



Romanticism on the Net

Perspectives on Slavery: The “Description of the Brooks Slave Ship” and the African Girl of Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*

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Abstract

This essay takes a new look at one of the most disturbing images of the Romantic period in order to reconsider the ethical significance of fictional episodes as they are resituated in Romantic-era literary anthologies. It uses the concept of the “diagram” to correlate the “Description of the Brooks Slave Ship” with anthologized versions of an episode from Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, and it finds in these different works a similar invitation for viewers or readers to fill in the blank spaces of printed texts. The image of the Brooks slave ship and Sterne’s episode involving a silent African girl expose, through the details of print, the functions that visual, narrative, and imaginative perspectives play in white authors’ representations of Black suffering.

Biographical Note

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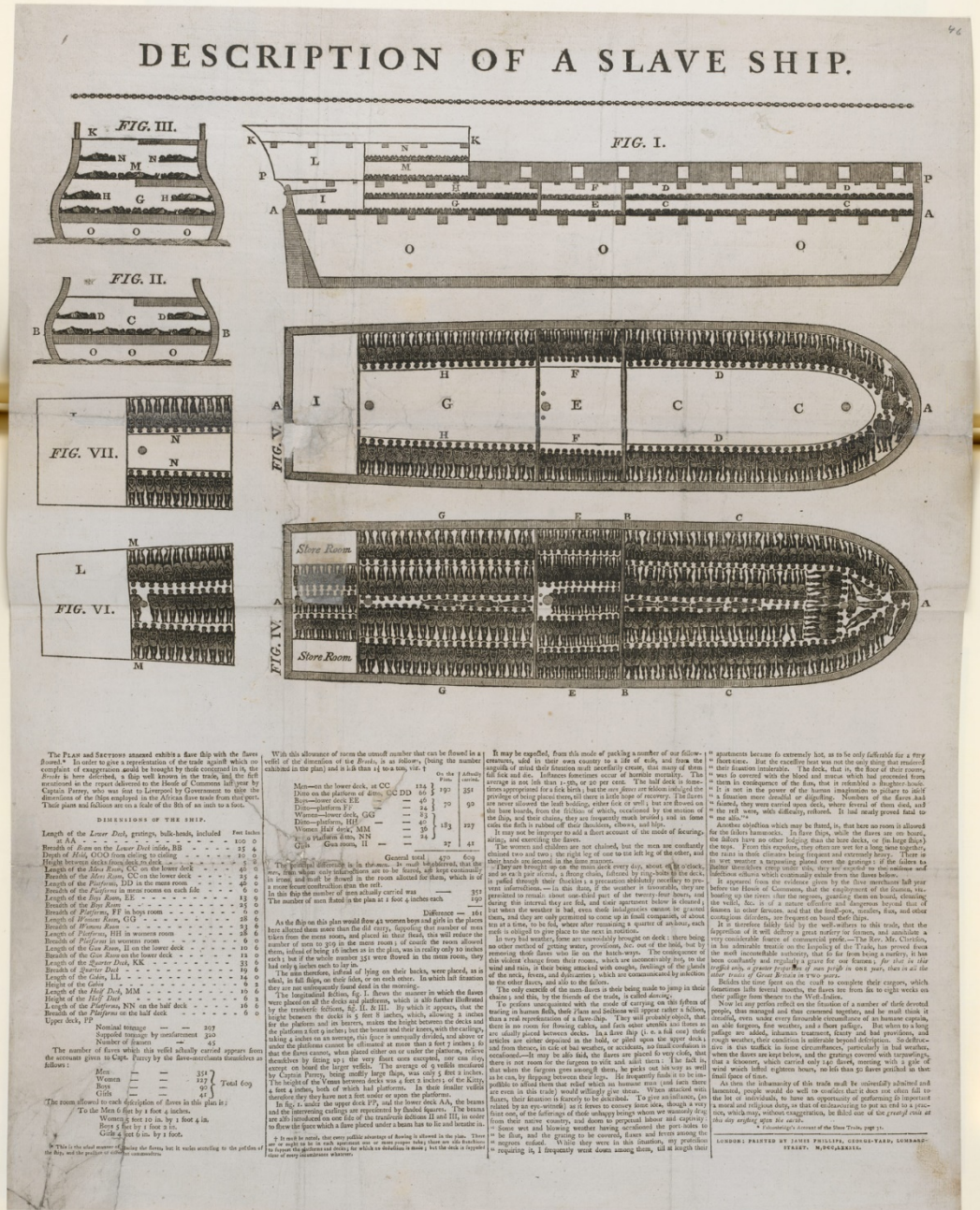


Figure 1. "Description of a Slave Ship." The British Library. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/diagram-of-the-brookes-slave-ship/>

1. The "Description of a Slave Ship" is one of the most disturbing images of Romantic-era print culture. With its diagrammatic qualities, which borrow from naval architectural il-

lustration, it contrasts strikingly with the overwhelmingly sentimental imagery of the abolitionist movement. In what follows, I emphasize this image's status as a work of information display, as an instance of the visual culture devoted to the presentation of information for philosophical, historical, political, or other purposes. In this way, the "Description" can, in the contexts I provide in this essay, be seen anew for its power—both its oppressive force and its political efficacy. Additionally, this image the "Description" can be identified as one place of many where violence against Black bodies intersects with the white sympathetic imagination. My broader aim is, though, to view both this image and a brief, frequently anthologized episode from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* about an African girl through the concept of the diagram. The varied instances of diagrammatic print that I assemble here, diagrammatic illustration and sentimental fiction, indicate the cognitive and ethical significance of intersections between various types of perspectives—physical as well as imaginative, visual as well as narrative. In their multiplied points of view, whether visual or narrative, the "Description" and Sterne's episode of the African girl offer their audiences space where their ethical perspectives have room to shift.

