Patronage, Performance, and Reputation in Sterne's Early Clerical Career, 1737–1742

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Abstract: Whereas current research into the biographical aspects of Sterne's life chiefly seeks to explore the connective sinews of the author's social networks at the height of his literary fame, this essay argues that new pathways for investigating Sterne's formative years can be discovered through the re-examination of his early clerical career. Whilst Sterne is usually treated as the focal subject when looking at the Church in York, the completion of an extensive historical investigation into Lancelot Blackburne's archiepiscopate (1724–1743) has made it possible to reinsert him into a refreshed historical context and thereby test old assumptions about the formation of his clerical identity. This provides a foundation for the reassessment of patronage connections between Sterne and his uncle Jaques. Attention is also drawn to the case of Lewis Stephens (1689–1747), prebendary of York, and satirical writer – hitherto unknown to Sterne studies – whose experience of breaking patronage ties with Blackburne in the 1730s provides an instructive comparison for Sterne's later rejection of the same in 1742. This essay utilises the guiding themes of patronage, performance, and reputation, and its findings are supported by new discoveries from the York diocesan archives and elsewhere.

Britain in the early eighteenth century has been described as a nation defined by God and war. More than any theoretical 'isms' and 'isations', Robert Ingram argues that war was the most potent and transformative force in British society during this period.[1] In the final years of Queen Anne's reign, many churchmen eagerly anticipated an end to the bitter War of the Spanish Succession. In May 1712, Archdeacon Edmund Gibson wrote that 'we are kept up in daily expectation that an express from Utrecht will bring news that a Peace is concluded', adding, however, that it was thought 'farther off than is generally imagined'.[2] When the British treaties were formalised the following summer, former under-Secretary of State John Ellis opined that the 'peace has in a good measure cast Europe into a new modell, which whether it be more advantageous than the old one was, experience can only show'.[3] But the abeyance of continental hostilities proved to be a pyrrhic victory for the Tories. Despite having further secured the Protestant succession, the arrival of George of Hanover in the autumn of 1714 ushered in a period of Whig political hegemony and prevailing Latitudinarian churchmanship. Attempts came in the following years to impeach the Tory architects of the peace negotiations, who were portrayed as traitors who had abandoned their European allies. And the ongoing necessity of preserving the Protestant religion from the

latent threat of Catholic insurrection was underscored by the abortive Jacobite rising of 1715. This was the world into which Laurence Sterne was born, and these were the guiding politico-religious forces that shaped his early clerical career.

Current research into the biographical aspects of Sterne's life and work chiefly seeks to explore the connective sinews of his social networks at the height of his authorial fame. The publication of the 'Identification List' of Sterne's subscribers (*MW*, 279–574) has provided an important milestone for better understanding this later period. But fresh interest in the conditions of Sterne's early life is less forthcoming. This has been compounded by editorial decisions such as the exclusion of scene-setting items, including Jaques Sterne's political correspondence from the *Letters*.This essay argues that new pathways for investigating the formative years of Sterne's life can be discovered through the re-examination of his early clerical career. This has been made possible by my own extensive historical investigation into Lancelot Blackburne's archiepiscopate (1724–1743).[4] Whereas Sterne is usually treated as the focal subject when we look at the Church in York during this period, the completion of this study has made it possible to reinsert him into a refreshed historical context and thereby test old assumptions about the formation of his clerical identity. To this end, this essay utilises the guiding themes of patronage, performance, and reputation, and its findings are supported by new discoveries from the York diocesan archives and elsewhere.

To better understand Sterne's entrance into his clerical career, it is important to emphasise the singular (and notorious) case of his episcopal patron. Despite the successes of the revisionist programme in ecclesiastical history in dissipating the 'longest shadow in modern historiography', Lancelot Blackburne remains an unparalleled problem in accounts of the Church in this period.[5] His name has been a by-word for the supposed venality and laxity of the Georgian episcopate ever since Alexander Pope ironically coupled it with that of Benjamin Hoadly in 1740; 'yea moral Ebor, or religious Winton'.[6] Over time, the intertwining of contemporary, politically-motivated scandals and the fictionalisation of Blackburne by successive generations of writers has resulted in a pernicious mythology that persists without the counterweight of a rigorous biography.[7] In 1863, a correspondent to *Notes & Queries* related that Blackburne's life had 'yet to be written', and this largely remains the case.[8] One of the last scholarly attempts at a corrective was provided by Church historian Norman Sykes in 1940, who had previously taken to his local newspaper to dispute an excoriating article about the prelate.[9] A reply followed: 'a clever young curate tried to

rehabilitate Judas Iscariot, and Professor Sykes is to be complimented for his success in white-washing Lancelot Blackburne'.[10]

It is a paradox that Blackburne's case is considered beneath serious historical investigation, whilst also stimulating continued popular interest.[11] Sterne studies has done little to challenge these views, despite the centrality of the Archbishop to Sterne's early career, and the other valuable contributions the field has made to our understanding of eighteenth-century Church politics in York. References to the 'colorful' Archbishop in the Florida edition of Sterne's correspondence (*Letters*, 686n10) follow Cash's description, which casts doubt on the more dubious elements that cling to his biography, but nevertheless concludes that Blackburne 'neglected every clerical duty which required more than the movement of a pen' (*EMY*, 93–94). Further investigation into Blackburne's archiepiscopate makes this position difficult to maintain. The aim here is not the arbitrary rehabilitation of an individual Georgian churchman, but to reframe Sterne's early clerical career through deeper historical contextualisation and further engagement with the primary record.

