs in Volume II, when Walter Shandy and Uncle Toby are discussing Mrs. Shandy’s preference for a midwife over the male Dr. Slop.



Example of a suggestive directed expletive (II.vi).
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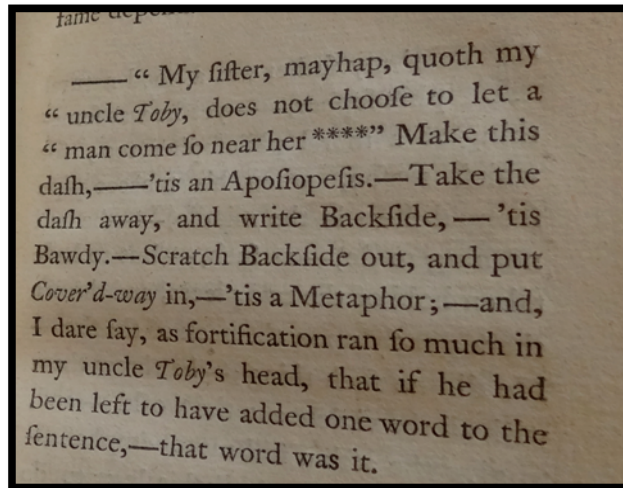
The reader might choose between a couple of possibilities for what these asterisks might stand for, neither of which would have been fit for “modest” ears. The joke functions in part by imitating the ways in which broadsides, pamphlets, and miscellanies represented bawdy content. Here’s an example of an especially popular verse miscellany from 1744 that includes “A Riddle upon ****,” attributed to “Dr. Swift”:



Example of asterisks used to cover bawdy content in a verse miscellany. 1744.

The riddle isn't difficult to solve for "arse" ("My *Words* are few, but spoke with *Sense*, / And yet my *Speaking* gives Offense," etc.), a word that would fit equally well in the Shandean example.

Note that in the example from Vol. II above, Tristram pointedly refuses to tell the reader whether Uncle Toby uttered the offensive word ("I will not say whether my uncle *Toby* had compleated the sentence or not"). In fact, he uses the ambiguity as an occasion to launch into one of his meta-textual analyses, demonstrating the many rhetorical effects that different solutions to the puzzle would achieve:



Tristram calls attention to the rhetorical effects of filling in expletives (II.vi).
University of Virginia Special Collections

When the joke works, the reader is left with the uncomfortable sense of having supplied a word that is much dirtier than Uncle Toby's. Tristram's subsequent commentary on the whole textual event draws attention to the way that such censoring asterisks undo themselves, introducing lewdness by affecting modesty.

In another direct commentary on his asterisks, Tristram puns that they are "stars" that he "hang[s] up in some of the darkest passages, knowing that the world is apt to lose its way, with all the lights the sun itself at noon day can give it" (VI.xxxiii). This pose of protecting the reader's delicacy is one he adopts routinely, but almost always with obvious irony, especially because he also takes aim at the reader's supposedly dirty mind. Again and again, Tristram sets up a trap where he forces us to imagine an obscene or indelicate word, then mockingly upbraids us for the filth of our own imaginations. It is in this sense that the asterisks in *Tristram Shandy* function not only as *notae*, marking the omission of content, but also as *signes de renvoi*, in that they gesture out to an extra-textual space, the reader's mind, where the omission must be completed. He can then use this referential

movement to satirize the hypocrisy of prudishness and its obsession with the corrupting power of the printed word, an idea we will return to in a few moments.

Star Search

From the examples above, we can see that Sterne's use of asterisks references the long history of the mark as well as some contemporary uses, but he also appears to be introducing some creative and sophisticated applications. So my question becomes: how can we know the extent to which Sterne is replicating past models so that we can distinguish his innovations? To answer this question, I've been scouring all kinds of print materials to try to track down just when the asterisk began being used to signal indecent or lewd material: and the search continues.

My pet hypothesis when I began was that asterisks and dashes were used to evade censors and punitive damages in the common law courts. There's certainly a case to be made for the use of asterisks to obscure names in print as deriving from libel and defamation law, which originated in the aptly named Star Chamber of the Middle Ages. There were also fines associated with profane swearing and oaths, an area of objectionable speech that arguably dates back to ancient proscriptions against uttering the name of God, but these subjects require their own presentations (and I'll be addressing them in subsequent chapters of my dissertation).