2. The "Description" is worthy of special attention as a diagram because it insists on an affective epistemology, on what Ian Baucom has described as "an affective, interested, and imaginary investment in the traumas of history as a truthful form of knowledge" (222). This type of knowledge shapes the significance of the "Description," but it also informs the experience of reading works of fiction that were written and read as abolitionist texts.

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

In their study of the diagram as a genre with particular and pervasive force, John Bender and Michael Marrinan provocatively claim that “The novel of the mid-eighteenth century may be viewed [...] as a symptom of the culture of diagram, for it stimulates the reader to bridge the empirical and the affective in order to project coherent fictional worlds” (81-2).¹ In the second half of this essay, I elaborate on that claim by arguing that such projection can find room in the blank, white spaces of printed, and especially excised, rearranged, and remediated, texts. My central argument is that the “Description,” when seen as a diagram in the sense that Bender and Marrinan propose, shares features of sentimental fiction that are on prominent display when such literary texts are repositioned in new narrative and visual formulations.

3. The history of the graphic display of information has been approached from various angles: Jacques Bertin posits a “semiology of graphics,” Joanna Drucker discusses “visual epistemology” (17), and Barbara Maria Stafford’s work charts a long history of visual learning. Bender and Marrinan argue for an approach to visual images that might otherwise have been the purview of technical illustration, architectural history, or the history of science. In their definition, a diagram is usually a drawing, often annotated with explanatory captions (7), that serves to produce knowledge rather than to generate affect. While some diagrams do require a single, dominant point of view, Bender and Marrinan focus on those which “multiply points of view by presenting arrays rather than legislating the single view of a replete spatial environment” (21). Central in their discussion are the illustrated plates of Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*. The white space on their

pages serves as “a virtual space whose material presence—which joins together the disparate parts of the *Encyclopédie* plates—provides support for the composite play of imagery and cognition that is the motor-energy of diagram” (23). A diagram’s blank space is the physical origin of correlation across varied images and genres, and it facilitates the “dissolution of fixed points of reference into the shifting material web” that is fundamental to the culture of diagram (153). In what follows, I correlate this “white space” to the background between the different views that comprise the “Description,” a work that can easily be considered a diagram in the familiar sense of the term. I also connect this “white space” to the blank space between extracted, rearranged episodes from Laurence Sterne’s fiction, which are, of course, not diagrams in any sense of the term. Nevertheless, in the blank spaces that, in both works, surround either the suggestion or the depiction of enslavement, the white imagination finds room to engage in shifting perspectives that draw from the “motor energy of diagram” as they solicit an affective epistemology.

4. The coercive implications of abolitionist visual culture, including the “Description,” are part of the paradox that Enlightenment discourses of benevolence entail structures of dominance and cruelty. The “Description” and the episode of the African girl from *Tristram Shandy* are both addressed to the white sentimental imagination, which I consider through critical studies that have pointed to both the significant overlap and persistent tensions between sentimental discourse and antislavery movements. While some critics have emphasized the intertwining of sensibility and antislavery movements (Ferguson, Ellis, Nussbaum), others have explored their incompatibilities. George Boulukos, for ex-

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

ample, has shown that, in response to literary works that foster sentimental response for the “grateful slave,” a reader’s pity for one individual enslaved African can serve to reinforce the system of slavery. In a related line of argument, Tassie Gwilliam, following Mary Louise Pratt, contends that literary sentimentalism relies fundamentally on the institution of slavery.

5. The “Diagram” and Sterne’s episode are part of the sentimentalist discourse of abolition that, as Stephen Ahern outlines, carries both egalitarian and oppressive implications (2-5). To be sure, this discourse’s practical effects—the aim of abolishing the slave trade or slavery—are a pertinent concern. Brycchan Carey argues that reformers employed sentimental rhetoric with notable efficacy in abolitionist texts, highlighting a practical consequence of what had overwhelmingly been seen, until at least the 1990s, as an embarrassing literary style. As numerous critics have pointed out, works of sentimental literature produced various results, many which fall far short of political action: a reader’s isolated private feeling, an author’s self-promotion, or the indirect reinforcement of slavery itself (Lilley, Richardson, Boulukos, Wood). This political efficacy has been seen to hinge more on abolitionist literature’s fostering of imaginative reflexivity than on its accurate depiction of historical facts (Mitchell). Along these lines, Carey contends that sentimental literature, with its tendency towards the “pathetic and little,” “offered the eighteenth-century reader a space to imagine the unimaginable, to consider themselves in a situation which they could not possibly have experienced first-hand” (49). Tensions between sentimentalism and abolitionism—particularly between the equality each discourse promotes

and the inequalities that both can reinforce—often pivot on the imaginative responses that they prompt in their white audiences. What I want to emphasize is that those tensions have a localized and material presence in the visual details of these two works.

6. The “Description” visualizes the effects of an invisible source of power that is enforced by violence. It operates as abolitionist propaganda through the different visual perspectives it assembles. First, it puts viewers in a position of superiority: To comprehend the plans of the slave ship, a viewer, who is most likely white, must adopt a bird’s eye perspective and look down on anonymous, depersonalized African bodies. The reinforcement of power that the plans of the ship convey was altered when subsequent reworkings of the image added cross-sections, which bring viewers into the ship, positioning them on the same horizontal plane as the suffocating men and women. The fullest version of the image, as shown above (see Fig. 1), incorporates the important alternation between the plan’s vertical perspective, associated with surveillance and domination, and the cross-section’s horizontal view and its suggestions of proximity and parity. This duality of oppression and equality aligns, broadly speaking, with reject the argument Martha Cutter, Ramesh Mallipeddi, and I have made, which suggest that, while many abolitionist texts and images reinscribe oppression in the name of liberty, others offer models of intersubjective, egalitarian identification. Expanding on these conclusions, I argue that the “Description” rehearses oppression but also, in its fullest incarnation, allows for the possibility of identification through its multiplied architectural perspectives. This claim relies on

seeing the “Description” as a particular kind of diagram.