Episcopal Patronage

Progress through the clerical profession in Sterne's time was reliant on the 'vertical links of mutual dependence and obligation' of patronage, which was pervasive throughout British society, from the issuing of credit, to the Navy, and the Church.[12] Writing in 1754, the experienced politician George Bubb Dodington provided a contemporary summary of the expectations of patronage,

> Service is obligation, obligation implies return. Could any man of honour profess friendship, accept the offer of his friend's whole services, suffer those offers to be carried into execution, avail himself of their whole utility, and then tell him he could not or would not make him any return? Could there be such a character?[13]

Jeffrey Chamberlain has defined this 'much maligned and poorly understood' patronage system as a 'reciprocal exchange relationship' that was personal, emotional, and unequal.[14] Patrons expected 'gratitude, deference, and loyalty' from their clients in return for the favours they bestowed.[15] This required the 'performance' on both sides of certain expectations, a word that held particular resonance in the eighteenth century. As Marvin Carlson has said,

'performance is always performance for someone'.[16] This essay refers to the balanced expectations around due performance as the 'patronage bargain'.

For clergymen astute enough to navigate the patronage bargain successfully, advancement through the Church's respective stations entailed a transition from client status to the accrual of patronage in their own right. Bishops sat atop this 'pagoda of patronage' (as L. P. Curtis called it), though their control of rights of presentation varied widely from one diocese to another, ranging from 81.5% in Bangor to only 1.3% in Bristol; the average across all English and Welsh dioceses was just 11.7%.[17] Whilst the process of collation to church places ultimately required a bishop's approval, great swathes of these rights were outside of their direct control, otherwise vested in a national mosaic of patrons including the Crown, ecclesiastical bodies and dignitaries, the universities, corporations, and private individuals.[18] Yet bishops' influence over appointments in their dioceses should not be understated: even modest control of patronage rights provided ample opportunities for bishops to reward deserving clients. The best account of how this functioned in York was given by Thomas Herring in March 1743,

> That one great view in my taking this Preferment is the hope of doing good to yourself & my best Friends, w^{ch} if it please God to continue my Life I can hardly fail of doing. The ArchB^{p} of Yorke is a Patron of above forty Prebends in y^{e} two Cathedrals of York & Southwell, all wth Corpses, some good ArchDeaconries & other things, & many Livings of one Hundred a Year & some few of two.[19]

The politico-religious imperatives of individual bishops provided the rationale for the distribution of their episcopal patronage among worthy clients. When Herring's predecessor Lancelot Blackburne came to York in 1724, it was with the express purpose of 'turning' the diocese towards Walpole's ministry, having built a strong reputation for applying episcopal patronage in favour of loyal, Whig clergymen in the South West. In July 1718, Blackburne wrote that he placed 'good men' in seven Exeter parishes to cure 'the madness of the people'.[20] In the same letter, Blackburne made plain his understanding of the patronage bargain, emphasising that his clients would be duly rewarded for their service:

> For where the subsistence of the Clergy depends upon the Voluntary Contributions of disaffected Parishioners, I can think of no way we have to ensure Their Reddyness in their Duty to the King & Government, so likely to be effectual, as to enable 'em to live of Themselves. Your Lp knows better than I can say; It is not the Gift of Every Priest to persevere in Principles that Starve him: And tho' I use the utmost Care to find out such, & to prefer non Other: Yet, as the world is made, I wish to guard 'em from the Trial, & to make it easy & comfortable to 'em to be Just.[21]

Whilst this might imply that political service was the only consideration in the distribution of patronage, bishops required able clergymen to both support them in efficiently running their dioceses, and to serve the pastoral needs of communicants. Facing a lapse of the vicarage of Leeds in 1745, Archbishop Herring declared that he would only present the 'best and worthiest' clergyman to the living, and took care not to influence the disputed presentation in order to preserve the long-term stability of the parish.[22]

At the establishment of Lancelot Blackburne's episcopal administration ― meaning the hierarchical structure of governance centred on the bishop, his household, and its principal officers ― there were greater opportunities for preferment for local York clergymen than might otherwise be expected. With no acknowledged biological children and few blood relatives, Blackburne closely resembled Swift's model of the ideal ecclesiastical patron 'not overstock'd with relations' to provide for.[23] So, politico-religious bonds were stronger between Blackburne and many of his clients than ties of kinship. Those transplanted from Exeter were the closest to the Archbishop in this nexus, including Lewis Stephens (1689–1747), the only chaplain to join Blackburne across dioceses, and Thomas Hayter (1702–1762), a young secretary whose subsequent admission to the priesthood and meteoric rise provoked unsubstantiated (but persistent) rumours that he was in fact the Archbishop's illegitimate son.[24] However, another key client did not follow his patron to the North. In 1725, the See of Chester fell vacant, and to the 'very great surprize' of the ministry Blackburne named his former chaplain, thirty-three-year-old John Gilbert (future Archbishop of York) as a candidate.[25] Opposition to this scheme was led by Bishop Edmund Gibson, who stressed that to elevate Gilbert ahead of more senior churchmen would set a 'dangerous precedent' and risk unsettling the lower clergy.[26] This tussle over ecclesiastical influence

raged across New Year 1726, but Gibson's scheme prevailed, and he cemented his position as chief advisor to the ministry in Church matters. Samuel Peploe was appointed to Chester, whilst Gilbert was offered a canonry at Christ Church.[27] And so, Blackburne was deprived of a close clerical ally, and quickly receded from a position of influence over national Church affairs that he only occupied briefly. His primary focus then became forwarding the ministry's interests in York.

