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The Good Humour Club or Doctors' Club and Sterne's Political Romance

Abstract: This essay argues that Sterne's satire in A Political Romance pokes fun not just at the disagreement between lawyer Francis Topham and Dean of York John Fountayne, as is well known by Sterne scholars, but also at the role of a convivial club in that disagreement. Through analysing an early manuscript minute book of an eighteenth-century gentleman's club previously unknown to scholars, the Good Humour Club of York (c.1724-1800), it will be demonstrated that nine of the club's ninety-nine identified members were known to Sterne and that four of those were central to the pamphlet wars which climaxed with Sterne's Political Romance in 1759. Sterne's self-reflexivity in the Romance, through which he deconstructs his own satirical project and creates the self-consciousness perceived by scholars as anticipating the humour of Tristram Shandy, can be seen as a response to, and a satire of, the Good Humour Club's involvement in local ecclesiastical affairs.

The Minutes

Shandy Hall houses materials purchased from the late Kenneth Monkman, collector and founder of the Laurence Sterne Trust and the first curator of this literary house. In 2009, the Trust won Heritage Lottery Funding to acquire from the Monkman family further rare books pertaining to Sterne's life and works. Through this process, a unique eighteenth-century manuscript, previously unknown to scholars, became part of the collection: the minute book of the Good Humour Club of York, 1743-1762. Local worthies known to Sterne and prominent in his biographies have signed its pages, where we learn of the club's weekly meetings in Coney Street for feasting, alcohol, and gambling under the general goal of achieving and celebrating 'good humour'.¹ This manuscript, which records new memberships, retirements, charitable donations, wagers, and fines for absent members, not only offers a unique glimpse into a social circle with which Sterne was familiar but also allows us to better understand his satire, *A Political Romance* (1759).

Sterne had intended *A Political Romance* to appear at the end of January 1759 as perhaps the closing text in a long-standing dispute over lucrative ecclesiastical positions in York. When news of the prospective publication reached London and the ears of the Archbishop of York, John Gilbert, who was spending the winter there, he commanded it to be

removed from the printers and most copies were burnt.² The text of *A Political Romance* is made up of five parts: the *Romance* itself (epistolary satire), a postscript, a key, and two letters. The key in particular, Marcus Walsh has argued, develops the parody within Sterne's text 'in ways that herald Sterne's play with interpretation and meaning in *Tristram Shandy*'.³ It cross-examines Sterne's satire, purporting to be a report compiled by a political society who, having stumbled across the satirical *Romance*, attempt (and fail) to comprehend its meaning during one of their club meetings in the Minster yard.

Scholars have long been tempted to propose that Sterne's club in the key to *A Political Romance* was based on a real group of people who met socially in York during the mid-eighteenth century. Robert Davies read the 'Key' as a satire of a 'convivial club' of real people,⁴ and Wilbur Cross went so far as to suggest that Sterne himself was a member:

The transactions of the 'political club' by the Minster Yard, were, so far as we may surely go, a burlesque of the evenings Sterne passed with his convivial club that met at Sunton's Coffee-House in Coney Street. Under the disguise of a surgeon, lawyer, apothecary, undertaker, and the president who loved an hypothesis better than his life, he drew little portraits of the members — their mannerisms and favourite gestures, and their vehemence in canvassing local and larger politics of the day. What kind of men they were further than this or what names they bore — we may never know, except, to be sure, that the Vicar of Sutton is among them.⁵

Arthur Cash was the first to query the evidence for this, pointing out that no members of any club had yet been identified (*EMY*, 274). Though Cross's point about Sterne being a member is unsubstantiated, he may have had in mind a letter that Sterne wrote to Hall-Stevenson in 1761 from a York coffee-house: 'I have a lot to write to you — but I am writing this letter in a coffee-house full of loud-mouthed companions who do not let me think a single thought' (*Letters*, 211). Such evidence is, of course, merely circumstantial, and most recently Melvyn New and W.B. Gerard have reminded us that any claims that the key to *A Political Romance* is a satire of a local club of which he was a member have never been substantiated (*MW*, 139-40, n. 73). Indeed, it continues to be impossible to suggest from even the new evidence of the Good Humour Club minute book that Sterne was a member of that or any other club which met at Sunton's coffee house. However, the minute book reveals that individuals satirised by Sterne in his *Political Romance* were members of the club. The manuscript therefore allows

us to better contextualise the humour of Sterne's satire, and encourages us to read the key as a caricature of the very club to which the individuals Sterne sought to ridicule belonged.

The manuscript minute book was the second of at least four minute books spanning the life of the club. On 28 April 1745 the club's secretary, Mr Busfield, resigned after twenty years' service, suggesting that the club was active from around 1725.⁶ Another minute book survives in the York Minster Archives, catalogued under the title of the 'Doctors Club', recording minutes from 1781-1800.⁷ Like the earlier manuscript, the later minute book is bound in brown calf leather and embossed with 'Good Humour' in red and gold on the cover (Fig. xx). Most pages record lists of absent members and sometimes wagers. Because both extant books cover a period of nineteen years, are of similar (quarto) size, and the period of time between these minutes also covers a period of nineteen years, it is likely that the Good Humour Club was established in 1724 and that Busfield was the first secretary (Fig. xx). The later minute book has been known to scholars of eighteenth-century York since at least the nineteenth century. However, because historians J.W. Knowles, Peter Clark, and Michael Brown have only had access to this later text, they believed the Good Humour Club to have been called the 'Doctor's Club' and to have been established in 1781.⁸ In fact, as appears from the earlier minute book at Shandy Hall, the 'Doctor's Club' was a later name, or alias, for the Good Humour Club, which had the unusual unwritten rule that each of its members should be named 'doctor', regardless of profession, and be listed in the register and addressed in the minutes accordingly. The later minute book has never been associated with Sterne. The earlier one, with its membership of Sternean associates, nine of whom feature in varying degrees in his life and works, allows us to read an identifiable York society against Sterne's satire in *A Political Romance*.