7. Through the focus on features of print that I adopt throughout this essay, the shifting perspectives that this diagram fosters shed new light on white authors’ representations of the experiences of enslaved Africans. Reading the “Description” alongside an episode from *Tristram Shandy* exposes the oppression and ambivalence that can tinge, permeate, or enable politically progressive works—abstractions that find visual, material expression in issues prioritized by image studies and book history.² My approach includes architectural cross-sections with features of typography, such as titles, dashes, and line breaks, in an expansive category of diagrammatic print so as to make a case for the articulation of perspectives that are visual and narrative, physical as well as imaginative.

8. To elaborate, visual elements of print materialize abstract and imaginative perspectives. The diagrammatic elements of the “Description” hinge on shifting visual perspectives that take as their subject the oppression of Black bodies. The inset tales of sentimental fiction also hinge on shifting perspectives that are, of course, narrative rather than visual. The frequent so-called “pictures” that feature prominently in such literary works take on the cognitive and imaginative perspectives that actual images, and especially diagrams, require their viewers to imaginatively adopt. James Chandler has traced similar perspectives, or what Sterne specifies as “sight lines,” particularly in the episodes of Maria from *Sentimental Journey* and *Tristram Shandy*. In these instances, an “oscillation ... between the aesthetic and the ethical” is formulated through shifting sight lines, sentimental re-

sponse, and narrative delays and silences (163). If, as Chandler notes of the eighteenth century's expanding print culture, "the new literary form of spectatorship lends itself to circulation, and may even be said to depend on it" (17), then it is perhaps appropriate for sight lines to be crossed or redirected when readers and viewers experience remediated printed texts in new publication formats.

9. Sterne's fiction inspired a number of visual illustrations. I look, though, to different forms of remediation. When his muted support for abolition is excerpted and republished in Romantic-era anthologies, new narrative arrangements and typographical details expand the original range of his sentimental economy. Thomas Clarkson wrote in his *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade* (1808) that "Sterne, in his account of the Negro girl in his *Life of Tristram Shandy*, took decidedly the part of the oppressed Africans." What it means to "take the part" of enslaved Africans or, as Clarkson adds, to handle "this subject" in Sterne's "pathetic, witty, and sentimental manner" might be considered differently depending on whether we read the episode in its original position in the novel or its new positions in anthologies (62-3). Connections between visual and narrative perspectives are of course nothing new, and their careful elaboration by Elizabeth Ermarth in particular has enriched the study of nineteenth-century realism. My emphasis on the blank spaces of printed images and texts prioritizes the cognitive and imaginative movement that can multiply visual and narrative perspectives. I argue that these two republished, remediated texts—the "Description" and the episode of the African girl—tell us about the ways that readers and viewers might

shift their own ethical perspectives through the multiplied points of view that are manifested in the details of diagrammatic print.

“Description of a Slave Ship”

10. In this section, I trace the publication and critical histories of the “Description of a Slave Ship” and argue for the value of seeing it as a diagram in the particular sense that Bender and Marrinan propose. Remediation is central to the “Description.” There is no single, stable version of the image. There is also, for that matter, no standard title. Versions of this composite image have appeared with the titles “Description of a Slave Ship,” “Plan and Section of a Slave Ship,” and “Remarks on the Slave Trade.” It is often known by the name of the ship—the Brooks—but, after the misspelling that first appeared in Clarkson’s *History*, it has long been referred to erroneously as “the Brookes slave ship.” Individually, its multiple versions have been described as a “schematic representation,” an “icon of the visual horror of the slave trade,” and, invoking the impersonal connotations the term can carry, “a white-generated, pseudo-scientific, and narrowly historic ‘diagram.’”³ There is no single artist or author. Cheryl Finley has detailed the development of the image and its related text from the first version, planned by the Plymouth Committee against the Slave Trade in late 1788 and likely executed by artist and politician William Elford. The image appeared as a plate, a pamphlet, an insert in a magazine, and a broadside before it was included, in an especially notable incarnation, as a foldout without the original text in Clarkson’s *History* (see Fig. 2).⁴ In this incarnation, seven numbered figures from above, alongside, and within the ship depict enslaved African men and women in frontal and

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

profile views. The multiple versions of this image, which expand the iterability of the print medium, might account for some, but certainly not all, of the divergent critical responses this image has received.