Blackburne's archiepiscopate can be divided into two distinct phases. At his first arrival in the North in July 1725, the Archbishop was assiduous in the performance of his episcopal functions. In Exeter, Blackburne had made it a rule to examine all ordination candidates personally, and he initially maintained those high standards in York.[28] In 1727, Blackburne made public a series of orders and resolutions for the better regulation of orders, testimonials, and appointment to curacies.[29] And at the accession of George II that summer, he resolved to continue with his primary visitation of York rather than return to London, reasoning that 'being here wil be of more service to His Majestie; than anywhere else; for great struggles there wil be in many places undoubtedly'.[30] Blackburne made accommodations for his age by deferring other business whilst on the road, telling one correspondent that 'the hours I can have to spend at my inn wil be but necessary to rest in after ye toil of a journey.'[31] Nevertheless, Blackburne's diligence in the earlier phase of his archiepiscopate runs counter to the common assumption that he would rather be anywhere but his diocese, especially at times of great political significance.

Following recurrent bouts of serious ill health, however, by 1731 the seventy-three-year-old Archbishop believed that he was nearing the end of his life. Writing to his Canterbury counterpart William Wake in October of that year, Blackburne promised to preserve their friendship until the day he died, which was 'surely at no great distance'.[32] In June 1732, it was announced at the archdeacons' visitations that the Archbishop would no longer personally appear before the clergy of his diocese, and this message was subsequently published in Thomas Hayter's charge to the Archdeaconry of York.

> But alas! As *Length of Days* hath thus qualified him to *disperse Knowledge*; so at the same Time, by impairing his Health and Strength, it hath deprived him of the Pleasure of *seeing you Face to Face* in a Triennial Visitation. Happy however! If whilst still *absent* from you in *Body not in Mind*, He can enjoy the Fruits of his past Labours, in

> the Order and Beauty of a well-regulated Diocese, and the Unanimity and Loyalty of a Flourishing Clergy.[33]

At first, Blackburne's declared absence from his clergy appears to have related only to visitation, but following a further health scare in 1734 he did not return to York for the final nine years of his archiepiscopate. Yet rather than allowing the diocese to slip into disorder through inattention, Blackburne's prolonged health issues were held as the rationale for sweeping changes to diocesan management from that time forward.

Patron and Client

The Sternes' aspirations for church preferment were shaped by the achievements of preceding generations of their family.[34] It was customary for bishops to provide for the relations of their predecessors out of mutual respect within the clerical community. William Gibson has described this feature of eighteenth-century patronage as 'transferred nepotism'.[35] Yet this custom was still beholden to politico-religious imperatives. The descendants of archbishops Thomas Lamplugh and John Sharp found favour prior to 1724, but their High Church views saw them excluded from further preferment under Lancelot Blackburne. Instead, that favour fell on the kin of Archbishop Richard Sterne (c1596–1683) who, by the eighteenth century, were firm Whigs despite the hardened Toryism of their forebear.[36] Both Jaques and Laurence attended Jesus College, Cambridge, through scholarships established by Archbishop Sterne (a former master), and both grew up surrounded by tangible reminders of their (great-) grandfather's accomplishments. Richard Sterne's funerary monument stands prominently in the cathedral of York, and a silver cup presented by Charles II was in the family's possession into at least the mid-eighteenth century.[37] A coat of arms engraved on the vessel at the marriage of Mary Sterne to Thomas Pulleyn in 1740 is telling of the object's lasting, symbolic potency.[38]

The Sternes' clerical lineage provides one possible explanation for their promotion under Blackburne, but current biographical accounts provide little evidence as to how they first came to his administration's attention.It is generally assumed that Jaques Sterne received preferment for his due performance of overtly political activities during the 1727 general election, but new evidence from the diocesan archives shows that he was in contact with

Blackburne's officials some two years earlier. In September 1725, during the Archbishop's first summer in the North, Jaques wrote to Lewis Stephens about the state of archiepiscopal lands near Ripon (his earliest known letter to come to light).[39] Stephens later recalled that Jaques 'gained his favour [informing Blackburne] of y^{e} value of Estates in [Yorkshire]'.[40] Whilst it might be assumed that an archbishop's primary visitation would provide the first opportunity to identify potential clients in a new jurisdiction, clergymen in York such as Jaques cultivated patronage by transmitting local intelligence by correspondence before meeting their diocesan in person. This was also the case for John Lambert, rector of Halsham in the East Riding, who in September 1726 provided information about local schools.[41] Lambert was subsequently appointed as Blackburne's first episcopal chaplain from York, and both he and Jaques were selected to preach at the Archbishop's primary visitation that year.[42] By then, Jaques was sufficiently esteemed that he received special treatment in being excused from attending the subsequent corrections court.[43] In a letter to Thomas Jubb, diocesan registrar, Jaques related that Blackburne placed him 'at his liberty either to give or not give' in a terrier (or inventory) of his parish, as was generally required.[44] In Jaques, Blackburne found a loyal, willing, and knowledgeable source of local intelligence, so provided him with vital clerical experience that would serve him in his later career.

