

# Controlling exchange: money in a sentimental journey



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In *A Sentimental Journey*, Laurence Sterne places a peculiar emphasis on the exchange of money. An intentional stress on this topic is clear in the monetary terms found throughout the text, especially as metaphors in unexpected places. The process of buying and selling provides opportunities for social interaction between men and women. Characters of both sexes capitalize on this de-sexualized setting to speak freely to each other. For Yorick, these interactions exist in a realm outside of commerce. It seems that the exchange, money aside, is the crucial aspect for him in these moments. Yorick is searching for simple human interaction. He desperately wants to believe that sentiment, or at least something emotional and romantic, drives human action. But his own narration betrays his true vision of the world. Everything is commerce, including human beings themselves. Sterne litters Yorick's narration with well-disguised reminders of the world of commerce lurking behind any kind of exchange. Monetary terms are found referring to anything but money. For example, Yorick will say "cost the honest fellow a heartache," (98) or "cost me infinite trouble to make anything of it" (126). Moments like these serve to subtly remind a reader of the inherent loss and gain of any situation, not simply the economic. A slightly different use of this tactic occurs in the metaphors that involve a monetary vocabulary. He says "I always perceive my heart locked up - I can scarce find in it, to give Misery a sixpence," (57) to refer to his feelings when he is between loves. Later, Yorick proclaims to a count that "A polished nation...makes every one its debtor" (114). When the Count does not understand, the language dwells in monetary terms, as Yorick makes use of "a few king William's shillings as smooth as glass in [his] pocket" (114) and illustrates his point by making the coins stand for the French. He uses similar language when telling of a

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woman that “ did not care a sous,” (134) once again incorporating this terminology. His language is gradually becoming a strange money-slang. And as much as he openly discusses his obsession with sentiment, he seems less aware of his obsession with money. Here, the author’s hand is seen as the narration becomes a commentary on its speaker’s character. A crucial complexity in the novel is the nuances in the author and the narrator’s treatment of the money theme. Sterne uses the familiarity of monetary terms to communicate with the reader but also to allow communication without chaperones between characters. One example is “ The Remise,” (48-50) in which Yorick is able to speak with a shy widow while shopping for a new “ chaise.” The first several paragraphs closely describe the process of shopping, giving detailed images of several purchases that Yorick isn’t going to make. He tells of “ a couple of chaises...[that] were too good,” so he “ pass[es] on to a third...and forthwith [begins] to chaffer for the price” (48). This tactic could be considered Yorick’s own sly attempt to convince the reader that this process is winning his attention as much as the woman who he is permitted to speak with because of this exchange of coins. The use of the necessary everyday commerce is a successful mask for Yorick’s inappropriate flirting. Unsupervised interactions between men and women are obviously more acceptable when some sort of actual monetary exchange is involved. This is clearly illustrated when a maitre d’hotel explains his reluctance to forgive Yorick for having “ a young woman locked up with [him] two hours that evening” (120). Although “[He owns] it is necessary...that a stranger in Paris should have opportunities presented to him of buying lace and silk,” it is only rendered inappropriate if “ Monsieur...has bought nothing” (121). Social taboos like this explain the role of money in bringing

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men and women together. Yorick makes use of this potential often. When he stops in a glove shop to ask for directions, and finds himself smitten with the “handsomest Grisset...[he] ever saw,” (74) he cannot leave without buying something. When her assistant arrives to help him with the directions he was supposedly looking for, he suddenly decides that “A propos,...[he] want[s] a couple of pair [himself]” (77). The term “a propos” means of course, or naturally, and therefore suggests that paying for anything is the appropriate behavior in this moment. The sensuality of Sterne’s language in the ensuing moments only proves the absolute lack of importance in the exchange of money that is occurring. Two people go through the motions of normal commerce as “The beautiful Grisset measure[s] them one by one across [his] hand...She [begs he] would try a single pair, which [seem] to be the least – She [holds] it open – [his] hand slip[s] into it at once – It will not do, [says he], shaking [his] head a little – No, [says] she, doing the same thing” (77). In the end, Yorick buys the gloves even though they do not fit, only proving that he relies on exchanging goods to flirt with women in public. The careful de-emphasis of money in these situations reveals their actual role in Yorick’s journey. His instinct to buy something he doesn’t need suggests that he is perhaps confused about his own intentions. Sometimes, he is consciously using money as a vehicle for something else. He admits this understanding when he says “When a virtuous convention is made betwixt man and woman, it sanctifies their most private walks” (90). But in narrating his encounters, he does not discuss monetary rewards so much as “sentimental” ones. When he sees a beggar asking only women for money, and getting it without fail, he is immediately very curious to know “what kind of story it was, and what species of eloquence it could be, which