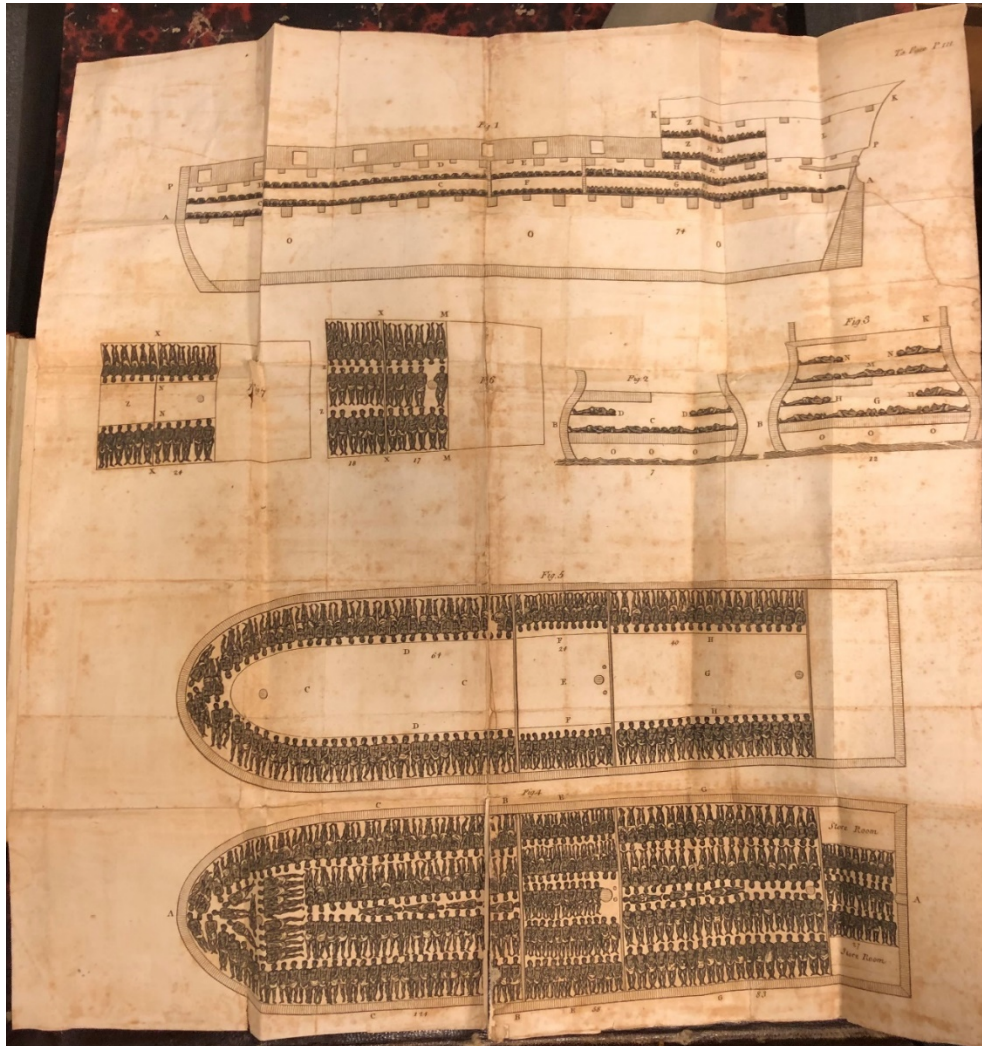


Figure 2. From Thomas Clarkson, *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade* (1808). Reproduced with permission of the Irvin Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of South Carolina Libraries.

11. The “Description” has been understood to further dehumanize the people whose lives its collective authors and publishers sought to improve. According to Marcus Wood, it follows rules of composition that “allow the black body no voice which is not the creation of

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

a white observer” (29). Of the people represented in the early Plymouth version, “[h]orribly appearing only as faceless silhouettes,” Celeste-Marie Bernier has said that their historical lives “have left barely a physical let alone a psychological ‘imprint,’ while their imaginative inner lives have been rendered null and void” (997).⁵ However, other scholars have also found visual evidence corresponding to the explicit aims of the abolitionists. Finley has argued that the human figures in a later version of the image are granted a new level of dignity by being portrayed in slightly varying postures: Some turn to the left or right, in a way that she has argued suggests the *contrapposto* stance of classical sculpture and its implication of thoughtful contemplation or inner doubt (91). Are the interior states and psychological traumas of the people who are represented in this image erased? Alternatively, are these human figures, at least in one version, dignified through visual detail? Rather than responding directly to these questions, I instead provide an analysis of the printed features that make answering them so difficult.

12. Something important happens both empirically and affectively when the visual field of the “Description” expands in the London version of 1789 to supplement the plans (from above the ship) with cross-sections (from alongside or within the ship). This version of the “Description” borrows heavily from the conventions of architectural illustration, in which plan, elevation, and section each contributes to the visual depiction of a three-dimensional building on the two dimensions of paper. This version also, importantly, requires a shift in a viewer’s visual perspective in order to make sense of the entire image. Wood identifies the addition of the second plan of the lower level (see “Fig V” above in

my Fig. 1) as a significant innovation within traditions of naval architectural illustration. Viewers of this full version of the image, with plans as well as sections (see “Fig II” and “Fig III” above in my Fig 1), adopt not only the superior position invoked by the plan, which must be viewed vertically, but also the interior, parallel position posited by the sections, which must be viewed horizontally, from eye-level. These sections are crucial because, according to Finley, they allow “viewers to imagine movement (and consequently themselves) within the space previously delineated by the plan view” (58). The composite image’s differing perspectives invite viewers into a fictional space that is, of course, drawn from reality. The explanatory text that appears beneath the numbered figures in the fullest version of the “Description” acknowledges this dissonance by observing that, for viewers unfamiliar with the trade of human beings, “these Plans and Sections will appear rather a fiction, than a real representation” (cited in Finley, 65). In the imaginative experience that arises from the image’s visual arrangement, viewers encounter a merging of imagination and reality, a combination of fact and fiction, of the sort that Baucom and Lennard Davis have identified. Representations of slavery’s viciousness summon features of the imagination that literary sentimentalism also fosters, and printed details can emphasize and clarify these issues.

13. The multiple perspectives afforded to the viewer of the “Description” amount to a totalizing image of a specific, confined space.⁶ Contemporary responses attest to its suffocating effects. The first American version, published by Matthew Carey, included in its additional text the comment that “Here is presented to our view, one of the most horrid spec-

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

tacles—a number of human creatures, packed, side by side, almost like herrings in a barrel, and reduced nearly to the state of being buried alive, with just air enough to preserve a degree of life sufficient to make them sensible of all the horrors of their situation” (cited in Finley, 46). The Comte de Mirabeau wrote an impassioned plea in an undelivered speech:

Behold the model of a vessel laden with these unfortunate beings, ... Mark how the vessel when it rolls hurts them, mutilates them, bruises them against each other, tears them with their own chains, and presents thus a thousand tortures in a single picture! ... Have they at least a sufficient quantity of wholesome air? Let us calculate it together. A space of a little less than six feet in length, and a little more than a foot in breadth, is the base of the column of air, the smallest possible, which has to suffice for the respiration of one ... The poor wretches! I see them, I hear them gasping for breath. (cited in Finley, 79)

This sense of suffocation takes on new meaning when the image is considered within the history of the graphic display of information.