Though Sterne does not appear within the pages of the extant minute books, the discovery of the earlier manuscript prompts a re-evaluation of his *Political Romance* in relation to local sociability. When read alongside the club minutes, the *Romance* gains an exclusive layer of comedy that would have appealed to a select circle of local people who recognised the society in his work. Sterne's satire in *A Political Romance* arguably pokes fun not just at the disagreement between lawyer Francis Topham and Dean of York John Fountayne, as is well known by Sterne scholars, but also at the Good Humour Club's role in that disagreement. Sterne changed the very shape and form of the *Romance* in the days leading up to its publication. Its self-reflexivity, through which Sterne deconstructs his own narrative, can be read as a satire of the fact that the individuals Topham called upon to

support his version of events had shared membership of a convivial club. Sterne's key could therefore be read as a satiric response to the Good Humour Club's embroilment in ecclesiastical affairs.

The Articles

The Good Humour Club met every Thursday evening, except race week, at the Turk's Head on Coney Street, the establishment that later became Sunton's Coffee House (c.1746-62).⁹ Members had to be elected by a majority before they subscribed to the articles. These articles have been preserved because they were reconsidered on the opening pages of the Shandy Hall minute book and were signed by the members: '*Imprimis*, To meet at Mr Joseph Sunton's House every Thursday Night, and to pay Six Pence for Each Night's absence, payable [sic] at their first Appearance at the Club'. The rules capped the membership at eighteen people, prohibited political arguments, ordered that everyone pay their share of the bill, and fined the members for marriage: 'Every Member, who is a single Man (and has not been married) shall at their first Appearance at the Club after his having committed Matrimony, pay a Crown Bowl of Punch' (7 July 1743).

The York club had many similar counterparts; Clark has estimated that during the eighteenth century there may have been around 25,000 different clubs and societies meeting in the English-speaking world.¹⁰ Most eighteenth-century clubs were male-centred and town-based, meeting in drinking houses.¹¹ Having seen the later minute book, Clark briefly mentions the 'Doctors' Club' as an example of a typical late-century club: informal and primarily concerned with drinking and mirth.¹² By the 1720s, there were so many convivial clubs or societies in London 'for the improvement of learning and keeping up good humour and mirth' that contemporary commentator John Macky numbered them at 'an infinity'. It was not just London that boasted good-humoured social clubs; Tiverton's Categorical Club was keen 'to promote good humour and mirth' and a Winchester club preserved 'good humour and fun [...] in masterly fashion'.¹³ The good humour enjoyed by the convivial club on Coney Street involved a good deal of mirth, with the minutes suggesting that the men met primarily with the aim of enjoying themselves through such diversions as feasting on turkey dinners, telling stories, debating, and laying wagers of punch and wine as to whether the word 'mahogany' could be found in the dictionary (15 June 1749; 30 August 1798). In 1744 the club decided that 'all wagers made in the Clubb for Liquor whether a Bowl or Bowls of

Punch, or a Bottle or Bottles of wine etc. is to be drunk in the said Clubb when the said wagers are determined'. Yet despite the alcohol-fuelled love of fun, good nature was also one of its most highly prized virtues. Club members practiced good humour, giving 6d a head to the servants of the house at Christmas. They also celebrated it. The minutes memorialise the club's late member, wigmaker Henry Tireman (d. 1747), as exemplifying the virtues they promote: 'Yesterday in the afternoon died after a few Hours illness, Mr Henry Tireman, a worthy Member of this Club, a friendly sociable good natur'd man and a good Neighbour --- May his Sudden Death be a Lesson of Repentance to the Surviving Members of this Club --- Amen' (17 September 1747). To name a social group as a 'good humour' club in this period hinted at genial sociability whilst also suggesting that the group was effective in provoking laughter and merriment.

The Membership

Though none of the extant evidence suggests that Sterne ever attended a meeting of the Good Humour Club, and only the re-discovery of the third minute book would settle this point definitively, he certainly knew some of its members and must have known of the club's existence. Sterne was well acquainted with nine of the 99 members identified in the two extant minute books. Three of these he knew through political or professional networks. As New points out, Sterne had supported the Milner family since the contested election of 1741-42, when the father of Sir William Milner (1754-1811, third baronet) stood as the Whig candidate, perhaps supported by propaganda produced by Sterne and his uncle Jacques (*MW*, 458). He liaised with John Hinxman (d. 1762) and John Hildyard (d. 1757) in their roles as booksellers. Hinxman had advised Sterne to apply to Robert Dodsley to publish *Tristram Shandy* (1759) and sold copies in York (*EMY*, 278), and Hildyard, bookseller at the Sign of the Bible in Stonegate, had published Sterne's sermon *The Case of Elijah* (1747). Hildyard specialised in selling ecclesiastical works and worked as an agent seeking substitute preachers when required. When, in 1750, Sterne stepped in to offer himself as a replacement preacher for Archdeacon Blackburne, he was disappointed in Hildyard, who, as go-between, found Sterne's quarrel with his uncle Jacques an insurmountable barrier to his employment. Sterne later wrote that Hildyard spoke from his head, not his heart, 'The Defects of which no One in Reason is Accountable for' (*EMY*, 235).