The kinds of content Sterne suggests—obscenity and bawdy words—didn't fall under common law jurisdiction until the case of Edmund Curll in 1727. Curll's punishment for publishing the erotic novel *Venus in the Cloister* was light, and the concept of obscene libel was not systematically targeted until much later in the century. As Alec Craig has noted, "When the law of obscenity was invoked in the eighteenth

century it was generally in the role of a hanger-on to its more substantial cousins, seditious and blasphemous libel” (34). Later on in the century, the courts established that obscenity tended to corrupt the morals of society as a whole. The legal measures toward greater restriction of printed material were greatly accelerated by the rising Evangelical Movement and especially Methodism. The moralistic Proclamation Society, under the aegis of William Wilberforce, took aim squarely at “the Suppression of indecent Publications and Exhibitions” in 1789,¹ and no less a figure than the Reverend George Whitefield publicly condemned Sterne as an Antichrist who would usher in an age of ever more obscene publications by the example of his novel.

If earlier uses of the bawdy asterisk were not motivated by an attempt to evade the law, then they must stem from something else, which may lead us into the concepts such as decorum, taste, or delicacy. These realms are potentially much more interesting, but they are proportionally much harder to pin down in the textual record. As a further complication, I have discovered the uselessness of the asterisk for conducting searches in digital databases such as ECCO and EEBO: true to form, the asterisk in functions in search engines as a “wildcard” that can stand for any character or any number of characters—except, of course, for itself. Still, I’ve found a range of relevant strands of discourse, which together may give us a better picture of the historical contexts that informed Sterne’s typographical experiments.

1. Contemporary **grammar books and printers’ manuals** confirm the typical range of uses for the asterisk, so they help us to navigate the ways in which Sterne’s asterisks both

¹ *Brief Statement of the Origin and Nature of the Society for Carrying Into Effect His Majesty’s Proclamation for the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue*, 1789.

reflect and depart from prevailing conventions.

6. The *Asterism* is the chief of the References, which presents itself most readily to the eye, on account of having its figure a-top, and leaving a blank below ; which makes it a Superior.

In Roman Church-books the Asterism divides each verse of a Psalm into two parts ; and shews where the Responses begin : which in our Common-Prayer-books is done by putting a Colon between the two parts of each verse.

The Asterism is sometimes used to supply a name of a person that chuses to pass anonymous: Asterisms, again, denote an omission, or an hiatus; by loss of original Copy; in which case the number of Asterisms is multiplied according to the largeness of the chasm; and not only whole lines, but
some-

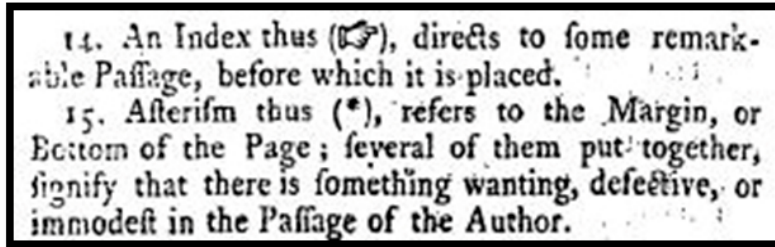
sometimes whole pages are left blank, and mark'd with some lines of Stars.

In satyrizing persons in Pamphlets and Public papers, the Asterism is of great service ; for it is but putting the first letter of a person's name, with some Asterisms after it, and ill-natur'd people think they may characterize, and even libel, their betters, without restriction.

Asterisms may serve instead of a line of Small Flowers, if they are set to stand progressively ; and they perform the same service when they are put alternately, one set the right way, and the next inverted.

The Asterism, used as a Reference, has a proper position for its figure ; but for all other purposes it would be better to be in the middle of its Shank ; which would save the trouble of justifying it, when used the flat way, and prevent the looks of bad spacing, which the blank part of it must needs occasion in close lines.

Descriptions of the functions of “asterisms” in *The Printer's Grammar* by John Smith, 1755. Note that it directs printers and compositors to observe a correlation between “the number of Asterisms” and “the largeness of the chasm” when representing lacunae.