14. As a diagram, the “Description” prioritizes an accuracy and explanatory force that it fundamentally lacks as a representational image of human lives. In this light, it clearly aligns with Bernier’s assessment of it as a “pseudo-scientific, narrowly historical diagram.” Wood has noted that even its visual composition dehumanizes the people it depicts because its empty white spaces are equally important as “the black spaces of ink” that represent them (2000, 29). If the white space of the diagram is the venue for imaginative ab-

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

straction and shifting perspectives, some of the white space of this diagram represents, in a more mundane but no less powerful sense, air. To be precise, the “Description” includes blank space between its plans and sections, and it is at least in part that background space where the viewer’s mind is permitted the shifts of perspective that diagrams, in Bender and Marrinan’s sense of the term, require. The white space within the lower decks also contributes, it must be acknowledged, to this imaginative work. This confined space in the “Description,” Simon Gikandi notes, is a disturbing affront to “the modern imagination, its norms of social space, and its conscience” (211).

15. These features of the image encapsulate the oppressive nature of abolitionism: In some of the same material space where the minds of the abolitionists’ audience expanded in imaginative exercises of identification and sympathy, enslaved Africans are depicted as lacking adequate air. It is not a stretch to say that where Black bodies gasp for breath, white imaginations freely expand. Perhaps this kind of imaginative expansion led to the sensation of choking that contemporaries such as Mirabeau reported. Certainly, though, the image, when seen to operate as a diagram in Bender and Marrinan’s sense of the term, vividly delineates the overlapping spaces of its viewers’ freedom and interiority and its subjects’ oppression and suffocation. After the events following May 25, 2020, it is difficult not to hear in the dying words of George Floyd, Eric Garner, Javier Ambler II, Manuel Ellis, and almost forty other Black men and women killed in police custody between 2010 and 2020—“I can’t breathe”—the continued presence of the callous, murderous violence embedded in this image.⁷

16. When included in Clarkson's *History*, published in 1808 as a celebration of Britain's abolition of the slave trade in the previous year, the ship's plans and sections are, significantly, not joined by any version of the explanatory text (see Fig 2). Instead, the image supplements a long, sustained narrative into which the image's original text is "abstracted" (Finley, 27). The keys still appear, though, signaling absent explanatory text. As a foldout within the bound pages of a book, the image more likely addresses an individual reader rather than the small groups that, we can assume, studied and discussed versions of the work that were printed as broadsides. Bound within a historical narrative, though, this particular format of the image suggestively points to a meeting place of the cognitive habits shaped by diagrammatic culture and the emotional engagement with conjectural realities fostered by the novelistic imagination. Indeed, Clarkson's *History* includes in its first chapter a speculative account of Africa, a deliberate fiction complete with sentimental exhortations to "Look!" and "Behold!" that is designed to speak more forcefully than fact (37-9). In its earlier incarnation in his *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, this scene's interlacing of fiction and history is more explicit. To situate a scene of Africans being marched to slave ships waiting on the coast "in the clearest, and most conspicuous point of view," he says, "we shall throw a considerable part of our information on this head into the form of a narrative: we shall suppose ourselves, in short, on the continent of Africa, and relate a scene, which, from its agreement with unquestionable facts, might not unreasonably be presumed to have been presented to our view, had we been really there" (117-8). Clarkson's own merging of fact and fiction, of political

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

persuasion with sentimentalist rhetoric, prepares readers of his *History* for the cognitive and ethical movements that the “Description” asks of its viewers. Embedded within Clarkson’s text, the “Description” unites the “culture of diagram” with Baucom’s “fanciful fact” and Davis’s “factual fictions.”

The African Girl of *Tristram Shandy*

17. Popular versions of Sternean episodes produce similar consequences, particularly when, as I argue of the African girl from *Tristram Shandy*, they mobilize printed and cognitive elements of the concept of the diagram. In turn, the diagrammatic operation of shifting narrative perspectives can be identified in Sterne’s seemingly abolitionist fiction. In this section, I read this episode not as a diagram but through the concept of diagram. Specifically, I consider the diagrammatic qualities of printed features including page layout and typography by comparing the blank space surrounding the individual images that comprise the “Description” to the blank spaces that separate Sterne’s fictional episodes. Doing so unites components of abolitionism’s printed manifestations in ways that illuminate compatibilities between visual and narrative perspectives.

18. Born on a slave ship in 1729, Ignatius Sancho briefly experienced New World chattel slavery as an infant before being brought to England by his owner. He was the first Black Briton to own property, vote, and become a published author. His letters, printed in an edition with generous blank space around the text, include his well-known request of July

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

1766: He asks Sterne “to give one half hour’s attention to slavery, as it is at this day practiced in our West Indies,” calling on him to “think in me you behold the uplifted hands of thousands of my brother Moors” (74).⁸ In his reply, Sterne refers to “a tender tale of the sorrows of a distressed friendless poor negro girl” that he “had just been writing” before receiving Sancho’s letter (*Letters*, 701). This “tender tale” appears the following year in the final volume of *Tristram Shandy*, where a “Negro girl” is presented through vague ties to the novel’s main characters, and her story, such as it is—“she had suffered persecution ... and had learned mercy”—is suggested but never told (508).

