

# 'PAUSE, READER, PAUSE'

## Lessons in Mourning by Romantic Women Poets

*Emily J. Dolive*



WHEN CONSIDERING HOW 'Romanticism Goes to University', I first recalled the political upheavals that underpin the period. According to Walter Rüegg, the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars effectively closed more than 40 per cent of European universities.<sup>1</sup> In such a turbulent political climate, what did university or education or pedagogy look like? In short, I find it looked like poetry, particularly from the viewpoint of women writers. Though physically restricted from university and theoretically restricted from political practice, women did fill and at times control the pages of newspapers, pamphlets and broadsides. The ubiquity of print ushered in at once the rise of silent reading—a media revolution itself—and a pedagogy of memorisation and recitation. As war and memorial verses inundated daily papers, the extent perhaps best seen in Betty Bennett's 3000 recovered war poems from 1793–1814, a training ground was taking shape.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, terms like 'Elegy,' 'Monody' and 'To the Memory of' introduce dozens of poems from the period, but this essay focuses on poems that revise established lesson plans for mourning and memorial. Most elegies and panegyrics that filled periodicals during the Romantic war years relied on the established elements of that genre: personification, anagnorisis, allusion, consolation, laurels and sighs. Everyone was writing them, hoping to soothe a nation by fitting new horrors into ancient forms. However, I notice in a few war poems by women, which do not appear in Bennett's anthology, attempts to revise the tradition of guiding readers toward sorrow or heavenly consolation. The mourning lesson these women propose relies on textual reconstruction, which trains active readers to better reflect on and participate in this explosion of printed war memorials. Defined as the interplay of topic and genre on a printed page, including locative words, intricate shifts in speaker or addressee, and intertextuality, I argue that textual reconstruction and manipulation aimed to teach readers how to properly mourn wartime losses, in fact, through the acts of reading and writing.

Two key poems will be explored below, with brief comparisons to other contemporary texts. The first is Mary Robinson's (1757–1800) 'Stanzas Supposed to be Written near a Tree, over the Grave of an Officer' (1793), which underwent several reprintings in 1790s periodicals.<sup>3</sup> Robinson is then paired with critically overlooked poet Jane Alice Sargent (1789–1869), whose 'Monody' appears in her 1817 collection but likely appeared in newspapers or pamphlets during the years her brothers served in the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>4</sup> Along the way, I theorise the

printed page as a terrain upon which women poets cultivated textual markers and layers that force readers' eyes and minds towards alternative conceptions of mourning that lie beneath the surface topic. Such textual manipulations highlight other, more active mourning processes than merely rewarding the dead with fame, heaven or overindulgent weeping. Robinson and Sargant do compose other memorial poems to family members or famous names lost during the twenty years of conflict that are filled with abstract figures like 'Memory' or 'Fate' and heavenly consolations; however, their memorial verses that raise awareness of reading and writing forgo or gradually dismiss the typical structures and symbols of elegy. Robinson, in fact, leaves terms like 'Elegy' or 'Memory' out of her title and selects quatrains instead of elegiac couplets, which Sargant retains. Still, both poets—at opposite ends of the Romantic war years—revise war memorials in order to retrain the living to be better readers rather than solely mourn the dead.

### *Lesson 1: Locative Words*

The first lesson I chart in Robinson and Sargant's war poems is the repetition of locative words that fuse grave and page. Despite the wordy title of Robinson's poem 'Stanzas Supposed to Be Written near a Tree, over the Grave of an Officer, Who Was Killed at Lincelles, in Flanders, in August 1793', the location of that grave is imprecise: it is 'over' there somewhere, 'supposed', 'near'. Celeste Langan and Maureen McLane call these terms 'etherealized locations' that contrast with the concrete notion of writing also found in the title.<sup>5</sup> To overcome ethereal locations and emotions, Robinson first locates the act of mourning in the physical space of the poem through locative words before turning to the act of writing. Locative words like 'here', 'this' and 'spot' are scattered throughout the seven stanzas, playing tug-of-war with the vague 'near a Tree' and 'over the Grave' in the title (ll. 4, 21, 13). Robinson, as Sargant will further elucidate, looks to the text to manifest a site for readers to 'here | Lament' (ll. 3–4). The sheer repetition of locative terms, immediate referents and later quotation marks 'draw[s] attention to poetry's use of the material support of paper', in Langan and McLane's words.<sup>6</sup> In Robinson's poem, the point seems to be that paper and writing preserve a significant location—not just an emotion—to be visited, to be read.