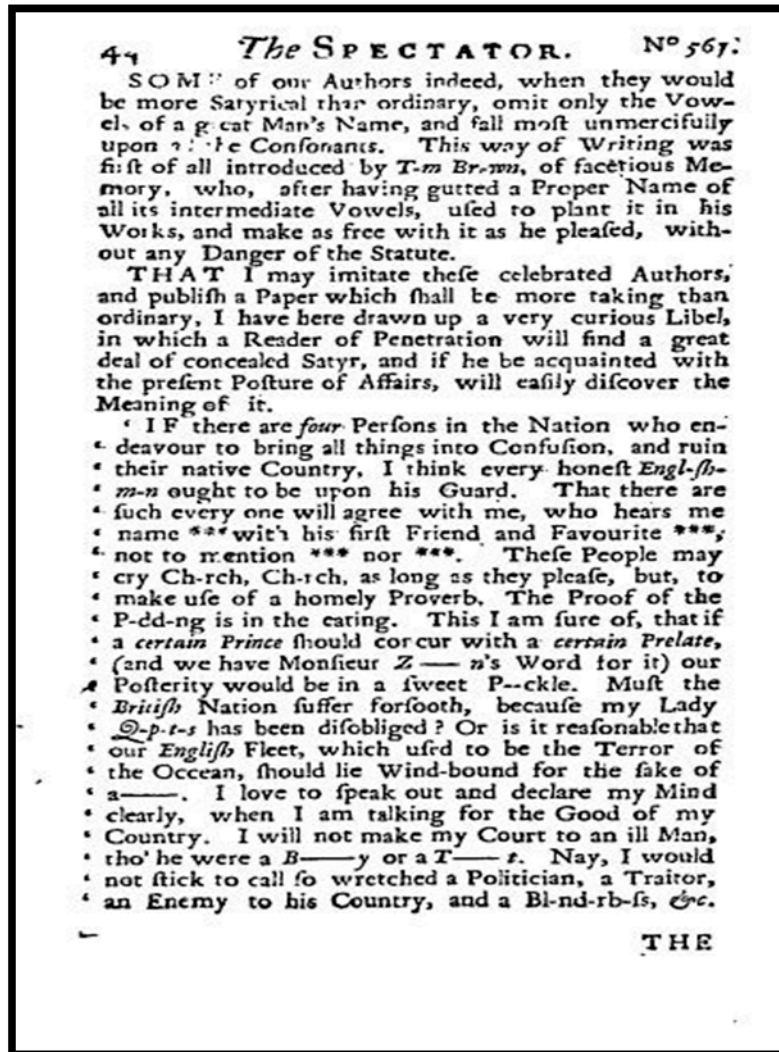


Description of the asterism from James Buchanan's *The British Grammar*, 1762.

The above example from Buchanan's 1762 grammar manual notably mentions that asterisks could cover something "immodest" in the author's words. This instance is the earliest direct mention of asterisks being used to censor obscenities that I have found, and it may not be a coincidence that it comes out after the publication of *Tristram Shandy*. However, such manuals frequently lifted much of their material from earlier sources, so it's possible that an earlier iteration of this principle exists.

2. Satires of secret histories

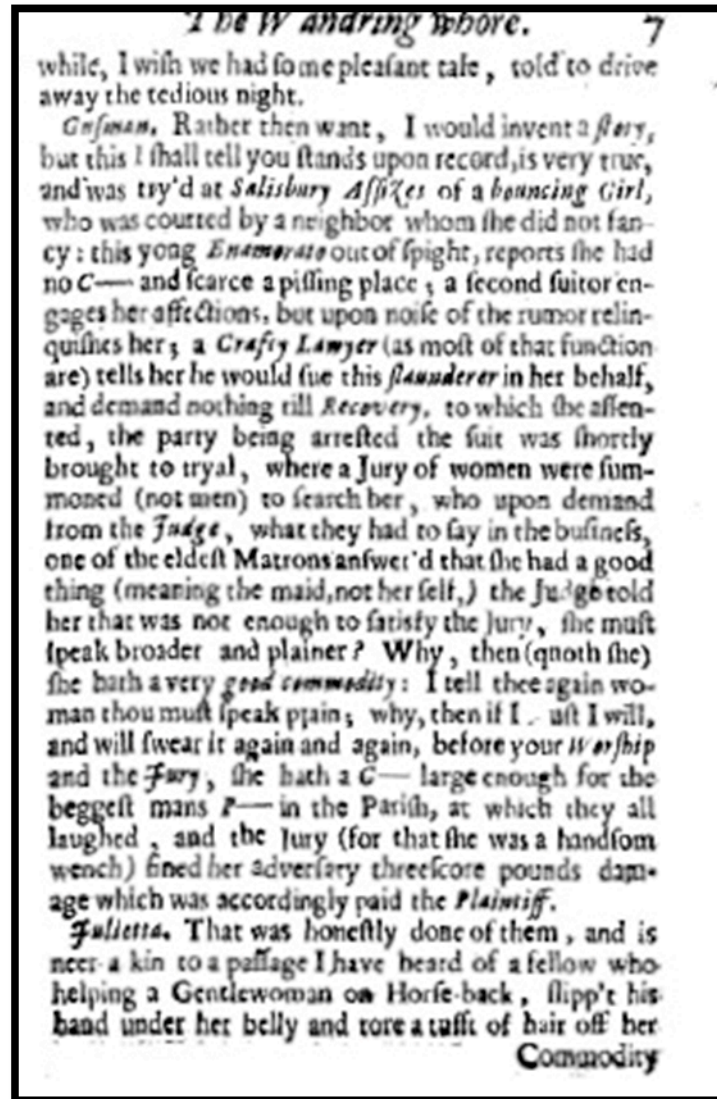
The former example from *The Printer's Grammar* points to another prevalent asterisk convention that authors used creatively in fiction and literature: obscuring names and titles in secret histories and *nouvelles scandaleuses*. At least as early as *The Spectator* in 1714, we see an author parodying this usage of asterisks and dashes in print culture:



A send-up of expletives used to obscure (reveal) names in *The Spectator* no. 567, 1714.