Jaques Sterne's status as his nephew's principal patron at the very outset of his clerical career is not contentious. Sterne explicitly acknowledged this in his memoirs.[45] By the time of Sterne's appointment to the curacy of Catton in February 1738, Jaques had become one of the most prominent figures in Blackburne's administration, wielding multi-faceted influence across the diocese. In addition to his eminence in cathedral affairs as precentor and canon residentiary, oversight for over 175 parishes and chapelries in the Archdeaconry of Cleveland, and management of the diocese's temporalities as auditor of the archiepiscopal estates, Jaques was becoming increasingly intimate with the Archbishop's inner circle. That year, he personally attended Blackburne at his London home.[46] Another marker of Jaques's status arose from the Archbishop's managed retreat from official functions due to his worsening health. Jaques was named in an extraordinary commission alongside Dean Richard Osbaldeston, Samuel Baker, John Audley, and William Ward granting them quasi-episcopal powers in the prelate's stead.[47] This legal instrument, designed to ensure the continuation of diocesan business at a time when there was no formal way for an ailing bishop to retire was so far-reaching that it was later thought illegal.[48] Through these

preferments and positions of great trust Jaques came to possess patronage to dispense to clients of his own.

Beyond securing Sterne his first Church living at Sutton-on-the-Forest, the diocesan archives reveal that Jaques took more steps to promote his nephew's early career than has previously been acknowledged. As Archdeacon of Cleveland, Jaques conducted annual visitations of his North Riding jurisdiction. These roaming courts were more parochially focussed than their episcopal equivalents, and were undertaken with commensurate prestige. Jaques performed the visitations personally between 1736 and 1739, before turning the task over to surrogates until the late 1740s.[49] One of the archdeacon's responsibilities was to nominate clergymen to preach at each deanery centre on their tours. Despite the prevailing political wind in the diocese, there were limitations to how far Church leaders could manage the public performances of their clergy. An extreme Latitudinarian (or even freethinking) archidiaconal visitation sermon preached by William Bowman at Wakefield in 1731 was considered an act of outright disobedience. John Bettesworth, Dean of the Arches, explained that Bowman's performance was the more offensive because it was

> deliverd in a Sermon, & not only so, but what is still a greater aggravation, a Sermon preachd at y^{e} Visitation of His Ordinary to a large number of Clergy, and afterwards publishd in open defiance of all Ecclesiastical Authority.[50]

Archdeacon Thomas Hayter provided a corrective the following year. George Arnet, a trusted client of Blackburne's administration, preached a loyal Whig sermon at Wakefield, whilst Bowman was rebuked and forced to recant his actions having 'greatly suffer'd in his reputation'.[51]

The Cleveland court book shows that for his 1736 primary visitation Jaques selected loyal preachers from among the local clergy, which was well received. Freshly returned from Malton, the physician Dr Robert Taylor reported to Thomas Hayter that 'M^{r} Archdeacon Sterne entertain'd his clergy with a most excellent charge, and y^{e} Vicar of Myton preach'd an honest Whig sermon'.[52] And, from the following year, Jaques began nominating preachers who can be identified either as personal allies or trusted agents of Blackburne's administration. In 1737, he chose Samuel Baker, future cathedral chancellor; James Borwick,

an agent who had some years earlier been sent to Sutton-on-the-Forest 'in masquerade' to investigate the Tory Harland family; and Francis Wanley, Jaques's nephew-by-marriage.[53] Evidently, after just a year as archdeacon, Jaques was sufficiently trusted to exercise his patronage discretely to further Archbishop Blackburne's aims in the northernmost portion of his diocese.

Following his appointment to Sutton-on-the-Forest, Sterne's first appearance at the archidiaconal visitation court was at Thirsk on 23 May 1739. Cash's description of this occasion provides both a vivid insight into the significance of the gathering for the local community, and an introduction to the vagaries of ecclesiastical law (*EMY*, 128–31). However, this account omits any reference to the note written in the margin of the Cleveland court book: 'The Reverend M^{r} Laurence Sterne Vicar of Sutton on the forest preached.'[54] Almost two years before his collation to a prebendal stall at York, this must have been the first time that Sterne preached on a notable public occasion. Visitation sermons were customarily delivered before an auditory of the assembled clergy, but were often attended by local, lay dignitaries.[55] As to subject matter, they usually concerned issues most pressing in clerical circles.[56] This opportunity provided the twenty-six-year-old Sterne with vital experience in addressing his contemporaries in the Church, and firmly identified the young clergyman as an agent of Archbishop Blackburne alongside the other presiding attendees, his uncle the archdeacon, the diocesan registrar Robert Jubb, and the young lawyer Francis Topham. Successful performance of visitation sermons often went hand-in-hand with future preferment.[57] So, Cash was seemingly correct to assert that Jaques 'thought his nephew could best serve by making himself known' (*EMY*, 69), but this was not limited to the sociable and political scenes in York.