19. Readers have disagreed about whether she is an adequate response to Sancho’s request. Conjectural response and narrative deferral introduce her untold story. Its perpetual narrative delay adheres, of course, to *Tristram Shandy*’s own method: To introduce but never tell a story is characteristic of a novel that, after all, purports to tell the life of the narrator but arrives at his birth in the third volume. Rather than being glossed over as other tales in the novel are, the African girl’s tale remains an unfulfilled promise. The details of her “story” are sparse. The brief chapter—the sixth in the novel’s ninth and final volume—begins with the “pretty picture” of “a poor negro girl, with a bunch of white feathers slightly tied to the end of a long cane, flapping away flies—not killing them,” a demonstration that Trim, a servant to Tristram’s Uncle Toby, suggests that “she had suffered persecution [...] and learnt mercy.” Her story is promised as an element of another delayed narrative, that of Trim’s brother Tom, and its sentimental force—it “would melt a heart of stone”—remains an unfulfilled possibility. The episode is then largely given over to a de-

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

bate, answered in the affirmative, about whether Africans have souls, with Uncle Toby declaring that her powerlessness—“she has no one to stand up for her”—is what “recommends her to protection—and her brethren with her.” Invoking the famous twisted line of Trim’s “stick” that appears in the volume’s fourth chapter, Toby remarks that “’tis the fortune of war which has put the whip into our hands *now*,” and he hopes that “the brave ... will not use it unkindly” (508).

20. This “pretty picture” evokes Sterne’s paragon of sensibility, Uncle Toby, who is praised for a similar gesture. The debate about souls entails speculation about this character’s psychological interiority even as it remains hidden—expressed gesturally but not verbally—and offers white audiences a venue for the development and exercise of their own sensibilities. But these elements do not, in any recognizable sense of the term, tell this character’s “story.” While the whip certainly hints at the experience of slavery, the episode falls short of directly addressing slavery “as it is at this day,” in Sancho’s words, “practiced in our West Indies.” In this episode, three things emerge: the limits of Sterne’s own representational strategies, narrative breaks that invite the revisions of anthology editors and the imaginative efforts of readers, and “white space” of the sort that prompts a recalibration of perspectives for viewers of diagrams and readers of novelistic episodes.

21. Within and beyond *Tristram Shandy*, reading “the African girl” summons imaginative effort similar to that which the diagram of the Brooks slave ship requires. In fragmentary

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

fiction that suggestively implies the sufferings of slavery, chapter breaks, ellipses, and dashes create blank spaces not unlike those that are fundamental to diagrammatic imagery. Without appropriating the voice of a “distressed friendless poor negro girl,” Sterne conjures rather than “writing,” as he nevertheless claims, her tale. His readers, though, were quite possibly attuned not only to his characteristic narrative delays but also to the perspectives that are invoked but not depicted in diagrammatic images and the imaginative agency they summon. As such, readers of Sterne’s fiction, particularly as it is repackaged and recirculated in Romantic-era anthologies, were likely prepared to imagine a story that Sterne himself may lack the inclination, capacity, and right to tell.

22. While Sterne’s response to Sancho’s request today seems less than adequate, contemporary readers believed him to be boldly serving the abolitionist cause. Recent critics have commented on his “transferential” use of slavery, as Markman Ellis puts it, to discuss other issues, especially marriage and liberty (55). Mallipeddi argues that Sterne merely meditates on the confinement of an Englishman through this episode (84-108). In 1808, as noted, Clarkson says of Sterne’s “account of the Negro girl” that he “took decidedly the part of the oppressed Africans” (62-3). For another contemporary reader, George Nicholson, a printer in Manchester, the implied connections between slavery and the African girl’s untold story are clear enough to encourage one of the Romantic period’s many repackagings of Sterne’s sentimental tales, a few of which I discuss below before focusing on Nicholson’s publication. Characters frequently—and problematically—speak for others in Sterne’s novels. The episodes that arise from such moments were very popu-

lar in Romantic-era literary anthologies, which played a large role in perpetuating Sterne's cultural capital into the following century.⁹ The popular Romantic-era version of Sterne that was propagated in inexpensive publications draws on the culture of diagram in amplifying his subdued suggestion of slavery.

The African Girl in the Romantic-era Anthology

23. When they excerpt, rearrange, and retitle Sterne's works, anthology editors situate his novelistic episodes in new positions that are delimited and defined by the blank spaces between them, and editors invite readers to imagine, as their eyes traverse those same spaces, new connections between them. Although anthologies certainly facilitate discontinuous reading, the editor of the very popular *Beauties of Sterne* presumes that its episodes will be read consecutively. He carefully arranges them, he explains, so as not to "wound the heart of sensibility too deeply" (viii).¹⁰ Sensibility is but one of many organizational principles guiding editorial arrangements. Following the rhetorical tradition, categories in Vicesimus Knox's *Elegant Extracts* and William Enfield's well-known *The Speaker*—including the "Sentimental," "Pathetic," "Didactic," "Descriptive," "Narrative," "Dramatic," and "Dialogues"—present passages according to their effects (emotional or moral) or their forms (generic or rhetorical).¹¹ While some collections were designed to foster other reading practices, I nevertheless read Sterne's anthology pieces consecutively and continuously.

24. The episodic nature of Sterne's novels invites remediation. Indeed, the episode of the African girl is excerpted as early as 1774 (the same year that restrictions on republication were lifted) in the first edition of Enfield's *Speaker*, a schoolroom text that continued to be reprinted well into the nineteenth century. In that collection, the episode is entitled "On Negroes" and grouped with other so-called "Dialogues." *The Beauties of Sterne* went through seven editions in 1782 alone and at least fifteen editions by 1819. In it, the African girl appears within the same narrative position as *Tristram Shandy* but in a condensed version. In episodes that are spread across seven volumes of the novel, Trim finds the pages of a sermon in a book, reads them aloud, is overcome with memories of his brother Tom's torture, tells the story of Tom's marriage to a widow in Lisbon, and says, twice, that Tom's story is linked in undisclosed ways to that of the African girl. This dispersed narrative trajectory suggests a "story within a story" framework that is never fulfilled and, given the printed space and publication dates separating its layers, is almost impossible for contemporary readers to reconstruct. In the anthologies' compression of these episodes, the tale of a tortured brother leads, through embedded narratives and shifts in point of view, towards a conjectured sympathetic response—the African girl's story "would," it is worth repeating, "melt a heart of stone"—for a figure of racial difference whose psychological interiority and personal history seem to remain beyond Sterne's strategies of representation.¹² If these stories are in fact connected, perhaps the African girl's "sufferings" included torture, possibly in the West Indies, and perhaps those sufferings warrant the same kind of sentimental response that is prompted by those of Trim's brother, however excessive Trim's reaction may be. By making a claim for narrat-

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

ive continuity—the African girl appears in a section titled “The Remainder of the Story of Trim’s Brother”—*The Beauties of Sterne* suggests a supplement of reality to fill out this blank space in both the material printed text and the fictional narrative.