The essay pokes fun at the way that such “concealed Satyr” allows the informed reader to “easily discover the Meaning of it,” which should remind us of Sterne’s own practice. However, it’s clear that the fictional individuals the example targets are singled out not for their lewdness or sexual misconduct, but for political sins. Playing with bawdy asterisks did not appear to make it into such a mainstream or respected periodical as *The Spectator*, but instead hovered just below that threshold in the realm of popular ephemera.

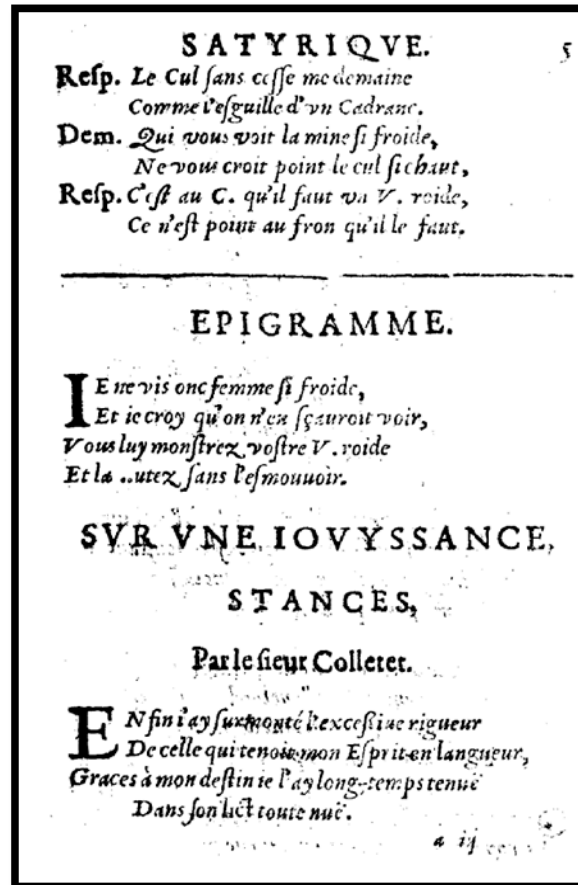
3. **Bawdy ephemera and miscellanies** like *The Muse in Good Humour* did frequently incorporate expletives to draw attention to the obscenities they weren't printing, and this practice was around at least as early as the mid-seventeenth century in England, as we can see from the following example:



The Fifth and Last Part of the Wandring Whore: a Dialogue Between Magdalena, a Crafty Bawd, Julietta, an Exquisite Whore, Francion, a Lascivious Gallant, and Gusman a Pimping Hector. Attributed to "Pietro Aretino," 1661.

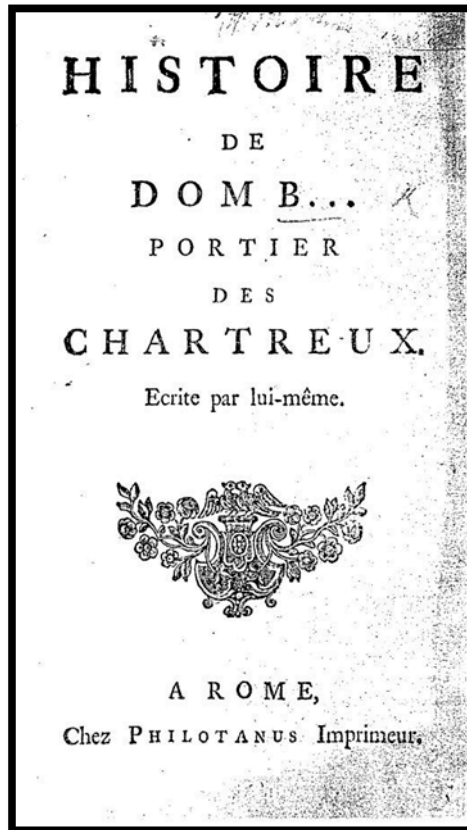
This excerpt from *The Wandring Whore* (1661) blends erotic with humorous content, referencing genitals with the initial letter and dash. Gusman the pimp tells a “true” story about a lover’s quarrel in which the woman was accused of having “no C---- and scarce a pissing place,” but when the issue is taken to court, a jury of women finds that, indeed, the woman so maligned “hath a C---- large enough for the biggest mans P---- in the Parish.” Such lewd humor goes farther than Sterne ever did with his suggestive asterisks by forcing the reader to supply exact obscenities. The fact that they almost always use letters and dashes rather than asterisks aligns them with another strain of contemporary writing, the French erotic or pornographic novel.