Re-examination of the politico-religious conditions of Archbishop Blackburne's administration prompts a return to another of Sterne's early sermons. On 4 February 1741, Sterne preached at the cathedral of York on a nationally appointed fast day following the declaration of hostilities with France, marking Britain's deepening involvement in the tumultuous War of the Austrian Succession (*EMY*, 89). This occasion provides greater specificity to Michael Rotenberg-Schwartz's general remark that fast-day and thanksgiving sermons were a time for projecting 'national unanimity'.[58] In a step towards ensuring conformity in the delivery of these state-appointed orations, a question about the observance of fast days was included in Blackburne's articles of enquiry to the diocese's churchwardens at his primary visitation.[59] This concern for the projection of unity extended throughout the

British Isles. In 1727, Archbishop Hugh Boulter of Armagh wrote to William Wake urging that fast days in Ireland should coincide with those in England.[60] The tone of these occasional sermons was typically providential, identifying sinfulness as the root cause of godly displeasure.[61] Divine reward would follow moments of national contrition.[62] It was also usual for this genre to make more frequent reference to external events than other occasional sermons, so there were expectations that the preacher would channel the politico-religious mores of their patrons. And for a preacher of Sterne's abilities, they also provided opportunity for the exploration of the emotive quality of the subject matter.[63] In 1692, antiquarian Ralph Thoresby attended the cathedral of York on a fast day where he heard 'a most excellent sermon, and suitable to the occasion, full of candour and moderation'.[64] He was so taken with it that he later repeated it to his family.

The cursory treatment of Sterne's delivery of the 1741 fast sermon overlooks the relative significance of his selection. Sterne would have been specifically appointed for the occasion on what was one of his first preaching engagements in the cathedral; he had only been inducted into the chapter a fortnight earlier (*EMY*, 75). His relatively junior status is worthy of notice. A sermon was preached at King's Lane chapel in London on the same day by Bishop Thomas Secker of Oxford, and later of Canterbury.[65] In the period from 1721 to 1761, Sterne was the only preacher of a fast day or thanksgiving sermon in the cathedral who was neither a canon residentiary nor beneficed in the city of York.[66] On the same occasion in February 1756, the sermon was preached by no less than Dean John Fountayne.[67] Sterne's rapidly rising status was driven by his aptitudes as a preacher and ready performance of the obligations laid before him by his patrons. Nowhere is the young Sterne's confidence at this time more apparent than in the parish register of Sutton-on-the-Forest, where he boldly headed the first page of his incumbency with his own name in large, gaudy letters. And, in more measured fashion, inside the front cover Sterne recorded his obligations to Archbishop Blackburne for his prebendal appointments.[68]

This evidence indicates that prior to their breach, Jaques Sterne was more active in promoting his nephew's career than has previously been acknowledged. Yet his motivations for doing so have been called into question. Through close analysis of journalistic pieces purported to have been written by Sterne in 1741–42, the editors of the final volume of the Florida Edition conclude that Sterne and Jaques may have 'parted company' as early as the autumn of 1741 (*MW*, 54n38). This calls into question the circumstances of Sterne's appointment to the prebend of North Newbald in January 1742. The editors propose that the

prebend was bestowed on Sterne by Archbishop Blackburne independently of Jaques, and they go as far as suggesting that North Newbald was a '"poisoned chalice"' encumbered with a financially unrewarding reversionary lease (*MW*, 54n38). But, in the context of the dynamics of patronage within Blackburne's administration, this argument cannot be sustained. Jaques remained a trusted agent of the Archbishop throughout this period, and cathedral prebends were too valuable — through their income, access to chapter to affairs, or as tokens of obligation — to be distributed in this way. Moreover, Sterne was one of only four men to move from a prebend of lower income to one of greater value under Blackburne, alongside Thomas Hayter, Robert Fysh, and Jaques.[69]

If a breach occurred prior to January 1742, Sterne would have been excluded from further patronage altogether. Whilst this counterargument is largely contextual, there is archival evidence that supports the continuance of the patron and client relationship between the Sternes into 1742. Archbishop Blackburne's survey of the diocese, initially compiled in 1725 and updated until 1742, contains internal evidence demonstrating that several of Blackburne's closest allies had personal access to the survey, including Jaques, who made numerous amendments in his own hand. At his appointment to the prebend of North Newbald in January 1742, Sterne personally entered his own name into this volume, alongside those of two other prebendaries who were installed in the same week. And more telling still, Sterne's declaration at his appointment to North Newbald was witnessed and signed by Jaques.[70] It was with the final collapse of Walpole's ministry, and Sterne's very public renunciation of his political activities six months later, that his relationship with his patrons was irrevocably altered.

Rejecting Patronage

These findings prompt a reconsideration of the significance of Sterne's breach with his uncle Jaques to the course of his later clerical career. Aside from the inherent risk of damage to personal reputation by failing to uphold the patronage bargain, in the Church there was an intrinsic link between individual patron-client relationships and future preferment. Of the 133 appointments to cathedral dignities in York between 1691 and 1761, only three clergymen received preferment under more than one archbishop.[71] Sterne, having received two prebends under Blackburne, could not reasonably have expected to progress further after publicly repudiating his patrons without cultivating a more considerable interest elsewhere. Indeed,

other clergymen who received preferment from Blackburne continued to acknowledge their obligations throughout their lives. In the 1760s, some twenty years after Blackburne's death, James Borwick recalled the Archbishop as his 'great patron' and spoke of his appointment to Whitby in the following terms:

> his Grace ordered me into this difficult Post, as a Person on whom He could depend; intimating, 'that if I behaved properly 'til ye Parish could be brought into Order, I should not be forgot'[.][72]

Whilst Sterne's case seems extraordinary in comparison to other Blackburne clients such as Borwick, it was not unique. Ten years before Sterne's estrangement from his uncle, Lewis Stephens, Blackburne's former chaplain and fellow prebendary of York, also broke ties with the Archbishop. As with Sterne's experience, this separation was also acrimonious and final, bringing to a sudden halt Stephens's otherwise apparently inexorable, upward trajectory in the Church.