25. Between 1793 and 1802, Nicholson’s publications were printed as pamphlets to be bound with other similar selections, and they were issued in 1812 and 1825 as a volume entitled *The Literary Miscellany*. In one of his pamphlets, his *Extracts from the Tristram Shandy, and Sentimental Journey, of Lawr. [sic] Sterne* (1796), Sterne’s silent girl is the title character of its sixth episode (of 37) entitled “The Negro Girl.” The episode is positioned after “The Starling” and “The Captive,” episodes from *A Sentimental Journey* in which Yorick has a conversation with a bird and meditates on confinement.¹³ By uniting this episode with “The Captive,” Nicholson’s anthology expands beyond the limits of Sterne’s own representational strategies and draws on his pictorialism in order to point more forcefully to the untold story of slavery. That pointing happens in the white space between the episodes, where readers are invited to imagine the perspective of the silent character. In a similar way, viewers of the “Description” are encouraged to feel, in the spaces between its numbered figures and the individual enslaved Africans, the lack of air in the lower deck of the slave ship. A fundamental difference, though, is that, while the “Description” locates suffocating Black bodies between the same blank spaces where white imaginations expand, this anthology can be seen to make room for a story of Black suffering that has otherwise been unvoiced.

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

26. Nicholson's new arrangements forge new conceptual ties as Romantic-era readers bridge the limited but sufficient white space that the printer leaves in order to connect the silent narrative strands between Sterne's episodic extracts. The extraction of this brief scene from the center of an impossibly dispersed structure of narrative containment means that her "story," such as it is, gets breathing room: Trim has his own difficulties in telling his brother Tom's story, losing and struggling to regain "the sportable key of his voice" immediately after the anthology episode ends (508). His quavering voice is the consequence of concern for his brother, who was tortured, he manages to suggestively declare, after marrying a Jewish widow who owns the sausage shop where the African girl sits. These circumstances (and the phallic innuendo that follows) are absent from the anthology. Instead, this anthology's episode of the "the Negro Girl" is given narrative independence outside of Trim's convoluted, breathless series of vaguely connected tales. In this narrative space, readers find the imaginative space to connect her "tale" not to Sterne's original narrative trajectory but instead to the historical realities that Nicholson's sequencing strongly suggests and that Sancho's letter specifies.

27. There are slight visual differences between the episode as it appears in the novel's ninth volume and as it appears in Nicholson's anthology. In the anthology, below a small printer's mark, the new title "THE NEGRO GIRL" replaces the novel's original chapter heading. The text is unaltered but is now set very closely: Dialogue is indicated with additional space within the same line of print instead of paragraph breaks. Condensed in this way, the already brief episode now appears on a single page rather than the five generously-

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

spaced octavo pages of the novel. In this format, her tale is no longer, as Ellis termed it, a “digression within a digression within a digression.” Instead, it is released, as it were, from the confining narrative layers of the novel. She becomes a subject and an agent of compassion with her gesture of “flapping away flies,” a gesture that itself suggests not only Uncle Toby’s compassion but also, as Ellis has pointed out, the whip of the slave-master and the “flourish” Trim gives “with his stick” that leaves the famous twisted line that appears a few pages before this episode (but that is not, it is worth noting, reproduced in the anthologies; Ellis 70; Sterne 506). In a demonstration of fiction’s imaginative scope, this remediation and indeed extension of Sterne’s own formal looseness encourages readers to fill in the gaps of Sterne’s original episodes, which are now visualized by the section breaks and blank spaces that Nicholson’s arrangement creates.

THE NEGRO GIRL.

—When Tom an' please your honour, got to the shop, there was nobody in it, but a poor negro girl, with a bunch of white feathers slightly tied to the end of a long cane, flapping away flies—not killing them—'Tis a pretty picture! said my uncle Toby—she had suffered persecution, Trim, and had learned mercy.—

—She was good, an' please your honour, from nature as well as from hardships; and there are circumstances in the story of that poor friendless slut, that would melt a heart of stone, said Trim, and some dismal winter's evening, when your honour is in the humour, they shall be told you with the rest of Tom's story, for it makes a part of it.— Then do not forget, Trim, said my uncle Toby.

A NEGRO has a soul? an' please your honour, said the corporal (doubtingly). I am not much versed, corporal, quoth my uncle Toby, in things of that kind; but I suppose, God would not leave him without one, any more than thee or me.— It would be putting onesadly over the head of another, quoth the corporal.

It would be so; said my uncle Toby. Why then, an' please your honour, is a black wench to be used worse than a white one? I can give no reason, said my uncle Toby.—

—Only, cried the corporal, shaking his head, because she has no one to stand up for her.— 'Tis that very thing, Trim, quoth my uncle Toby,—which recommends her to protection—and her brethren with her; 't is the fortune of war which has put the whip into her hands now—where it may be hereafter, Heaven knows!—but be it where it will, the brave, Trim! will not use it unkindly.—God forbid! said the corporal.

AMEN! responded my uncle Toby, laying his hand upon his heart.