4. Many **French erotic novels** of the early and mid-seventeenth century found their way into England and were translated and re-sold under English titles, which was the case for Edmund Curll’s *Venus in the Cloister* mentioned above. Interestingly, as Joan DeJean tells us in her excellent study *The Reinvention of Obscenity*, by the 1630s French writers had developed a standardized system for using expletives to represent sexually graphic words in print: an initial letter usually followed by ellipses or vice-versa. Here’s an example from a collection of erotic poetry:



French expletive conventions from a collection of mid-seventeenth-century erotic poetry.
Le Parnasse des Poetes Satyriques, by Théophile, 1622.

As we observed in *The Wandering Whore*, initial letters are used here to signify obscene words, in this case C. for “con” (“cunt”) and V. for “vit” (“prick”). Note also the use of ellipses in the “Epigramme” to render “. . . outez” or “foutez.” As DeJean observes, such ellipses could enable the full range of semantic uses for “foutre” (“fuck”) that we encounter today.



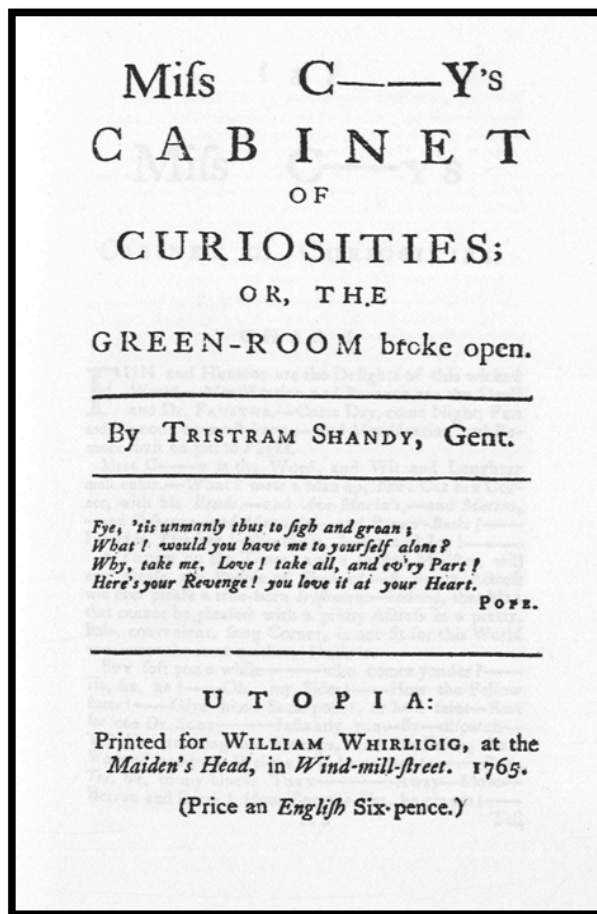
A later example of French ellipses as expletives. *Histoire de Dom B. . .*, by Latouche (?), 1740. “B. . .” would have been immediately legible as “bougre” (“bugger”).

Although similar texts in England followed loose conventions, there was nothing nearly so standardized and regular as these ellipses became. DeJean argues that such standardization might have actually accelerated the censorship that was looming on the horizon in France, but was yet still so far off in England:

The ellipsis, the substitution of a visual mark for suppressed content, can be seen as calling attention both to that content and to the act of its suppression. It is as if the printers were somehow asking for the official censorship that came down on the volumes virtually as soon as the new typographical sign of intentional omission began to be standardized. (36)

5. Sterneiana

In addition to these historical precedents, we can also glean some insight about the functioning of expletives both in *Tristram Shandy* and in contemporary print culture by turning to the works that Sterne's novel inspired: the so-called Sterneiana of the later eighteenth century. Given that these imitations were designed first and foremost to sell copies, it's reasonable to analyze about the features they imitated from *Tristram Shandy* as indices of what they thought the public liked in the original. That's not to say they interpreted readers' tastes accurately—especially considering that they use expletives in much less sophisticated ways than Sterne did. Consider the following example:



An example of Sterneiana: works inspired by the success of *Tristram Shandy*.
Miss C---y's Cabinet of Curiosities, attributed to "Tristram Shandy," 1765.

