

ROMANTICISM GOES TO UNIVERSITY

Introduction

Andrew McInnes



BYRON'S BEAR, KEPT IN HIS STUDENT ROOM to challenge the ban on pets—Shelley's expulsion from Oxford, for refusing to recant the atheism expressed in his provocative pamphlet—Victor Frankenstein as the undergraduate from hell—women writers debarred from university tuition but developing new models of mentorship in relation to Dissenting academies and other institutions: the university has an awkward reputation within Romantic period writing, becoming a symbol of authority and tradition to be resisted and challenged. On the other hand, 'Higher Education', broadly considered, occupies a significant space within Romantic thought, offering the potential for self-betterment and social improvement in revolutionary ways—from poetry embodying a radical call to arms and prose reconceptualising individual and national identity to print culture more generally offering a newly democratic public space of opinion formation.

The essays in this issue emerge from a conference called 'Romanticism Goes to University' held at Edge Hill University, UK, in 2018. The conference aimed for a twofold focus. Firstly, a space for discussion and debate about the role of higher education—pedagogy, didacticism, the Romantic lecture and essay, and the university as an institution—in the Romantic period itself. And secondly, an opportunity to scrutinise the state of the discipline in today's university: what does it mean to teach and research Romanticism now? how is the Romantic period presented in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes? what are the major trends in Romantic research at the moment? to what extent does what is taught in Romantic period courses reflect and/or motivate research? Our contributors offer a range of responses to the first point, from focusing on the experiences of a particular—and peculiar—Romantic university student, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, through Romantic poetry inspired by, satirising or resisting the university as institution, to a range of essays on the educational practices of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. All of their articles, whether implicitly or explicitly, reflect on current university practices and concerns, from the crisis in graduate training and employment in Anglo-American universities to the opportunities heralded by new technologies, whilst remaining alert to their ongoing imbrication in the politics and aesthetics of the Romantic university.

Michael Bradshaw's opening essay, 'Beddoes Raising Hell in Germany: A Tale of Student Mobility' begins with a telling quotation from a *Guardian* article of 2015, which runs the gamut of literary reference from Romantic poetry through

Dickens to Waugh, to pit Gradgrindian utilitarianism against '[s]wanning around with a copy of Keats in one's back pocket'. Bradshaw's account of Beddoes' tumultuous encounters with student societies and government crackdowns in German universities begins to forge connections between the early nineteenth century and the Higher Education situation of recent years, with the tendrils of government interference in the running of universities more insidious if no less damaging. Strikes protesting injustices in the calculation of pension contributions took place in Spring 2018 immediately before the conference and remain unresolved as I write this in 2020 (and update it in 2025!), with a wider dispute tackling inequality, casualisation, workload and pay—a combination of concerns which get to the heart of what a university should be for—taking place in late 2019 and early 2020, with strikes on the horizon again in the academic year 2022–23. The Covid-19 pandemic has further impacted upon the university sector in ways which a range of scholars have traced back into the Romantic period's own climate crisis.

As well as musing on past and present hellscapes in the university sector, Bradshaw's article shows how Beddoes' hellraising in German universities might have influenced his depiction of a necromantic hellraiser in the little studied poem 'Alfarabi', imagining a student of unhallowed arts uncannily akin to Beddoes himself. The essay concludes with a reflection on the continuities and discontinuities between universities of the early nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, implicitly elegising from its subtitle onward the kinds of student mobility which have been disrupted after the UK's departures from both the European Union and the Erasmus programme.

Matthew Sangster's 'Affecting Retreats and Academic Follies: The Romantic-Period College in Poets' Spheres' traces the mixed emotions prompted by the university experience in British and American Romantic-era poets, from playful if parodic elegies to youthful misdemeanours to more thoroughgoing critiques of their exclusive student bodies and conservative politics. Ranging among representations of the Romantic university by canonical figures such as Wordsworth and Byron through to lesser-known poets by turns elegising and satirising their time at college, Sangster's article also shows how women writers such as Mary Alcock, Joanna Baillie, Phillis Wheatley and Lydia Howard Sigourney both mocked and memorialised the Anglo-American academy.


Emily Dolive builds on Sangster's discussion of female poets in her 'Reader, Pause!': Lessons in Mourning by Romantic Women Poets', which opens with the sobering fact that the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars had closed nearly half of European universities before shifting focus to explore the didactic strategies of Mary Robinson and Jane Alice Sargent in their war elegies. Dolive argues that both women challenged conventional notions of elegy in formal strategies which stressed readerly engagement, the process of commemoration and a focus on how the living were to survive. Taken together, the first three articles explore the impact of higher education, broadly considered, on the writings and self-representations of a wide range of writers, from hellraising Beddoes through a surprisingly affective Richard Polwhele to Robinson and Sargent positioning

themselves as educators outside of the university system. The last three essays in this Special Issue work together to focus on Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin's commitments to education, collaboration and revolution, with Judith Pascoe's final article returning to Dolive's elegiac theme to think about the work of mourning both in Godwin's *Posthumous Works of Wollstonecraft* and in today's academy.

John-Erik Hansson's 'Quite Interesting: Godwin as a Writer of Fables' focuses on Godwin as an educator of children, using Sianne Ngai's very influential theory of the interesting as one of 'our' aesthetic categories to explore how Godwin encourages children's interest in his storytelling to shape actively questioning citizen subjects, in a manner which diverges from Ngai's more pessimistic account of the interesting. For Hansson, Godwin adopts a range of strategies to interest his child reader, engaging their readerly curiosity, and thereby promoting an active form of citizenship. The interesting as aesthetic category becomes a way for Godwin to provoke dialogue through his texts, using his conversational form to elicit a response from his child readers which should continue into adulthood.