The remaining six Good Humour Club members connected with Sterne comprise two of his good friends and four men who appear in his *Political Romance*. These four members feature most prominently in the final section of this article but they include Ward, stationer and printer of the *York Courant*, from whom Sterne bought his paper, with whom he had quarrelled during the 1741-1742 elections, and who published his *Political Romance*; Arthur Ricard (d. 1770), the attorney who would later assist Elizabeth Sterne with her husband's estate; Theophilus Garencieres (d. 1803), Sterne's apothecary; and surgeon Isaac Newton (member in 1748), president of the Good Humour Club.¹⁴ The first club member friendly with Sterne was the Reverend Joseph Bridges (d. 1784), graduate of St. John's College, Cambridge, sub-chanter at York Minster and rector of St Martin's, Coney-Street. He was 'intimately acquainted' with Sterne and his wife, Elizabeth (*EMY*, 58). The second was Charles Atkinson (c.1720-1783), senior surgeon at York Infirmary and close friend of Sterne.¹⁵

The number of members (nine) identified here as being linked to Sterne may, of course, increase according to new research. Further evidence about the connections between Sterne and members of the Good Humour Club has become available through the final volume of the Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, which provides biographical notes on Sterne's subscribers. New concludes, for example, that Good Humour Club member Allan Swainston is the most likely Swainston to have subscribed to the 1766 volume, due to his being in the circle of Fountayne, and that fellow members Arthur Ricard and Alexander Hunter subscribed to the 1769 posthumous sermons. The minute book, as a directory of a local network in which the book trade was prominent, means that further identifications are now possible. Another contender for the 'John Stowe, Esq.' who subscribed to the *Sermons* in 1769 (identified by New as John Aylett Stow), could be John Stow (1707-1775), member from 1743 and celebrated York silk mercer (*MW*, 531, 497, 417-18, 527). Due to the regular absence of forenames and the popularity of names like Brown, White and Wright, there may be more club members waiting to be found in the subscription lists.

The Club

In his *Romance*, Sterne reduces an argument over the distribution of two local ecclesiastical posts to a squabble over a great warm 'Watch-Coat' and 'an old-cast-Pair-of-black-Plush-Breeches' (*MW*, 96). The squabble was between local lawyer Francis Topham (in the

Romance Trim the sexton, and Sterne's main satiric target) and the Dean of York, John Fountayne (John the parish clerk in the *Romance*). Topham considered that these two ecclesiastical roles had been promised to him by Fountayne who then awarded them elsewhere. The first position was the most lucrative of Topham's existing appointments, to the Exchequer and Prerogative Court of York (the watch-coat), which he tried (but was prevented from) passing on to his son, and the second was the commissaryship of the Peculiar Court of Pickering and Pocklington (the black-plush-breeches), which Fountayne instead gave to Sterne. Fountayne denied ever having promised Topham these particular positions and in his *Romance* Sterne ridiculed the escalating debate over whose word was truth. Sterne's diminishing allegory has Trim the sexton accused by a crowd of onlookers of being greedy for favours, favours which already include the positions of parish dog whipper, clock winder, pinder, bailiff, mole catcher and coney catcher (a bawdy pun on coney/cunny, whilst also meaning a sharper).¹⁶ When a toothless old woman overhears the final accusation, exclaiming '—*You catch Conies!*—', this sets 'the Mob a laughing, and sent every Man home in perfect good Humour, except *Trim*' (*MW*, 105). Sterne's exclusion of Trim from the mob's good humour in the *Romance* paralleled Topham's troubled relationship with the Good Humour Club during these disputes. This concluding claim in the satire, that a joke sets everyone but its main target in a 'good Humour', anticipates Sterne's creation of parson Yorick in *Tristram Shandy* who, through 'a mere jocundity of humour', makes himself a number of enemies in exactly this manner. Eugenius's advice to his friend on the subject underlines the fact that such enemies may also have associates:

Trust me, dear *Yorick*, this unwary pleasantry of thine will sooner or later bring thee into scrapes and difficulties, which no after-wit can extricate thee out of. — In these sallies, too oft, I see, it happens, that a person laughed at, considers himself in the light of a person injured, with all the rights of such a situation belonging to him; and when thou viewest him in that light too, and reckons up his friends, his family, his kindred and allies, ---- and musters up with them the many recruits which will list under him from a sense of common danger; --- 'tis no extravagant arithmetic to say, that for every ten jokes, --- thou hast got a hundred enemies; and till thou hast gone on, and raised a swarm of wasps about thine ears, and art half stung to death by them, thou wilt never be convinced it is so (*TS*, 1.12.31).

Eugenius's theory, however, relies on the loyalty of those recruits. Topham's strategy would be to enlist some members of the Good Humour Club to help support his version of events, a strategy that Sterne and Fountayne would actively attempt to undermine by invoking the same individuals for their own purposes. As John Havard has argued of this passage in *Tristram Shandy*, it exemplifies the eighteenth-century individual's 'haphazard navigation between competing spheres [...] In Sterne's fictional parson, we encounter an individual "unpracticed in the world," whose failure to think through the repercussions of his conduct exemplifies a larger confusion about navigating contemporary "politics" (in both its localized and, we will see, wider contexts)'. But it also plays into Sterne's awareness (from experience) of the 'propensity for isolated quarrels and broad-based disputes to get sucked into each other — what we mean by avoiding "politics" in social and institutional contexts'.¹⁷