As with the erotic novels and ephemera, the title reference is much more explicit than anything used by Sterne. The “C---y” refers to “cunny,” a diminutive version of a primary obscenity. Sterne occasionally uses the initial letter/dash form for obscene scatological terms such as “A—e” (VIII.xxxii) and “besh-t” (VII.xvii), but never for sexual content. The fact that the main character’s name receives this treatment also harkens back to the secret histories, references to which appear rarely within the Shandean oeuvre. These observations tell us a couple of related things: 1) *Miss C---y’s Cabinet* locates *Tristram Shandy* within a larger history of print conventions that include both bawdier and even pornographic content as well as secret histories.² 2) Yet the work also banks on the fact that the expletives in *Tristram Shandy* are part of its unique appeal to the book-buying public—its characteristic appearance. Thus, we can infer that the contemporary reading public would have recognized the Shandean use of asterisks as both old and new: old in their reaching back through centuries of bawdy verse and erotic novels, but new in their excess and playful exuberance. Yet another useful feature of the Sterneiana is how, in their often insipid coarseness, they illuminate by contrast the sophistication of Sterne’s use of suggestive humor. Works like *Miss C---y* employ bawdy for bawdy’s sake, or to sell books, and not in the service of a complicated and multi-layered joke about the reader’s hypocritical delicacy.

Ancient Precedents for Bawdy Satire

² Admittedly, there’s plenty of evidence in *Tristram Shandy* that Sterne intentionally alluded to dirty French novels, as with the story of the “Abbess of Andouilletts” (VII.xx): popular erotic stories frequently incorporated monastic settings and relationships between novitiates and their superiors.

Thus far, we have surveyed a few strains of discourse and printed materials that relate to the *form* of Sterne's typographical play, but when considering the *function* of his jokes, we can usefully look to some much older models: Rabelais and the Romans. It's no secret that Rabelais is a major influence on *Tristram Shandy*. As seen in "A Fragment in the Manner of Rabelais" (which Melvyn New heralded in 1972 as a kind of early draft of *Tristram Shandy*), Sterne could be very coarse and direct with scatological terms, following Rabelais's lead:

Good God! answer'd Longinus Rabelaicus (making an Exclamation, but taking Care to moderate his Voice at the same Time) Why,---of the Art of making all kinds of your theological, hebdomadal, rostrummical, humdrummical what d'ye call 'ems-----I'll be shot quoth Epistemon if all this Story of thine of a roasted Horse is simply no more than S----- SAUSAGES?, quoth Panurge. [. . .] for my own Part, either I know no more of Greek & Latin than my Arse, or the KERUKOPAEDIA, is nothing but the Art of making 'em---

But when it comes to sexual expletives, it seems Sterne was more in line with classical tradition. Amy Richlin's *Garden of Priapus* shows how major Roman writers such as Martial, Pliny, and Petronius frequently used sexual obscenities in their light verse and epigrams. They didn't use expletives, but they did draw attention to the bawdiness of their language through the elaborate constructions of rhetorical devices such as:

1. praeteritio—pretending to pass over something in a way that emphasizes it; and
2. apologiae—making a show of excusing or defending the use of dirty language.

These *apologiae* particularly remind me of Sterne in several ways. For one, writers (especially Martial) would address the female reader and comment on her supposed delicacy, warning her to stop reading but acknowledging that such warnings were likely to fail. Another technique is that they would also set up a stock puritanical critic—often named Cato—and ridicule his prudery. Tristram employs this technique any time he addresses Sir, Madam, your worships, or your reverences. Another common trope that Richlin identifies is how Roman epigrammatists made an elaborate show of demonstrating that the words themselves were harmless, casting them as mere plain speaking, which didn't reflect on the writer's morals. This metalinguistic, self-referential turn is something with which we should be very familiar from *Tristram Shandy*, as when Tristram draws additional attention to what he's doing by discussing it directly (as seen above). I also noticed a striking Shandean spirit in a letter of Cicero's that Richlin reprints:

Do you see, then, that this is nothing but silliness, and that foulness is neither in the word nor in the thing, and therefore is nowhere? and so we put obscene words into respectable ones. . . . And indeed, now even words not obscene have become so. . . . “Witnesses” [testes; = “balls”] is a totally respectable word in a courtroom, none too respectable elsewhere. . . . What about the fact that the thing itself is sometimes respectable, sometimes foul? Someone farts softly, it's a disgrace; let him be naked at the baths, you will not reprove him. (from *Epistulae ad Familiares* 9.22, qtd. in Richlin 40)