Similarly, Sargant implies that reading is the only way to know how and where to mourn in her 'Monody', subtitled 'To the Memory of Lieutenant W. Hervey, of the 17th Regiment of Foot' and including an epigraph from Ossian. Playing on 'Regiment of foot', Sargant asks readers to 'with solemn footsteps tread this mournful spot', the spot being the page filled with iambic feet (ll. 1–2). Like Robinson two decades before, Sargant roots readers in the text before them through language like 'This mournful spot', 'here' and 'hither' (ll. 2, 3, 23). As these locative terms are repeated throughout Sargant's 'Monody', grave and page momentarily fuse. Indeed, the unmarked, half-forgotten grave 'spot' is only discovered through reading: as Sargant explains, 'no sculptur'd marble grace[d] his grave [...] no tender tear was o'er him shed!' (ll. 16–19) The repeated use of 'no' de-materialises

the gravesite, replacing it with locative terms and various ‘reader[s]’ who ‘pause’ and whose ‘footsteps’ explore the page to better understand and grieve this loss.

Just as Sargant denies the customary ‘sculptur’d marble’ and ‘tear[s]’ of other elegies, Robinson alternates abstract representations of mourning, like ‘sorrow’s gem’ with repeated locative terms and metrical variation (l. 14). In these moments of linguistic and textual play, audiences are trained to actively read, to pick up cues from changing terminology and repeated words, rather than to seek solace in symbolic memorials. Without reading, precise details of each gravesite would be lost and readers’ duties to the dead misunderstood. In terms of the latter, Robinson uses the word ‘Here’ to forcibly open two early stanzas (ll. 5, 9). ‘Here’ helps Robinson trip up her iambs and thus draw readers’ attention to a list of common elegiac tasks. Readers are urged to ‘Arrest thy wand’ring steps’, then ‘Here [...] bind the laurel’ and shed ‘tears’, albeit keeping in mind ‘Thy fame shall brave the blasts of time’ (ll. 3, 9, 16). Though these several mourning options are listed seemingly for readers to choose from, the second half of Robinson’s poem shifts to reassert the role of active reading.

### *Lesson 2: Shifting Address*

The familiar elegiac symbols and consolations of laurel wreaths, tears, and fame are quickly subverted when Robinson shifts the addressee of ‘Stanzas [...] Over the grave of an Officer’ (1793). Reversing recipients mid-poem is the second textual training exercise that makes room for active reading. Initially, a ‘pensive traveller’ is called on to ‘Arrest’ his ‘steps’ (ll. 1–3). Once he is still, the poem addresses additional human and non-human figures that guide readers toward the acts of reading and writing instead of abstract musings. In the 1793 version of this text, Robinson included another stanza, left out of the final 1806 reprinting, which contained the first change in addressee. Here, Robinson suddenly shifts to speak directly to the officer, named in the original title as Colonel Bosville. In doing so, Robinson links the dead officer with future poets, the ‘MUSE’ who will ‘mingle sainted names with thine’ and even ‘Thy gallant Comrades’ who oft shall share | ‘The frequent sigh, the mournful line!’ (ll. 13–16). Though left out of later reprintings, this stanza offers the dead officer solace via poetry. Robinson further implies that friends and future poets will be compelled ‘frequent[ly]’ to compose ‘lines’ in his memory. ‘Stanzas’ seems to be working out the relationship between the pensive traveler, the dead and the lines of poetry written for both of them. Just as writing is offered as a better mourning task, Robinson shifts addresses yet again. ‘Stanzas’ abruptly turns to address ‘Oh! hallow’d turf’ and, a few lines later, ‘thou, rude bark’ at the gravesite (ll. 13, 17); these natural, localised addressees effectively replace the earlier list of laurel, tears and fame.