The pamphlet wars between Topham and Fountayne which had preceded Sterne's *Romance* co-opted (among other York worthies) three Good Humour Club members in support of their competing truth claims. In person and in the press, in *A Letter Address'd to the Reverend the Dean of York, &c.* (1758), Topham had denounced the Dean as corrupt. Particularly aggravating to Topham was Fountayne's denial at a public Sessions Dinner (where Sterne was present) of promising him any specific preferment. Topham took this public denial as a blow to his character. In his *Letter*, he used as evidence of Fountayne's betrayal an alleged private conversation between Fountayne and their mutual acquaintance, York surgeon Isaac Newton, president of the Good Humour Club from 1748 until at least 1762. Topham wrote that, when Newton asked the Dean 'how this Matter really stood', the Dean had asserted that he had never promised Topham any particular patent but had pledged to do him all the service in his power (*MW*, 225). This was an answer which Topham found infuriatingly paradoxical. Within a fortnight, Fountayne published *An Answer to a Letter Address'd to the Dean of York &c.* (1758), in which he outlined his own account of events and of his conversation with Newton. Fountayne's pamphlet consists of a series of witness statements, signed by Sterne and five others, and concludes with Newton's testimony. Newton accuses Topham of forcing him to talk under duress, amidst a series of 'Threats' causing him 'great Fear and Confusion' (*MW*, 249). Topham must have been disappointed to see Newton, whom he had invoked to support his defamation of the Dean's character, put his name to Fountayne's version of events.

Just before Sterne sent his *Romance* to press, Topham published his final retaliation, *A Reply to the Answer* (1759), in which he invoked more members of the Good Humour Club

to support his story. Here Topham related his account of how he had questioned the Good Humour Club president, Newton, in a civil, unthreatening manner, asserting that the conversation was witnessed by Theophilus Garencieres, who we now know to have been a member. Topham cited a letter by Garencieres to counter Newton's claim to have been browbeaten, in which Garencieres asserted, '*I am far from thinking Mr. Newton was in the least intimidated at that Interview*' (MW, 255). Topham did not stop there, but offered his readers a letter by a third member, Arthur Ricard, intended to support his understanding of the Sessions Dinner. The fact that Newton, Garencieres and Ricard were members of the same convivial club makes it appear that Topham used their association to bolster his version of events. Recognising that Garencieres and Ricard, as Newton's fellow club members, would be perceived as unlikely to testify falsely against their president, Topham strengthened the veracity of his own claims.

As if to laugh at Topham's use of the Good Humour Club, Sterne added to his *Romance* at this stage its four other sections: the postscript, the letters (one to Ward and the other addressed to Topham), and the key, in which a fictional convivial club almost comes to blows over competing interpretations of the *Romance*.¹⁸ Sterne was not convinced by Topham's use of Ricard to support his version of events, averring in his appended letter to Topham that the attorney had told him in person that he knew nothing of the details of the dispute. In this letter, Sterne could only account for Ricard's 'feeble' supporting statement printed in Topham's *Reply* by proposing that he must have 'scower'd his Memory' since they spoke. Calling Ricard's sudden remembering an 'After-Thought', Sterne echoed the language of Topham's own pamphlet, alluding to Newton's 'AFTER-THOUGHT': his Fountayne-supporting statement in which he accuses Topham of making him confess under duress (MW, 121, 256, 150 n. 113). Given that Ward and Ricard appear explicitly within the letters appended to the *Romance*, and Newton through allusion, the Good Humour Club minute book reveals that Sterne's satiric targets were not only the individuals of this ecclesiastical dispute but perhaps also the society to which they were affiliated.

The Key

The moment at which the Good Humour Club members were brought most prominently into these ecclesiastical disputes by Topham is also the moment at which Sterne changes the

shape of his political satire to accommodate them. Topham's dependence upon the Good Humour Club prompted Sterne to produce the self-reflexive, multi-component form in which *A Political Romance* exists today. Because we now know that three of the local men brought into the argument were Good Humour Club members, the political club in Sterne's key to the *Romance* appears in a new light, as a much more specific satire than has hitherto been recognised. Sterne's use of a club meeting as the fictional premise for the key helps him to more accurately direct his satire toward Topham and his Good Humour Club 'allies'. The key is almost as long as the satire itself, functioning as a self-reflexive frame in which the *Romance* we have just read is consumed in a club scenario:

This *Romance* was, by some Mischance or other, dropp'd in the *Minster-Yard, York*, and pick'd up by a Member of a small Political Club in that City; where it was carried, and publickly read to the Members the last Club Night (*MW*, 109).

As has been identified by New and Gerard, Sterne's self-conscious joke about how every club member 'turn'd the Story to what was swimming uppermost in his own Brain', is a Sternean spin on Pope's Key to the *Rape of the Lock*, in which Pope offers parodic political interpretations of his own work (*MW*, 115, 146 n. 96). The key to the *Rape of the Lock* opens with the narrator visiting two coffee-houses, where he receives differing interpretations of the poem, before going on to an independent reading of the text. Whilst Sterne may have drawn from Pope the civic setting of his text, he crafts a club device instead of a coffee-house readership, which is sustained throughout the key. The key to the *Romance* therefore comprises the club members' competing interpretations of the text in hand, allowing for characterisation of the members as comically argumentative, competitive, and bad tempered.

With his fictional convivial club, Sterne parodied clubs and club discourse, but he also directed his humour at one social group in particular. Sterne's fictional club members are of diverse professions (as were the Good Humour Club members), a fact which helps produce the comic conflicting interpretations of the *Romance* they have found and are reading together. When they interpret the text, each member finds it funniest when it best suits their interests and preoccupations. The attorney sees the *Romance* as an attack on the church. The parson, in turn, reads it as assault on the law, a reading which the apothecary finds particularly entertaining because of his recent hefty legal bill. The apothecary's

readiness to accept the parson's interpretation allows Sterne to pause proceedings to explore what constitutes polite and impolite humour:

The Apothecary, who had paid the Attorney, the same Afternoon, a Demand of Three Pounds Six Shillings and Eight-Pence, for much such another Jobb, — was so highly tickled with the Parson's Repartee in that particular Point, — that he rubb'd his Hands together most fervently, — and laugh'd most triumphantly thereupon (*MW*, 114).