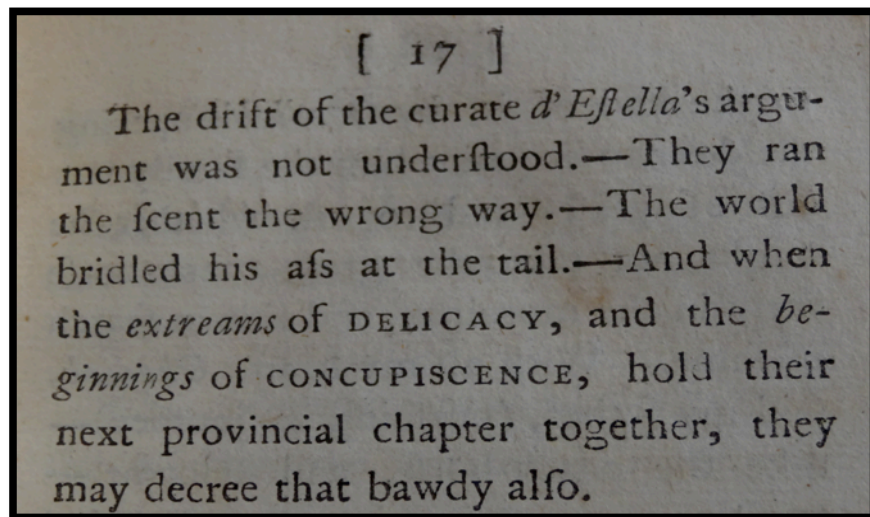
Though he makes a big show of avoiding obscenities in this letter to his friend Paetus, Cicero dances close to the edge of objectionable language throughout, clearly meaning for his reader to imagine the dirty words. Like Tristram, he exposes the relative power of a

word (in this case “testes”), the dirtiness of which depends entirely on the context and how the audience chooses to interpret it.

We see this theme repeated frequently in Sterne’s novel, both enacted in the use of asterisks and thematized in Ernulphus’s curses, the chapters upon noses, button-holes, and whiskers, the aforementioned Abbess of Andouillet’s affair, and notably, as the central joke of Uncle Toby’s amours, which hinge upon the Widow Wadman’s obsession with proving Toby’s virility without resorting to direct questioning. All of these scenes reenact the drama of the relative and relational power of words—but carried to an absurd, Shandean extent. As with the suggestive asterisks and the elaborate discussions of them, these episodes take aim at what I’m calling the paradox of prudery: that those who seek dirty things will always find them. The more scrupulously a prude tries to avoid offenses against delicacy or decorum in public life, the more absurdly they reveal themselves as obsessed with the prurient in the privacy of their minds.

Tristram Shandy’s expletives trip us into recognizing this truth—which is part of the fun—and it does so in a way that points to print as the arbiter of this negotiation between the public and private. Although Sterne may be drawing on conventions that reach back through medieval texts and beyond, he’s using the materials of print in new combinations to create sophisticated jokes that also serve as satirical commentary on the rising tide of prudishness that was already sweeping through English culture. But ironically, keeping DeJean’s argument about French ellipses in mind, perhaps Sterne’s own standardization of asterisks to represent suggestive humor accelerated this move toward censorship and harsher penalties for lewd publications because it gave the prudes a very visible target. Sterne’s underlying satirical purpose in using asterisks as expletives went

above the heads of his detractors, much like the curate *d'Estella* (another star reference?) in the chapter on whiskers (V.i):