As the only other clergyman close to Archbishop Blackburne who is known to have subsequently rejected his patronage, Lewis Stephens's case deserves particular attention from Sterneans. In the 1720s, there were few clergymen in England and Wales with greater career prospects than Stephens. Between 1721 and 1731 he received preferment to dignities across four separate dioceses. Shortly thereafter, however, Stephens parted from Blackburne, and gradually withdrew from ambitions to future preferment, the tumultuous world of politico-religious activity, and deference to his ecclesiastical superiors.[73] His later, disdainful views expressed in private correspondence could not have been further from the sentiments of a sermon delivered at St. Margaret's, Westminster, at the consecration of Samuel Peploe on 12 April 1726, where he urged his listeners,

> let us, like Dutiful Sons of the Church, acknowledge their Labours, and pay them those particular Honours, which are due to every Branch of their Power; let us hear them, and reverence them, as our Teachers in the Lord; let us cheerfully obey them, as our Spiritual Governours; let us love them, and honour them, as our Spiritual Fathers.[74]

Indeed, for other clergymen separation from their patron was the source of considerable anguish. At the death of Bishop William Talbot in 1730, his former chaplain Thomas Rundle lamented, 'I have lost my patron, friend, father! To him I owe all the happiness I have ever enjoyed in life, all the comfort […] that I am still to receive, flow from his bounty to me!'[75] In sharp contrast, Stephens later observed dismissively that 'I might have made much greater advances in learning, if I had not danced after bishops from palace to palace'.[76]

The exact nature of Stephens's split with Blackburne is not known, but his surviving letters provide insight into his growing disaffection with Church affairs from 1736 until his death in 1747.[77] Stephens's abilities as a writer and orator had formerly been harnessed to further Blackburne's politico-religious agenda in York, but once outside of the administration those skills made him a potentially dangerous opponent. Stephens's most significant reflection on the state of the Church can be found in a privately circulated satire composed at Southwell in 1743.[78] 'The Ecclesiastical Climbers' reimagines the clerical profession as a plantation of maypoles, distinguished and ordered in precedence according to the respective stations of the Church. Stephens introduces a procession of characters into the work, who adopt various strategies for acquiring preferments attached to the maypoles. Philip Connell has stated that Pope's political poetry of the 1730s played to suspicions that Church preferment under Walpole meant the 'abandonment of both political and spiritual integrity', but Stephens repeatedly alluded to the redundancy of learning in the pursuit of a clerical career.[79] When writing about his contemporaries, Stephens ascribed ignorance, frivolous pursuits, idleness, negligence of parochial duties, and fervent activity in support of the ministry as the chief qualifications for success in the clerical profession:

> They are frequently running after new dignities, & new Maypoles; and are, in every shop in town, except the booksellers; meddling with every thing, except learning; & appearing in every public place, except the Church; and are indeed in every Parish, except their own.[80]

Lancelot Blackburne's appearance in 'The Ecclesiastical Climbers' comes under the pseudonym of 'Cossa', derived from Baldasarre Cossa, a fifteenth-century Neapolitan

antipope, a marker of the deep animus Stephens felt towards his former patron. Popular anti-Catholic texts declared Cossa to be 'the most profligate villain that one shall read of'.[81]

Whilst Blackburne and his Exeter protégé, John Gilbert, were the most frequent subjects of Stephens's scorn, he also made reflections on Jaques Sterne. In a partially obscured passage in a letter of September 1743, Stephens wrote,

> D^{r} St – n was a creature of Cossas… & was y^{e} Northern [Vinicombe] his character very bad. he Kept his wife at his living, & (as y^{e} world reports) Scandalously wth another mans wife, & is a diminutive Cossa. he is now fitting up a house in [York]; & if he takes y^{t}: woman into it, y^{e} present Dean is [determined] to cite [him] before y^{e} Chapter. he beat persons for not voting at y^{e} Elections as he w^{d} them, & brought on a trial, at his own insisting upon it, & was cast. he is much hated by the Gentlemen of the Country, his abilities are mean but he himself bold & daring. he lay in Cossa's house, when y^{e} Chancellour was only in lodgings.[82]

This contemporary account of Jaques Sterne's character is as remarkable as it is damning. Unlike other contemporary accounts of the Sternes, Stephens's views were firmly rooted in his ongoing clerical engagements in Exeter where he was a residentiary canon. Even after his translation to the archbishopric, Blackburne's spectre cast a long shadow over the cathedral community in the South West. When a diocese fell vacant, the episcopal seals of the former incumbent were broken in a physical and symbolic representation of the severance of jurisdictive ties from one bishop to the next.[83] This was only a formality, however, and the influence of predecessor administrations persisted through their clients. Stephens saw Jaques as a Yorkshire incarnation of John Vinicombe, one of Blackburne's most trusted agents in Exeter, who, even after the Archbishop's translation, provided him with intelligence about chapter and electoral affairs in that city.[84] When commenting on Jaques's status in the episcopal administration at York, Stephens drew comparisons with Blackburne's treatment of John Fursman, cathedral chancellor of Exeter, and client since the early 1700s. He observed that Jaques was invited to reside with Blackburne's household whilst his former chaplain Fursman was only 'in lodgings'.[85]