In this debate over the satiric target of the *Romance*, the apothecary prefers the joke which allows him to triumph over the attorney. But he forgets to assume the appearance expected in such a club environment of being genial and good humoured. He laughs a raucous, physical kind of laughter, rubbing his hands together with glee, offending the attorney and breaking with good humour. The attorney sees the apothecary's mirth as 'immoderate', 'unseasonable', and altogether improper. To the attorney, the joke was neither good humour (funny) nor in good humour (friendly). He retaliates by reading 'the *Cob-Web* which *Trim* went so far for, and brought back with an Air of so much Importance, in his Breeches Pocket, to lay upon the Parson's cut Finger', as a scathing satire on medicines with which apothecaries 'make a Property of the Sick, the Ignorant, and the Unsuspecting' (*MW*, 114). Not content with offending just the apothecary through exegesis, the attorney then focuses on the scatological humour of the *Romance*, reading the entire medical profession as Sterne's satiric target:

And as for the Moral of the *Close-Stool-Pan*, Sir, 'tis too plain, — Does not nine Parts in ten of the whole Practice, and of all you vend under *its Colours*, pass into and concenter in that one nasty Utensil? — And let me tell you, Sir, says he, raising his Voice, — had not your unseasonable Mirth blinded you, you might have seen that *Trim*'s carrying the *Close-Stool-Pan* upon his Head the whole Length of the Town, without blushing, is a pointed Raillery, — and one of the sharpest Sarcasms, Sir, that ever was thrown out upon you; — for it unveils the solemn Impudence of the whole Profession, who, I see, are ashamed of nothing which brings in Money (*MW*, 114).

As the attorney unleashes his final blow, accusing the apothecary of indecorum and then fraud, Sterne raises issues about the concepts of humour and geniality invoked in the name of

the Good Humour Club. This accusation against the medical members of the club of practicing for profit results in the club comically descending into chaos:

There were two Apothecaries in the Club, besides the Surgeon mentioned before, with a Chemist and an Undertaker, who all felt themselves equally hurt and aggrieved by this discourteous Retort: — And they were all five rising up together from their Chairs, with full Intent of Heart, as it was thought, to return the *Reproof Valiant* thereupon. — But the President, fearing it would end in a general Engagement, he instantly call'd out, *To Order* (MW, 114-15).

Sterne's joke on the collusion of the apothecaries, chemist, surgeon and undertaker in the fictional club reflects the aims of the Good Humour Club which similarly allowed professional men, especially medical professionals, to introduce colleagues to each other and to a wider network of Yorkshire men for the purpose of promoting each other's financial and social interests. Having only seen the later minute book, Brown has argued that the 'Doctors' Club' (alias our convivial Good Humour Club) facilitated patronage and 'social assimilation'.¹⁹ In fact, it appears from the membership across both extant minute books that Good Humour Club members expected social and professional favours.²⁰ The club's second name, the 'Doctors' Club', became doubly fitting in later years when its number of medical members increased. Because of this growing body of physicians, surgeons and apothecaries, Brown considered the club a form of 'medical association' and has convincingly argued that such clubbable associations could have been key to an individual's professional advancement in eighteenth-century York.²¹ That Sterne's treatment in the key to *A Political Romance* of what constitutes a good joke and gracious sociability is couched in a club setting during a heated debate about the medical profession, suggests that he may have been caricaturing the medically-qualified and humour-conscious Good Humour Club or Doctors' Club. This caricature is emphasised through the terms in which the angry lawyer replies to the clergyman:

— And do not you think, says he, softening his Voice a little, and addressing himself to the Parson with a forced Smile, — Do not you think Doctor, says he, That the Dispute in the *Romance*, [...] is a very fine Panegyrick upon the *Humility of Church-Men?* (MW, 113)

Whilst it was common for clergyman to be addressed as ‘Doctor’, Sterne’s repetition of the lawyer’s opening gambit (‘do not you think’), later adding ‘doctor’ (‘Do not you think Doctor’), leaves the stress on the Good Humour Club’s identifying trait. To those who knew that members of the Good Humour Club, four of whom are implicated within the *Romance*, referred to each other as ‘doctor’, Sterne’s key would have immediately conjured up an image of the ‘Doctors’ Club’ or Good Humour Club as the butt of his joke.

In Sterne’s fictional club meeting, there is so much disagreement over the text, and so many competing interpretations of it, that the president has to propose two motions, ‘which were instantly agreed to, without any Division’:

First, Gentlemen, says he, as *Trim*’s Character in the *Romance*, of a shuffling intriguing Fellow, — whoever it was drawn for, is, in Truth, as like the *French King* as it can stare, — I move, That the *Romance* be forthwith *printed*: — For, continues he, if we can but once turn the Laugh against him, and make him asham’d of what he has done, it may be a great Means, with the Blessing of God upon our Fleets and Armies, to save the Liberties of *Europe*.

In the *second* Place, I move, That Mr. Attorney, our worthy Member, be desired to take Minutes, upon the Spot, of every Conjecture which has been made upon the *Romance*, by the several Members who have spoke; which, I think, says he, will answer two good Ends:

1st, It will establish the Political Knowledge of our Club for ever, and place it in a respectable Light to all the World.

In the *next* Place, it will furnish what will be wanted; that is, a *Key* to the *Romance*. — In troth you might have said a whole Bunch of *Keys*, quoth a Whitesmith, who was the only Member in the Club who had not said something in the Debate: But let me tell you, Mr. President, says he, That the *Right Key*, if it could but be found, would be worth the whole Bunch put together (*MW*, 115-16).