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softened the hearts of the women" (119). He cannot forget this spectacle, and he later explains that "[he] would have given anything to [get] to the bottom of it; and that, not out of curiosity - it is so low a principle of inquiry, in general, [he] would not purchase the gratification of it with a two-sous piece - but a secret...which so soon and so certainly soften[s] the heart of every woman you [come] near, [is] a secret at least equal to the philosopher's stone" (123). It is interesting to note that once again, he narrates in displaced monetary terms. His excessive interest in this man's "secret" betrays his desperate search for any opportunity to successfully steer any kind of exchange. His prize is different than the beggar's: He wants to learn how to get whatever he wants from a woman. He is obsessed with an act that bears all of the characteristics of a sale, without the actual passing of money. People and emotions are the preferred currency in most of Yorick's exchanges. The stress on money is simply a stress on reward. The reward varies in each situation, but it is rarely the actual object bought. Gratitude is one commodity deemed valuable in his unique bartering. He is immediately smitten when the beautiful Grisset in the glove shop rises to answer his initial question: "Très volontiers; most willingly, said she, laying her work down upon a chair next her, and rising up from the low chair she was sitting in, with so chearful a movement and so chearful a look, that had [he] been laying out fifty louis d'ors with her, [he] should have said - This woman is grateful" (73). And he also seems fulfilled by behavior such as "The young girl [who] [makes him] more a humble curtsy than a low one - it was one of those quiet, thankful sinkings, where the spirit bows itself down - the body does no more than tell it - [he] never gave a girl a crown in my life which gave [him] half the pleasure" (90). In both of these exchanges,

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Yorick finds compensation that he calls priceless, in a strictly monetary sense. It is crucial to note the slight hypocrisy of making such a claim by attaching specific numerical prices to both revelations. Nonetheless, in both cases he reveals the existence of a reward existing outside the bounds of standard currency. Most of Yorick's rewards demand a power relation that gives him control. In all of the above examples, he glories in situations where he is being curtsied to or helped by humble, grateful women. This is not an equal exchange by its very nature. In an encounter with yet another Grisset, he is taken by her servile manner, and convinced to buy despite a firm conviction not to spend anything with her. He explains the thrill of his feelings with " I might buy - or not - she would let me have everything at my own price...and laid herself out to win me..." (121). The excitement here is clearly in his control over the situation, which makes him so happy that he buys yet another item he doesn't need before the scene is over. Yorick actually prefers unequal exchanges if they somehow place him above the other party involved. He says this at the end of the glove shop scene, when he notes that "[he is] sensible that the beautiful Grisset had not asked above a single livre of the price - [he] wishe[s] she had asked a livre more, and [is] puzzling [his] brains how to bring the matter about" (78). Essentially, these scenes fulfill him more the less equal they are. His inability to give as he receives is finally secured by his experience in French society. He decides to make friends by flattery, thus placing himself in the semi-servile position. After becoming extremely popular by constant bowing (a symbol of humility, thus a loss of some power), his reaction is violent. He decides that "'twas a dishonest reckoning - [he grows] ashamed of it - it was the gain of the slave - every sentiment of honour revolted against it - the higher I got, the more I

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was forced upon my beggarly system...and one night after a most vile prostitution of myself...I grew sick — went to bed — ordered La Fleur to get me horses in the morning to set out for Italy” (136). Here, the word “prostitution” makes a strong claim. Any kind of power yielded is vile and shameful for him. Yorick is clearly unable to perform the simple humility he demands from practically every woman he sees. Essentially, Yorick’s “sentimental” needs are no different than those of the average consumer, and even defined in the same terms. His exchanges may be unequal, but he chooses them for this reason. He simply insists on control. Although his treatment of women is certainly unjust, he is not exactly meeting much opposition on their part. Sterne uses this character to draw disturbing parallels in familiar institutions. Money and power are both forces that steer people in their actions. And both forces demand inequality. In the saturated emotion of *A Sentimental Journey*, Yorick’s endless need for control is not surprising. This speaks volumes to the reader living in our consumer world, driven through a series of encounters, always in search of profit. Sterne presents complex ideas about the nature of interaction between the sexes that still resonate in today’s society, in terms we can easily comprehend.