Stephens's observation that Jaques was a 'diminutive Cossa' spoke both to his short stature, and that he was a facsimile of his patron as to his churchmanship and personal proclivities. This also goes further in confirming some of the more scandalous rumours about Jaques: that he cohabited in York with Sarah Benson whilst his wife Katherine was left to reside alone at his rural parish, and that he was indicted at the quarter sessions of York for beating up a barber during the 1734 electoral contest.[86] But the claim that Jaques was 'much hated' by the 'gentlemen of the country' is difficult to corroborate. He was on sociable terms with the squirearchy of Holderness, including Marmaduke Constable of Wassand Hall, and Hugh Bethell of Rise, who helped to fund his newspaper enterprises.[87] And, later, Lord Irwin was an ardent supporter of Jaques's claim for the deanery of York in 1747.[88] Stephens's views were undoubtedly drawn from his personal experiences of Blackburne and his clients, and from the 1730s he continued to be informed of the elderly archbishop's activities through those still in favour with the prelate. Nevertheless, his views were jaundiced by the acrimony of his separation from his former patron, and he was inclined to embellish rumours for the amusement of his correspondents.[89]

Lewis Stephens was especially exercised by the seeming transferal of vices and flaws from patron to client; he reserved particular ire for John Gilbert. On 16 June 1740, Stephens related that Gilbert declined a meeting with Bishop Stephen Weston because he was busy at 'cards with some ladies of quality'.[90] In the same year, Stephens was incensed by Gilbert's promotion to the bishopric of Llandaff ahead of other clergymen he deemed to be more deserving. Stephens later confided that 'it gives me indignation y^{t} [Gilbert] is B^{p}, & [Thomas] Worth was nothing more y^{n}: an [archdeacon]'.[91] In 'The Ecclesiastical Climbers', Stephens described Gilbert's advancement in the Church as effected 'with less labour, & no study', having 'learnt it from Cossa':

> for he is hugely qualified for it by 5 great & excellent parts of learning: (1) he is six foot high (2^{ly}) he wears a very genteel gown & cassock. (3^{ly}) he is married into a Nobleman's family. (4^{ly}) he rides in a handsome Chariot, & (5^{ly}) he has assurance [daring] enough for any May-pole.[92]

Stephens accentuated this account of Gilbert's worldly qualifications with the melodramatic declaration that he wished 'to be corkt up in a bottle, & not be let out again, till [Gilbert] hath

learnt Latin!'[93] Whilst Stephens's critiques of Blackburne and his clients were never made public, the breach with his former patron was total. Unlike Sterne, he received no further preferment for the final fifteen years of his life.

The Shadow of Patronage

Although Lewis Stephens's motivations for risking the contravention of social norms by breaking the patronage bargain are unclear, as with Sterne there was almost certainly a political complexion to his grievances. Throughout the 1730s, the perceived systemisation of patronage under Walpole drew criticism from opposition commentators.[94] But even Stephens framed this as a critique of excessive munificence to undeserved clients rather than a denunciation of the patronage system at large, from which he had himself benefited handsomely.[95] Sterne's rejection of his uncle's patronage in 1742 was a repudiation of the Walpolean party in York. He later claimed that he 'quarrelled' with Jaques because 'though he was a party man, I was not', and that he 'detested' the 'dirty work' of political journalism.[96] Whilst this implies that Sterne's decision was chiefly guided by personal scruples, the timing of the rupture brings this into question. With Walpole recently deposed, and the octogenarian Blackburne in terminally declining health, Sterne might seriously have believed that he could cultivate more fruitful connections elsewhere. This was a highly risky strategy, however, given the low probability of receiving additional preferment under successive bishops, and the damage he would sustain to his reputation.[97] In 1750, Jaques wrote scathingly about 'the Only person unacceptable to me in the whole Church, an ungrateful & unworthy nephew of my Own' (*Letters*, 668). Sterne's eventual pursuit of fame owed a great deal to his stasis as a '"lousy prebendary"' (*Letters*, 18n5). Having belatedly found favour with his former college acquaintance John Fountayne at his appointment as Dean of York in 1747, Sterne was soon disappointed again in his clerical career. The long, fallow period that followed saw Sterne develop methods of self-promotion that were characteristic of his literary endeavours.[98] (*Shandean*, 28 [2017]).

With the first volumes of *Tristram Shandy* in the press, Sterne declared that 'I am tired of employing my brains for other people's advantage.—'Tis a foolish sacrifice I made for some years to an ungrateful person' (*Letters*, 105). A sense of personal incompatibility also permeated William Cole's justification for breaking ties with his patron in the 1750s, though without the same sting of resentment:

> [Bishop Thomas] Sherlock was a great Man, but an arbitrary one. He gave me a Living, but I soon found that more Servility & Obsequiousness would be expected, than was in my nature to give: so I gave up all my future Prospects of great Ecclesiastical Preferment, for more Liberty & less Constraint, for which I was not made.[99]

These examples reveal that it was not only dyed-in-the-wool High Churchmen who risked being debarred from progress in their clerical careers after 1714. Clergymen who could not accommodate changing politico-religious conditions, misjudged the patronage bargain, or were personally incompatible with their superiors also risked being ostracised. This was particularly acute in the final years of Walpole's Whig ministry. For those like Sterne and Lewis Stephens, this entailed digressions into scholarly and literary pursuits. At his death in 1747, Stephens's curate expressed that 'tho' he has left some enemies behind him, he deserv'd none'.[100]