Furthermore, Robinson never addresses personified consolations like ‘Fame’ or ‘Death’ in this text but speaks instead to the ‘spot’ at once grave and page (l. 13). Once the tree, ‘thou rude bark’, is addressed and no longer ‘over the grave’ as per the title, it becomes a makeshift headstone to be read. The line ‘Carv’d by some just recording hand’ reveals a written monument to be read, like the poem

(l. 18). The acts of carving and recording not only highlight the importance of reading memorials but writing them as well, a ‘just’ act. Moreover, the tree becomes ‘proudly conscious’ of the recording and is hailed as an active reader—‘thy guardian branches spread wide’ (l. 19). The ‘guardian’ of the memorial text becomes connected in the final lines to the ‘grateful country [that] guards his fame’ (l. 28). Country and carved tree are asked to read, to ‘preserve’ and to be ‘proudly conscious’ of these recorded memorials (ll. 17, 19). As Robinson shifts her addressee from traveller, to officer, to ground to tree, the mourning lesson also shifts from ‘tears’ and consoling ‘fame’ to physically ‘recording’ and reading that fame (ll. 1, 16, 18). To reinforce the significance of actively reading what’s ‘Here’, Robinson concludes her ‘Stanzas’ with an assertion of absence: ‘No trophied column trimm’d with bays, | No gilded tablet bears his name’ (l. 25). In the closing quatrain, Robinson links ‘no’ to familiar memorial trappings like bay wreaths and golden tablets, a cue Sargant takes up later. In the absence of such showy trappings, the reading ‘country’ becomes the officer’s ‘guard’, explicitly likened to the carved tree that is only discovered through reading the poem (l. 28).

### *Lesson 3: Personifications Revisited*

The major objective of Sargant’s and Robinson’s textual lessons is not only to train active readers, but for them to contend when in mourning with abstract ideals like fame; however, in neither text is fame capitalised or figured as a looming, personified force. Instead, Robinson makes the text of the ‘carv’d’ tree a ‘guardian’ of fame whereas Sargant makes fame a writer.

While personified ‘Vict’ry’ and ‘Death’ appear in the opening lines of Sargant’s ‘Monody’, these familiar figures fade and are replaced with locative words and with a new, speaking ‘Warrior’, which I will address momentarily (ll. 11, 12, 27). But before that warrior–reader’s entrance, Sargant sneaks in an un-capitalised ‘fame’ (l. 13) in order to juxtapose and recast the capitalised ‘Vict’ry’s arms’ and ‘Soft Pity’ (ll. 11, 20). Instead of remaining what Kate Singer calls ‘stable emotive concepts’ (l. 189) like Victory and Pity, fame creates a new text: ‘she gives the roll that Time shall keep, | O’er Hervey’s name in silent sorrow weep’ (ll. 15–16).<sup>7</sup> Termed feminine here, fame creates a ‘roll’ of ‘name[s]’ to be consulted, to be read, throughout time. Sargant imagines female scribes that sustain both wartime sorrow and fame through their records. It is not an oral history or a song, but printed, silent reading ‘in silent sorrow’ that Sargant asks of readers, a firm connection with media transformations in the period. Moreover, Sargant has already established the importance of reading this ‘roll’ in the very first line. Unlike Robinson’s opening address to a ‘pensive trav’ller’ Sargant’s first directive is ‘Pause! reader, pause!’ (l. 1, emphasis mine). Sargant’s ‘Monody’ subtly revises the figure of ‘fame’ seen in so many war memorials to guide readers towards the new memorial tasks of reading and writing, pointing our attention towards the role of print during the war years.

Readers and writers curiously populate other canonical poems from this period that conspicuously avoid—and thus delineate—wartime context.<sup>8</sup> Writ-

ten within a year of one another, Keats's armchair traveling in the 1816 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' reveals a complete break or escape from the twenty years of conflict in England whereas Sargant's 1817 'Monody' suggests the need to re-read and re-learn that conflict.<sup>9</sup> Keats's speaker has 'travel'd' and 'many goodly states and kingdoms seen' in an allegory of reading famous texts (ll. 1–2); he even reveals the 'Silent' staring and 'wild surmise' that attends reading (ll. 13–14). But the burden of what to do with these discoveries and feelings is, like the political subtext, buried. Keats's text then reads more like an escape as he does not return to the physical act of reading or learning like Robinson and Sargant do. Further, Sargant forces reading and remembrance of contemporary events through terms like 'reader', 'roll', 'this solemn spot' and even a sudden shift in speaker. The destination reached in Sargant's armchair traveling is not an exotic location rich in relevant allusion but one that connects readers to their recent history, particularly war and loss. The 'spot' of memory, near where a battle for England's autonomy and safety took place, can be repeatedly visited by returning to the printed page.