Sterne has his ‘Political Club’ members misread his satire on church politics and formalise that misreading as the entirety of their ‘Political Knowledge’, which could be interpreted as a sharp critique of what he saw as Topham and his clubbable associates’ misreading of events. Sterne’s emphasis on the political could be perceived as a comic jibe at the fact that Good

Humour Club members, Newton, Garencieres and Ricard, find themselves on opposing sides of an ecclesiastical political disagreement simultaneously, when the club to which they belonged forbade political disagreement at their meetings.

Sterne's parody of club minutes is humorous and self-consciously so, especially when the club proposes to publish the *Romance* and their minutes as its key. The attorney's specific task of recording the minutes co-opts him as a co-author of the text in hand. Perhaps here, Sterne mimics Good Humour Club member and attorney Arthur Ricard's role as testifier in the Topham-Fountayne pamphlet war. In this manner, Sterne could be seen to parallel Ricard's 'feeble' statement with the attorney's production of the club minutes, all of which are 'Conjecture'. Moreover, Sterne's fictional club president decides to print their conjectures, mirroring bookseller and Good Humour Club member and one-time president Caesar Ward's publication of the constitution of the Freemasons. This satiric parallel becomes characteristically self-conscious when we consider that Ward also published *A Political Romance* itself: '—I move, That the *Romance* be forthwith *printed*'. He also facilitated the production of the Good Humour Club's minutes by presenting the club with the quarto volume used to record its minutes from 1743-1762. The first page of the minute book is dedicated to Ward's donation: 'This Book Given to the Clubb [sic] by Mr Caesar Ward a Worthy Member of the Same June 30th 1743'.²² When compared with Sterne's *Romance*, the Good Humour Club minute book's inscription appears as a counterpart to *A Political Romance*'s title-page: both claim Ward as enabler of the text in hand. In the key to the *Romance*, through the image of the printer-president, Sterne has Ward appear as a character in the very text he printed and published.

The key to *A Political Romance* portrays a meeting in York of a club comprising men of various professions whilst highlighting their distinguishing characteristic of calling each other 'doctor'. It is preoccupied with notions of politeness and with the interpretation of a humorous text. The minute books of the Good Humour Club provide a clearer picture of a club and social group with which Sterne was familiar and which it seems he depicted with humour in the key. Considering this new evidence of local sociability illuminates the manner in which *A Political Romance*'s local references function as an exclusive layer of humour accessible only to a specific circle of readers. Sterne's satire of a club of known local characters created a private joke which could well provide entertainment to a club of this sort, and a distinct kind of literary pleasure for those in the know. Moreover, by reading the *Romance* in the context of the Good Humour Club minute books, it becomes clear that a

significant part of Sterne's satiric bite rests in his creation of a self-reflexive form which not only targeted identifiable individuals but also stylistically parodied the association to which they belonged. The Good Humour Club of York – its medical aspirations, its enjoyment of good humour, and its political tensions – changed the shape, and became a target, of Sterne's political satire in 1759.²²

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NOTES

¹ Research on the club, its members and their biographies has been a collaborative effort by Patrick Wildgust, Elinor Camille-Wood, Chris Pearson and Kate Compton (The Laurence Sterne Trust); Ashleigh Blackwell, Danielle McDonnell and Helen Williams (Northumbria University); and W.G. Day (Winchester College). The foundations for this project were laid by the research and transcription efforts of independent researchers Jill and Hugh Murray. See <https://goodhumour.laurencesternetrust.org.uk/> for the resulting exhibition, *The Good Humour Club* (2013), funded by the Heritage Lottery [last accessed 11 August 2020].

² Ian Campbell Ross, *Laurence Sterne: A Life* (OUP, 2001), 193.

³ Marcus Walsh, 'Scriblerian Satire, *A Political Romance*, the 'Rabelaisian Fragment', and the origins of *Tristram Shandy*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Laurence Sterne*, ed. Thomas Keymer (CUP, 2009), 30.

⁴ Robert Davies, *A Memoir of the York Press* (Westminster: Nicholls, 1868), 260, n. 1.

⁵ Wilbur L. Cross, *The Life and Times of Laurence Sterne* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), 173.

⁶ 'Good Humour: manuscript register listing the meetings of the Good Humour Club in York', 1743-1762 (CCWSH:1347 Shandy Hall), entry for 28 April 1745.

⁷ 'Doctors Club, York, minutes', 1781-1800, Add MS 129 (NRA 30444 York Minster). From now on, minutes from both extant minute books will be cited only by date.

⁸ J.W. Knowles, *History of Stonegate*, n.d. [unpublished manuscript in private collection]; Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World*, Oxford Studies in Social History (OUP, 2002), 101; Michael Brown, 'From the Doctors' Club to the Medical Society: Medicine, Gentility and Social Space in York, 1780-1840', in *Eighteenth-Century York: Culture, Space and Society*, Mark Hallett, Jane Rendall, eds.

(York: Borthwick, 2003), 59-69; Michael Brown, *Performing Medicine: Medical Culture and Identity in Provincial England, c.1760-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

⁹ Later again, it became Kidd's Coffee House (1762-1771). When Kidd moved to the York Tavern in 1771, the Good Humour Club moved with him.

¹⁰ Peter Clark, *op. cit.*, 2.

¹¹ Despite a movement from the 1780s towards larger, more formal, nationally-networked organisations with charters and royal recognition, there remained, as Clark points out, many traditional social clubs (Clark, 95).

¹² Clark, 101.

¹³ Clark, 1, 136, 230.

¹⁴ Ann Ward, Caesar's widow, printed and sold the first edition of *Tristram Shandy*. On Ward, see Kenneth Monkman, 'The Bibliography of the Early Editions of *Tristram Shandy*', *Library*, 25 (1970), 21, and Ross, *Life*, 79-83.