On 26 June 1760, William Warburton concluded an exchange of correspondence with Sterne with the admonition, 'a man was never writ out of the reputation he had once fairly won, but by himself' (*Letters*, 690). The Bishop of Gloucester's remark on his disappointment at being unable to esteem Sterne as a clergyman resonate deeply with the latter's experiences of his early clerical career. The present biographical accounts of this period in Sterne's life under-emphasise the exceptional nature of his initial rise in the Church, and the character of his breach with his patrons. With the encouragement of Archbishop Blackburne's episcopal administration, Sterne was introduced to cathedral affairs, swiftly moved from one prebend to another of greater value, was invited to preach before his clerical contemporaries, and was brought into close proximity to his diocesan's inner circle ― all in the space of just four years. This placed Sterne on a career trajectory which exceeded median norms for progress within the Church. Men who went on to become bishops usually gained their first living in their early thirties, and their first cathedral dignity before the age of forty. Sterne reached these milestones by the age of twenty-seven, with just two years elapsing between his ordination and appointment as prebendary. It had taken Jaques Sterne twelve years to achieve the same. And, whereas Jaques's clerical successes have been read as

evidence of the rewards available to those who fully applied themselves in service to the Whig governors of the Church, he strived to accelerate this process for his nephew.

The main challenge when investigating this period of Sterne's life is the necessity of engaging with the provincial, ecclesiastical records of the North of England (and elsewhere), which may be impenetrable to an international coterie of literary scholars who spearhead the study of Sterne's life and works. And yet, we owe a debt of gratitude to a generation who not only understood and engaged with the complexities (and joys) of Sterne's literary productions, but also the historical contexts of his own time. Looking forward, there is great reason to be optimistic about future archival discoveries. The adoption of fresh approaches, accompanied by new findings in the primary record, will be necessary to refresh scholarship of Sterne's early life. The comparative case of Lewis Stephens emphasises the importance of joining these lines of inquiry with current research into Sterne's clerical contemporaries who were also exploring literary forms from locations of relative obscurity. When these strands are joined with the work underway on the social networks of Sterne's literary fame, a new, scholarly biography seems more achievable.

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NOTES

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3 Letter from John Ellis to Humphrey Prideaux, 14 May 1713, Kresen Kernow (KK), PB/8/4.

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153-157; Daniel Reed, 'Patronage, Performance, and Reputation in the Eighteenth-Century Church' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Oxford Brookes University, 2019).

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11 Blackburne is more likely to appear in an historical novel or a *Horrible Histories* title than in a scholarly work. See Terry Deary, *Horrible Histories Annual 2016* (Scholastic, 2015), 41; Deary Terry, *Horrible Histories: Pirates* (Scholastic, 2019), 24; Robin Blake, *A Dark Anatomy: A Mystery* (Pan, 2012).

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13 George Bubb Dodington, *Autobiography: A Collection of the Most Instructive and Amusing Lives Ever Published, Written by the Parties Themselves*…. (Hunt and Clarke, 1828), vol. 22, 162.

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15 Chamberlain, *Accommodating High Churchmen*, 68–79.

16 Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge, 1996), 4.

17 Lewis Perry Curtis, *Chichester Towers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 102; Daniel Ray Hirschberg, 'A Social History of the Anglican Episcopate, 1660–1760' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Michigan PhD, 1976), 1–5.

18 Hirschberg, 'A Social History of the Anglican Episcopate', 1–5.

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21 Add. MS. 61612.

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24 Daniel Reed, 'Patronage, Performance, and Reputation', chapter 9.

25 Letter from the Duke of Newcastle to Lord Townshend, 17 November 1725, BL, Add. MS. 32687.

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27 Sykes, *Edmund Gibson*, 126–27.

28 Letter from Lewis Stephens to Joshua Howell, 23 Apr 1724, KK, HL/2/179.

29. Lewis Stephens, *A Sermon Preach'd in the Chapel of Bishop-Thorp near York, At An Ordination Held there, on the 25th September, 1726. To which is Annexed, His Grace the Lord Archbishop of York's LETTER, March 9th, 1726, to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishops of his Province, with Orders and Resolutions agreed on between them, and to be communicated to the Clergy of their Respective Dioceses concerning Ordinations, Curacies, &c.* (Publisher, 1727); a version was also printed as a single sheet titled, *His Grace the Lord Arch-Bishop of York's Directions concerning Orders*. See Directions for Orders, [1726], Borthwick Institute for Archives (BIA), Bp. C&P III/21. A testimonial sent to Blackburne for a nominee to Carlton-in-Lindrick in Nottinghamshire was prefaced as 'subscribed being mindfull of ye Part of yr Grace's most Excellent Charge & Directions give to yr Clergy'. See Testimonial for Martin Rutter, BIA, Bp. C&P III/20,

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31 Letter from Lancelot Blackburne to Hardolph Wasteneys, 5 October 1727, BIA, Bp. C&P III.

32 Letter from Lancelot Blackburne to William Wake, 22 October 1731, KK, PB8/8.

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49 Cleveland court book, ff. 68−75, BIA, C.V/CB.8.

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86 Katherine Sterne (1679−1742). She was laid to rest at Rise. Jaques Sterne's relationship with Sarah Benson was the subject of local gossip by the 1740s, and he made her the sole executrix of his will in 1746. At Jaques's death, the details of his legacy to Benson were said to have 'open'd many mouths'. See, letter from Francis Best, June 1759, ERA, DDX1502/1/5. It was widely reported in the press that Jaques was indicted at the Guildhall in York for assaulting John Bignall, but the original record has yet to be found. See *Daily Gazetter*, no. 26, 29 July 1735.

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