Colette Davies switches focus to Wollstonecraft as educator, not only of children, but of her literary peers, schooled by her sometimes harsh and vituperative reviews. In '“We Advise Her to Throw Aside Her Pen”: Hierarchy and Authority in Mary Wollstonecraft's Reviews,' Wollstonecraft emerges as a provocative, and surprisingly conservative, figure, deploying sarcasm, intertextual reference and a didactic tone to keep a range of women writers in what she saw as their proper place. For Davies, Wollstonecraft's practices as a reviewer are self-serving, helping her to establish her predominance over her literary world by enforcing a strict hierarchy of moral and formal value in literary texts.

Finally, Judith Pascoe's 'Godwin Reads Wollstonecraft: Posthumousness, Protest, and Romantic Education' focuses on the 'Wollstonecraft syllabus' Godwin developed for himself in his editing of his late wife's *Posthumous Works*, using his rejection of consolation and need to stay with the feeling of grief to explore the affective responses that continue to inform our current work in universities. Taking her lead to think about our affective commitments to higher education, I met Judith at the 2016 'Summer of 1816: Creativity and Tumult' conference held in Sheffield to commemorate the anniversary of a very significant year in Romantic Studies. Over the weekend I was reeling from the recent Brexit vote to leave the European Union (as well as, more personally, the collapse of my house sale), and Judith's paper was one of the events at the conference which shed a little light in dark times. Her panel paper presentation worked as a keynote-in-miniature, connecting together a range of themes and papers from over the weekend to explore the state of Romantic Studies today. From that day, I aimed to invite her to act as a keynote at 'Romanticism Goes to University' and her paper was superb, beginning by asking us to create our own 'Wollstonecraft syllabus' before offering a dazzling state-of-the-discipline address taking in the Me Too movement, Black Lives Matter protests, and challenges and opportunities for innovation in graduate training.

University staff and students continue to struggle with a cluster of challenges facing them, from political antagonism to the idea of Higher Education itself to the continuing disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic which political and university leaders alike would prefer to ignore. Even before the pandemic, though, something was rotten in the state of universities: industrial action in the UK and US continues to fight for the soul of academic institutions; government policies threaten campuses with uncertainty and distress; a lack of coordination and cooperation between organisations weakens our social and intellectual positions. Back in 2016, I struggled to see the opportunities for creativity in the Sheffield conference's subtitle. Today, too, the future can seem bleak. I want to offer the articles collected here as testaments to the creativity still available in Higher Education: documents which celebrate the possibilities for conversation, collegiality and collaboration both in the Romantic period and our studies of it today. 

REFERRING TO THIS ARTICLE

A. McINNES. 'Romanticism Goes to University: Introduction,' *Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780–1840*, 25 (Summer 2024) <<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19995981>>.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

This article is © 2025–2026 The Author and is the result of the independent labour of the scholars credited with authorship. For full copyright information, see page 2.

Date of acceptance: 12 March 2025.



Literary Exchanges (with Julia M. Wright, 2011) and *Native Americans and Anglo-American Culture: The Indian Atlantic* (with Tim Fulford, 2009); and he has published more than thirty-five journal articles and book chapters. Kevin is currently working on a monograph entitled *The Life and Literary Adventures of Sir Francis Bond Head*, which under contract at McGill–Queen’s University Press and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Almudena Jiménez Virosta holds a Bachelor’s degree in Audiovisual Communications with a Fine Arts complement from the University of Seville and a Master’s in Hispanic Studies and Comparative Literature from the University of Geneva. She is currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Fribourg, where she works as a Teaching and Research Assistant. Her doctoral project builds on Golden Age Spain and its transnational reception and explores the intersections between politics, literature and painting across Europe between 1600 and 1900. Along with her academic background, these subjects inform her undergraduate teaching in academic writing in Spanish, Literary Theory and Comparative Literature. In the past, Almudena translated Mary Shelley’s later writings into Spanish, which she continues to study alongside works by other British authors, such as Coleridge and Ruskin. She has also presented at international conferences on topics ranging from the Spanish Baroque to European Romanticism, gothic literature and cinema.

Matthew C. Jones is an Assistant Instructional Professor in the University Writing Program at the University of Florida, where his primary responsibilities involve creating educational partnerships among UF and schools, universities and organisations in Wales. His scholarly work is on the presences and roles of education in colonialism of the long nineteenth century, particularly on indigenous and grassroots education networks in Wales, Ireland, India and China in response to the British Empire.

Andrew McInnes is Reader in Romanticisms and Co-Director of EHU Nineteen, the research centre for nineteenth-century studies at Edge Hill University, and Secretary of the British Association for Romantic Studies. He has published widely on Romantic Studies, women’s writing, gothic fiction and children’s literature. He is currently working on a critical edition of the Brontë sisters’ *Poems* by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell (1846), emphasising—like this Special Issue—the value of collaboration.

Judith Pascoe is the George Mills Harper Professor of English at Florida State University. Her work focuses on the theatrical, visual and material culture of the British Romantic period. Pascoe has written about theatrical self-representation in the 1790s (*Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship*, 1997) and about Romantic-era collectors (*The Hummingbird Cabinet: A Rare and*