¹⁵ Atkinson is best remembered for having tutored George Stubbs in anatomy. See Judy Egerton, *George Stubbs, Painter* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 16-21.

¹⁶ For the bawdy implications of 'coney-catcher', see Walsh, 22, 32 n. 4.

¹⁷ John Owen Havard, 'Only Disconnect? Laurence Sterne, Politics, and the Public', in *Social Networks of the Long Eighteenth-Century*, ed. Ileana Baird (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), 280, 274.

¹⁸ Edward Simmen, 'Sterne's *A Political Romance*: New Light from a Printer's Copy', *PBSA*, 64 (1970), 425.

¹⁹ Brown, 'Doctors Club', p. 64. Sterne's connections to the medical community and use of healthcare themes has drawn the attention of the public as well as scholarship in recent years. Wildgust and Blackwood contributed to the Royal Society of Medicine's *Shandy's Physicians* exhibition (2013), curated by Robert Greenwood. Research undertaken by Blackwood into the socio-political contexts of medical care in the eighteenth century, and more specifically as experienced by Sterne in his own lifetime, covered by both of these exhibitions informed her chapter 'Sterne's "Little Gentleman": *Tristram Shandy* and the Male Participant in Childbirth', *Sterne, Tristram, Yorick: Tercentenary Essays on Laurence Sterne*, ed. Melvyn New, Peter de Voogd, Judith Hawley (Delaware University Press, 2015), pp. 101-120.

²⁰ The minutes record the club members' disappointment in expected social and professional favours, as in 1794, when John Hay (woollen draper, fl. 1794) failed to invite the club to dine with him during his Mayoralty, 'as customary for Lord Mayors being Members of this society'. 27/11/1794. In total, 18 of the identified Good Humour Club members became Lord Mayor of York.

²¹ Brown, 'Doctors Club', p. 59.

²² For an unknown reason, this was later emended to 'an Un-Worthy Member'.

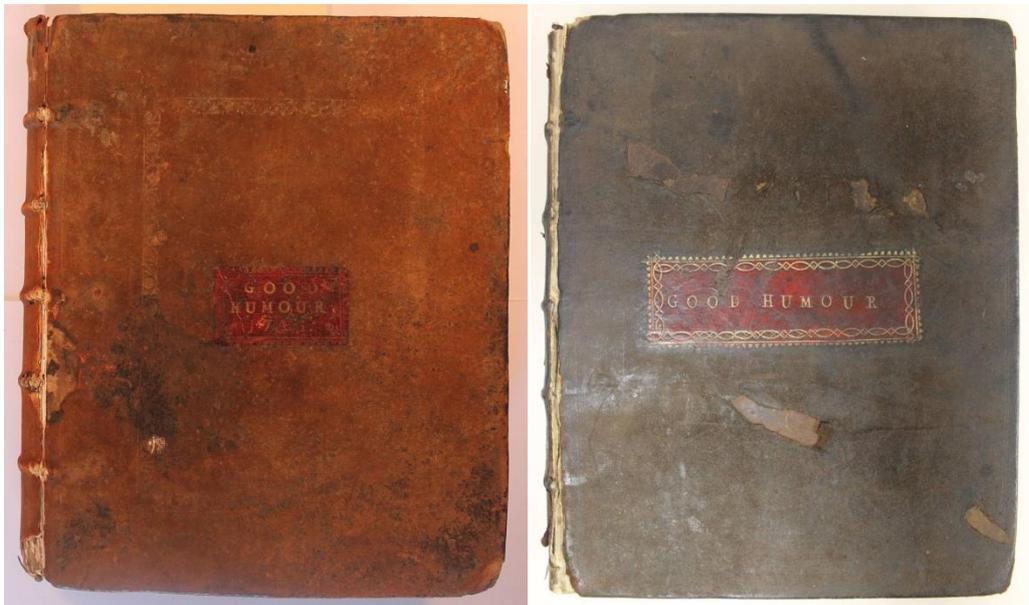


Figure xx: The Good Humour Club minute books, 1743-62 and 1781-1800. Images courtesy of the Laurence Sterne Trust and York Minster Archives.