Figure 3. From George Nicholson, *Extracts from the Tristram Shandy and Sentimental Journey of Lawr.[sic] Sterne, M.A.* (1796). Image from Eighteenth-Century Collections Online; GALE-Cengage.

28. Nicholson's arrangement of Sterne's oblique considerations of slavery almost renders them recognizable today as abolitionist texts because they redirect Sterne's imagery. After Yorick's encounter with the starling in *A Sentimental Journey*, "The bird in his cage pursue[s] [him] into [his] room," where he imagines a single captive and looks "through the

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

twilight of his grated door” so that he can “take his picture.” The episode of the starling establishes resemblance between the speaking bird and soliloquizing Yorick through echoed but altered speech when both say, in slightly different grammatical forms, “I can’t get out.” In “The Captive” (as it is titled in the anthology), by contrast, visual language of light and shade hints at racial difference. In his reply to Sancho, Sterne mentions “the finest tints and most insensible gradations” of complexion that run from “the fairest face about St James’s, to the sootyest complexion in Africa” (*Letters*, 701). In his novel, Sterne conjures a scene whose varied shades mirror this range of complexion when Yorick looks through the “twilight” upon the “pale and feverish” prisoner before he “darken[s] the little light” in the dungeon (61). Despite this episode’s resonance with slavery, this captive is white, and the infringement on freedom remains, as Mallipeddi demonstrates, an English fear of imprisonment.

29. “The Captive” concludes with a description of Yorick’s imagined prisoner: “I heard his chains upon his legs ... —He gave a deep sigh—I saw the iron enter into his soul—I burst into tears—I could not sustain the picture of confinement which my fancy had drawn” (61). In Nicholson’s next episode, Toby labels Trim’s description of the African girl as she brushes away flies “a pretty picture” (508). In the original novels, these so-called “pictures” remain isolated images. Nicholson’s arrangement of episodes, though, links the “picture” of confinement that ends “The Captive” to the “pretty picture” of the African girl that immediately follows. This sequence urges readers to imagine a connection between one “picture” and another, perhaps one that relates her unnamed sufferings

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

not to the torture that Trim's brother suffered but instead to the "chains" and "iron" that conclude the Captive episode. Her untold story exists as a factual fantasy, conjured by the affective and epistemological power of "the melancholy fact" that Baucom has described (226), and it emerges through the intertwining of the state of slavery with the culture of taste, sentiment, and sensibility that Gikandi has identified.

30. Perhaps, in the heyday of the literary anthology and the height of abolitionism, readers of Sterne's popular episodes readily saw abolitionist intent because they read into blank spaces according to the culture of diagram that print instantiated. Like the different figures that comprise the slave ship diagram, Sterne's fragmented and untold tales offer no single vantage point. The anthology pieces taken from his original works can be united, though, across the new blank spaces separating and suggestively connecting them, in a single narrative trajectory. As a result, the unstated, untold tales can be more forcefully brought forth in a reader's consciousness through the imaginative work of shifting perspectives—whether visual or narrative—that diagrams require of their viewers. The blank spaces around and within Sterne's anthology episode and the "Description" help to specify the ways that consumers of print are given space and encouragement to shift their own ethical perspectives through the medium's multiplied points of view.

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

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¹ Building on Ermarth's argument that the Renaissance invention of one-point perspective finds its narrative corollary in realist narrative, it is worth considering similar correlations between other visual media, especially prints, engravings, views, and diagrams, and other narrative forms, such as the frame tale. Shifting perspectives that are required in viewers of diagrams (according to Bender and Marrinan 81-2, 150) or described by Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (according to Boltanski 44) suggest the formal elements of developing narrative modes.

² On these issues, see, for example, Elkins and Drucker.

³ Finley 62; Lee 15; Bernier 993.

⁴ See Finley 1-86. See also Rediker 308-342; and Lapsansky. According to Bernier, "the very fact that white abolitionists betrayed a repeated—and almost obsessive—determination to rework this diagram speaks to their early realization regarding its artistic no less than political failures" to meet its political goal of ending the slave trade (997).

⁵ Bernier argues, following Betye Saar, that it is between the "imprint" and the "diagram" that the image has continued to be reconfigured.

Romanticism on the Net #77-78 (Autumn 2021-Spring 2022)

⁶ In their multiplicity, these perspectives suggest but do not equate with the panoramic view that Teresa Goddu has identified in later abolitionist texts.

⁷ On these cases, see Baker et al.

⁸ Rezek notes that works by Phillis Wheatley, Sancho, and Olaudah Equiano were the only texts by Black authors given such treatment in the eighteenth century.

⁹ St Clair, 525–50; Mayo, 245–6. On the inclusion of Sterne’s works in these publications, see St Clair 179–80, 337; Keymer 2009; and Barker-Benfield 296–7. On literary anthologies, see Benedict 1996 and 2003, and Price.

¹⁰ It is, as Christopher Nagle has noted, “unclear whether more knowing readers should imagine a sly wink accompanying this observation or not” (836). This preface appears in the first through the eleventh edition of 1793. Thomas Keymer has identified the editor as William Holland, a controversial printer of political and pornographic texts (2009, 79).

¹¹ On these and other anthologies, see St Clair 525–50. On Sterne and the culture of sentimentality, see Festa 67–110.

¹² For connections between this narrative series and Adam Smith’s theory of sympathy, see Britton 109–118.

¹³ His *Extracts from the Tristram Shandy and Sentimental Journey of Lawr.[sic] Sterne, M.A.*, was one of his inexpensive serial publications. Editions were printed in 1794, 1796, and 1799. He printed pamphlets with collections of fictional episodes between 1793 and 1802 that appeared as bound volumes in 1812 and 1825 as *The Literary Miscellany*. See St Clair 527–8; Pitcher 1975; and Pitcher 2004.