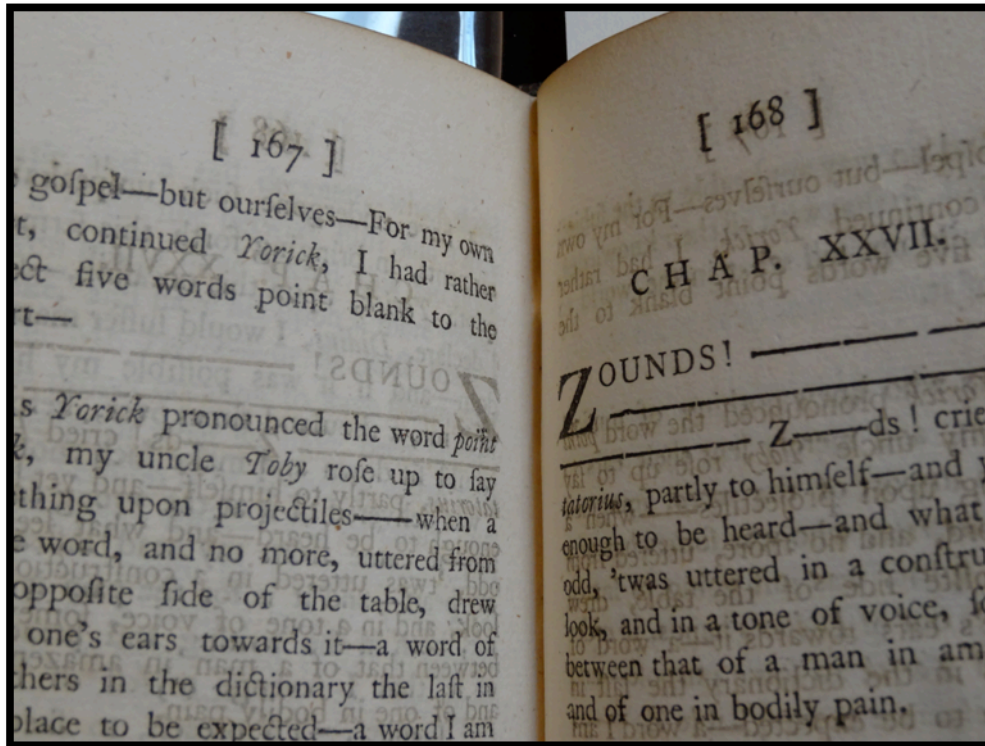


Afterword: The Bibliographical Corrective

There are some unique challenges to this project because it approaches expletives from both historicist and narratological directions. For instance, how can we distinguish between those marks that the printer may have introduced and those that the author intended? The final appearance of punctuation on the page could reflect any part of the spectrum from authorial design to compositor error. In the case of *Tristram Shandy*, the absence of a manuscript or proofs makes the possibility of answering these questions even murkier. Sternean scholars agree that he was involved in the appearance of his pages to an unusual degree, famously enjoining printer Robert Dodsley not to “alter or transpose one Word, nor rectify one false Spelling, nor so much as add or diminish one Comma or Tittle, in or to my *Romance*” (*Letters* 68). When he was pitching the idea of the first two volumes to Dodsley, which he funded and printed himself at York, he avowed that “as I live at York, and shall correct every proof myself, it shall go perfect into the world, and be printed in so

creditable a way as to paper, type, &c., as to do no dishonour to you, who, I know, never chuse to print a book meanly” (ibid. 80-1). But how far can we trust these statements when faced with the inconsistency of expletives in the work? As explored above, sometimes the text offers one asterisk per letter omitted, as when Tristram’s nurse forgets to put the “***** ***” (chamber pot) under the bed in Vol. V. (xvii), whereas in other cases a few asterisks stand for many letters, as when he mentions that he attended “*Jesus College* in *****” (I.xix), which could stand for Oxford or Cambridge. Such inconsistency is, itself, consistent with the use of asterisks throughout the period, which seems to weight the argument toward printer/compositor convention rather than Sternean design.

The creamy, thick paper of volumes I and II testifies to Sterne’s fulfillment of at least one of his promises, especially since the watermark matches the writing paper Sterne chose for his personal correspondence (Monkman 20-1). Yet by the third volume, and for several thereafter, the change in printers is clear: excessive off-setting makes the text difficult to read and clouds the visual impact of Sterne’s typographic experiments:



Off-setting in vol. IV. Notice the clutter with which the off-setting crowds the otherwise spacious arrangement of type on the page, threatening to obscure the visual impact of typographical details. *University of Virginia Special Collections.*

We can be confident that this off-setting took place at the printer's during the binding process because of the straightness of the ghostly lines and the fact that they are off-set from facing pages rather than bleed-throughs. Most likely it means that the pages were not completely dry when they were compressed into bindings. Sterne's first two volumes had sold extraordinarily well, so the next few volumes would be eagerly anticipated by booksellers and readers alike; thus, the printer may have rushed the job to get the books on the shelves as quickly as possible. This evidence of haste may suggest similar carelessness elsewhere, as in the strictness with which compositors were inclined to observe Sterne's every "Tittle," or asterisk, or dash.

Thus, it would be unwise to construct an argument that relied too heavily upon the exact appearance of asterisks and dashes in the first edition. Still, there are plenty of

meaningful consistencies in the way Sterne used expletives, and there are even a few clear instances when the inconsistency of his asterisk usage seems designed to lure the reader into an interpretative trap, playing upon the unavoidable impulse to fill in the blanks with dirty words, as detailed above.

Some inconsistencies may derive from chance or compositor error or choice, but others seem inconsistent by design. For instance, in the first edition of Vol. II, Uncle Toby surmises that his sister may prefer a midwife because she does not choose to let a “man come so near her ****.” The second edition prints the line with spaces between the asterisks: she does not choose to let a “man come so near her * * * *.” Can we read anything into the difference, or were spaces introduced by the compositor merely to justify the line? Does our decision for this example affect the way we interpret similar variations in the text? These remain complicated questions with which I’m grappling as research continues.

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