Book 2				Book 4			
Name	Occupation	member from	resigned	Name	Occupation	member from	resigned
1 Allen, John	weaver	before 1743	05/11/1747	45 Agar, William	confectioner and grocer	11/05/1786	after 1800
2 Atkinson, Charles	senior surgeon at York Infirmary	before 1781	after 1800	46 Allanson, Richard	grocer and tea-dealer	21/02/1799	after 1800
3 Bacon, Francis	apothecary	05/01/1756	after 1762	47 Atkinson, Frederick	silk mercer	20/07/1786	18/05/1797
4 Barker, Robert	unknown	23/09/1752	after 1762	48 Atkinson, James	surgeon	21/10/1784	19/07/1787
5 Bell, Rev John	curate of St Sampson's and Holy Trinity	before 1781	15/01/1795	49 Atkinson, Joseph	stonecutter	06/04/1786	06/04/1786
6 Belt, Thomas	surgeon	26/03/1761	01/03/1787	50 Benson, Edward	wine and spirit merchant	24/10/1782	after 1800
7 Bridges, Rev. Joseph	Rector at St Martin's	05/01/1756	before 1784	51 Bluit, William	vintner	02/03/1786	after 1800
8 Busfield, John	goldsmith	before 1743	10/11/1748	52 Braint, Joseph	butter factor	before 1781	after 1800
9 Cass, Peter	grocer	before 1743	11/01/1753	53 Brown, George	unknown	30/01/1800	30/01/1800
10 Cautley, Thomas	unknown	07/02/1760	28/03/1761	54 Camidge, John	York Minster organist	before 1781	14/08/1800
11 Chandler	unknown	before 1743	after 1762	55 Cappe, Robert	dispensary physician	30/01/1800	after 1800
12 Coton, William	merchant tailor	06/08/1761	after 1762	56 Champney, William	surgeon/midwife	18/05/1786	18/05/1786
13 Cumberland	unknown	after 1743	after 1762	57 Coates, George	glover	before 1781	16/04/1789
14 Etherington, Ambrose	merchant taylor	21/06/1753	after 1800	58 Coupland, John	pavement cutler	11/09/1788	18/05/1797
15 Farrer, Richard	upholsterer	before 1743	31/07/1755	59 Dodsworth, William	unknown	27/10/1791	after 1800
16 Fell, Christopher	surgeon	26/07/1744	09/01/1746	60 Drake, Richard	surgeon and apothecary	03/08/1792	10/1793
17 Garcenieres, Theophilus	apothecary	before 1743	22/12/1785	61 Dunsley, William	brewer	15/06/1797	after 1800
18 Grice, Henry	apothecary	before 1743	28/02/1751	62 Etherington, David	tailor	27/06/1799	after 1800
19 Hagren, John	unknown	after 1743	after 1781	63 Faval, Richard	surgeon	before 1781	14/10/1784
20 Hamilton (or Hambleton)	unknown	before 1743	04/08/1743	64 Fearne, William	physician	21/04/1791	31/05/1794
21 Hildyard, John	merchant adventurer and bookseller	27/05/1756	03/02/1757	65 Forbes, Charles	ivory comb maker	before 1781	after 1800
22 Hinxman, John	bookseller	03/11/1757	09/07/1762	66 Forbes, Timothy	esquire	25/09/1783	after 1800
23 Hunter, Alexander	physician	before 1781	after 1800	67 Frances	unknown	24/02/1785	24/02/1785
24 Jubb, Henry	apothecary	11/02/1748	22/01/1756	68 Frobisher, Nathaniel	stationer and bookseller	before 1781	after 1800
25 Jubb, Thomas	registrar to Dean and Chapter	before 1743	17/12/1747	69 Garland, Richard	butter factor	before 1781	31/05/1787
26 Marsh, Richard	merchant	before 1743	01/01/1747	70 Goulett, Peter	unknown	before 1781	24/01/1793
27 Nares, James	organist	07/01/1748	13/05/1756	71 Hartley, Thomas	brewer	19/05/1791	after 1800
28 Newton, Isaac	surgeon	before 1743	after 1762	72 Hay, John	woollen draper	before 1781	after 1800
29 Oldfield, Joshua	wine merchant	before 1781	07/02/1788	73 Hearon, Richard	tea and china man	before 1781	after 1800
30 Plant, Will	unknown	before 1743	04/12/1754	74 Hodgson, John	unknown	29/05/1800	after 1800
31 Reed, Thomas	goldsmith	24/11/1743	16/05/1745	75 Hotham, John	mercier	29/12/1785	29/12/1785
32 Ricard, Arthur	attorney	before 1743	after 1762	76 Johnson, Peter	attorney and Recorder of York	before 1781	after 1800
33 Robinson, Hugh	haberdasher	17/01/1755	after 1781	77 Johnson, Rev. William	clergyman	before 1782	18/09/1783
34 Smithson, Robert	unknown	28/11/1751	after 1762	78 Lamb junr., James	attorney	before 1781	after 1800
35 Spooner, Thomas	woollen draper	18/02/1748	after 1781	79 Land	unknown	30/12/1784	after 1800
36 Steele, Chris	merchant taylor	14/04/1757	after 1762	80 Metcalfe, Richard	merchant tailor	before 1781	after 1800
37 Stow, John	silk mercer	before 1743	after 1762	81 Milner, Sir William	Nobleman	16/08/1798	after 1800
38 Swainston, Allan	physician	before 1743	after 1762	82 Myers, Henry	tea dealer	before 1781	after 1800
39 Tasker, Jonathan	linen draper and silk mercer	26/01/1749	after 1781	83 Pickard, Leonard	land agent	before 1781	23/01/1796
40 Terry, John	goldsmith	before 1743	15/10/1747	84 Raper, George	unknown	17/07/1788	after 1800
41 Tireman, Henry	wigmaker	before 1743	17/09/1747	85 Raper, Henry	tea merchant and toy man	before 1781	17/07/1788
42 Tireman, Richard	unknown	before 1781	after 1800	86 Rowntree, Ralph	surgeon	29/05/1800	after 1800
43 Vaslet, Andrew	keeper of Young Ladies Boarding School	before 1743	30/07/1752	87 Rylah, George	sergeant and governor of prison	05/06/1800	after 1800
44 Ward, Caesar	bookseller and stationer	before 1743	26/04/1759	88 Sinclair, Robert	attorney and Recorder of York	before 1781	13/09/1787
				89 Smith, George	apothecary and surgeon	10/08/1786	28/02/1788
				90 Smith, Thomas	grocer	before 1781	after 1800
				91 Smithson, Thomas	tea man	before 1781	after 1800
				92 Spencer, Isaac	chemist and druggist	25/01/1798	after 1800
				93 Spencer, William	physician	before 1781	after 1800
				94 Spooner, William	unknown	13/01/1791	after 1800
				95 Tireman, Thomas	unknown	12/03/1789	12/03/1789
				96 Wallis, John	apothecary and surgeon	before 1781	10/02/1785
				97 Weare, Henry	unknown	30/10/1788	after 1800
				98 White, William	physician	before 1781	after 1800
				99 Wright, John	chemist and druggist	17/03/1785	after 1800

Figure xx: Good Humour Club Membership