Silent armchair travelling is again modeled by a new character introduced in Sargant's 'Monody,' a 'Warrior led astray' (l. 27). Finally overthrowing the conventional figures of Victory and Pity, the warrior is a model reader, like Robinson's carved tree, having 'ramble[d] here,' in the text (l. 28). As noted a moment ago, Sargant's text is the only map or marker to the unmarked gravesite, which the warrior seems to have followed. Like Robinson's abrupt shifts in address, Sargant introduces the warrior character in the final lines of her memorial to clarify that reading is linked to understanding and preserving the history of war.


#### *Lesson 4: Intertextuality*

Lastly, this reader-warrior suddenly speaks, an introduction of orality and quotation that is the final lesson for active readers. "Farewell," the warrior says, "future heroes oft shall breathe a sigh, | O'er the lone spot where Hervey's relics lie" (ll. 31–36). The warrior's nod to 'future heroes' suggests the perpetuity of memorial texts, which is further dramatised by the conspicuous quotation marks around his speech. As the 'Monody' ends with the speaking warrior, his quoted speech creates another layer of reading that mimics the quoted epigraph from Ossian. The intertextual quotation marks and speech acts not only inform readers about the role paper and ink play in preserving a variety of stories across time and place, but also present a print-orality feedback loop. When Sargant employs intertextuality, she calls upon the pedagogy of recitation and memorisation, suggesting that the warrior's lesson of remembrance will remain even if the reliable, carved space of print is returned to the orality of the supposed Ossian. These oral-textual moments reinforce the opening address for active 'readers', or Robinson's travellers, to 'pause', to listen, to remember.

Layering memorial poems with multiple speakers, addressees, locations or quotations reveals the wartime role women poets were carving out for themselves: namely, to fill traditional forms like elegy with options for preservation and

memory. One of the few poems in Bennett's anthology that matches Robinson and Sargant's spatial reconstruction is the 1794 'The annex'd elegy', which was supposedly taken from a gravestone in Hythe and later appeared in John Gabriel Stedman's *Journal*.<sup>10</sup> Its epigraph adds another possible title: 'To the memory of' two brothers who died in the summer of 1794 while 'soldiers in the N. Devon Militia'. Set up to be a direct elegy to the Harding brothers, the poem immediately addresses readers 'That wander'st', asking them to 'Here pause a while' and actively read 'this stone,' like this 'spot' (ll. 2–3). As we know from the title and epigraph, the stone is in fact the elegy we are reading on the printed page. Asking passersby to stop and read both poem and physical location matches the strategy seen in Robinson's and Sargant's poems.

Further, 'The annex'd elegy' makes use of the print–orality feedback loop as well. The final two lines of the poem are in quotation marks to reveal their dual nature as spoken and written on the gravestone in chalk. As if added by the surviving brother or a 'comrade' like Stedman, the speech asserts that "One brother still remains, to march or stand, | As God shall will, or as his King commands" (ll. 17–18). This vocalisation makes good on the elegy's earlier promise that 'their comrades hearts' will remember and be moved by reading this stone (l. 16). Indeed, like Sargant's and Robinson's texts, readers or wanderers become active writers and thus preservers. Reading these poems guides readers through old battlegrounds or graveyards to become 'future heroes' by recording the late wars now in danger of slipping away or being used as abstract consolation.

To conclude very briefly, the memorial page during the Romantic war years became a useful terrain, for women poets in particular, to carve out a pedagogy of action rather than sorrow or consolation. Readers were both guided and instigated to become better thinkers, writers and memorisers through repeated locative words, intricate shifts in addressee and speaker, and moments of intertextuality. As print exploded and oral recitation blended with silent reading, Robinson and Sargant turned to linguistic and structural play, manipulating traditional genres, to model active reading and new options for mourning. Both women reveal an interest in using the printed page to better engage with and preserve recent history, war and loss, ensuring that their chapter of the French Revolution or Napoleonic Wars will not slip into abstraction. 

## NOTES

1. The numbers quoted include Durham (1832) and London (1836) among the new university foundations, but not St David's College Lampeter (1822), University College London (1826), King's College London (1829) or any of the theological colleges or medical schools, as these do not meet Walter Rüegg's definition of a university. See Walter Rüegg, *A History of the University in Europe, Volume 3: Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries (1800–1945)* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).
2. See Betty Bennett, *British War Poetry in the Age of Romanticism: 1793–1815* (Garland, 1976), p. ix: 'The 350 poems presented here, selected from more than 3,000 poems collected from contemporary publications, are representative of the massive number

- of war poems which were widely circulated, but which have not been previously collected, or edited, or, with some exceptions, reprinted.’
3. Mary Robinson, ‘Stanzas Supposed to Be Written near a Tree, over the Grave of an Officer, Who Was killed at Lincelles, in Flanders, In August 1793’, in *The Poetical Works of the Late Mrs Mary Robinson*, 3 vols (Phillips, 1806), II, 219–20.
  4. Jane Sargant, ‘Monody To the Memory of Lieutenant W. Hervey, of the 17th Regiment of Foot’, in *Sonnets and Other Poems* (For the Author by Hatchard, 1817), pp. 20–21.
  5. Celeste Langan and Maureen N. McLane, ‘The Medium of Romantic Poetry’, in *The Cambridge Introduction to British Romantic Poetry*, ed. by James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane (Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 239–62.
  6. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
  7. Kate Singer, ‘Limpid Waves and Good Vibrations: Charlotte Smith’s New Materialist Affect’, *Essays in Romanticism*, 23.2 (2016), pp. 175–192 <<https://doi.org/10.3828/eir.2016.23.2.4>>.
  8. See Theodor W. Adorno, ‘On Lyric Poetry and Society’, in *Notes to Literature*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Sherry Weber Nicholsen (1991; Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 59–74.
  9. John Keats, ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’, in *John Keats: Complete Poems*, ed. by Jack Stillinger (Belknap Press, 2003), p. 34.
  10. John Gabriel Stedman and ‘Lord Fortescue, ‘The annex’d elegy is on a gravestone in the churchyard at Hythe’, in *British War Poetry*, ed. by Bennett, pp. 355–56. See also *The Journal of John Gabriel Stedman, 1744–1797, Soldier and Author, including an Authentic Account of his Expedition to Surinam, in 1772*, ed. by Stanbury Thompson (Mitre Press, 1962), p. 355.

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and relationship with, Glasgow. Geraldine came to university later in life and graduated in June 2023 with an MA (Hons) in Scottish Literature and is a former President (2022–2023) of the University of Glasgow, Scottish Literature Society.

**Colette Davies** was awarded her PhD by the University of Nottingham in 2022 for her thesis, ‘Women Writers, Authorship, and the Late Eighteenth-Century Novel: Representations of the Female Author in the Minerva Press (1785–1800)’. Between 2018 and 2022 she was one of the Postgraduate Representatives for the British Association for Romantic Studies and co-organised the 2020 ‘Romantic Futurities’ BARS Early Career and Postgraduate Conference. She was a co-contributor for the ‘Romantic Novel’ section of the *Year’s Work in English Studies* (2020–2021) and has co-edited a special edition and written an article for *Romanticism on the Net* (2021). She is now a Knowledge Exchange and Impact Manager at the University of Nottingham, and enjoys working with academics and external partners to develop and realise external engagement with and the impacts of research.

**Emily J. Dolive** currently teaches at Eastside Catholic School in Seattle, after completing her PhD in English at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and a two-year Postdoctoral Fellowship at Baylor University. Her dissertation and book project, ‘Staking Out Space: British Women’s War Poetry, 1780–1840’ examines how women poets navigated and reshaped the literary marketplace during the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. Her newest work places Mary Robinson’s poetry and politics in dialogue with John Thelwall and is forthcoming in the *European Romantic Review*.

**John-Erik Hansson** is lecturer in British History at Université Paris Cité, member of the Echelles (UMR 8264) research unit and reviews editor of the *Anarchist Studies* journal. He is a specialist of the intellectual and cultural history of political radicalism, from the late eighteenth century to today. In particular, he has worked on William Godwin and his circle, with a special interest in the links between radicalism and the diversity of genre of writings, from philosophical treatises to children’s books. More recently, he has worked with Matthew Adams on Godwin’s twentieth-century reputation as a precursor of anarchism, to rethink the ways in which anarchists have (re-)constructed their own histories.

**Kevin Hutchings** is a professor in the Department of English at the University of Northern British Columbia, where he holds a University Research Chair and chairs the Research Committee in the Faculty of Indigenous Studies, Social Sciences and Humanities. He is the author of *Transatlantic Upper Canada: Portraits in Literature, Land, and British–Indigenous Relations* (2020), *Romantic Ecologies and Colonial Cultures in the British Atlantic World* (2009) and *Imagining Nature: Blake’s Environmental Poetics* (2002). He is also co-editor of *Transatlantic Literary Ecologies* (with John Miller, 2017), *Transatlantic*