

## SEM4. British Romantic literature as cultural heritage: Texts, objects and places

**4A** 12 September h. 14:00-16:00, S5 Moro

**4B** 12 September h. 16:30-19:00, S5 Moro

### Convenors

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### Abstract

The seminar intends to explore the many ways in which British literature of the Romantic period becomes a site of cultural heritage when writers, texts, and places become objects of material enquiry. Key to this are two concepts: on the one hand, the idea of literature as ‘heritage’ finds its rationale in the recently redefined guidelines of the UNESCO Convention (2017), which introduces the notion of ‘cultural landscape’ as one that is able to trigger specific associations in the human mind, connecting a number of artifacts, literary texts included, with places. On the other hand, the idea of the humanities, and therefore literature, as cultural heritage puts institutions, places and practices at a centre stage for materialist and neo-materialist investigations (Gillman, 2010). This perspective is especially crucial at present in an attempt to account for the complex interplay between tangible and intangible elements in a world dominated by digital practices.

A practice grounded in this perspective is certainly literary tourism (Palmer & Tivers, 2019), which traditionally designs destinations and shapes itineraries, conflating the tourist's gaze (Urry and Larsen, 2011) with the expectations of the readers. Romantic literature offers many an example of this, both in the UK and abroad. The period witnessed the rise of a new attention to natural and cultural sites that promoted conservatism, and the institutionalization of places such as Dove Cottage, Chawton House, Keats House at Hampstead, and the Keats-Shelley House in UK and *Golfo dei Poeti* in Italy further demonstrate this (Castellano, 2013; Bevan, 2023). In their role as sites of memory (Nora, 1989), these places give new meanings and realities to the literary text, often suggesting alternative stories as in the case of Chatsworth House, which lives in the popular imagination as ‘the real’ Pemberley owing to the success of the BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995). At the same time, the role of institutions is crucial in reshaping the transmission of Romantic literature as cultural heritage, bringing about new scenarios where the complex relationship between material textual holdings, and the cultural practices in which they are entangled, invites novel investigation (Sommer, 2025). The Convenors invite proposals for papers exploring the ways in which British literature of the Romantic period redefines the role of the humanities in contemporary context by becoming cultural heritage.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- literature as material heritage
- tourist itineraries and experiences connected with British Romantic literature in the UK and abroad
- textual materiality
- sites of memory and the role of institutions
- literary mementos and souvenirs.

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## SEM4. Papers

### 4A 12 September h. 14:00-16:00, S5 Moro

- *Slavery, abolition and cultural memory: The role of the museum* (Serena Baiesi, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna)
- *From Netley Abbey to Northanger Abbey: Gothic tourism and the cultural legacy of the dissolution of the monasteries* (Caterina Daolio, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna)
- *From chivalric spectacle to cultural landscape: Ivanhoe's legacy in Ashby-de-la-Zouch* (Angel Antonio De Oliveira Amata, Università di Pisa)

### 4B 12 September h. 16:30-18:30, S5 Moro

- *From verse to vista: Romantic memory and place-making in Lerici and Portovenere* (Marco Canani, Università degli Studi di Milano)
- *Piazza di Spagna: British Romanticism's gateway to Italy and Europe* (Andrew Brayley, Università di Catania)
- *The Euganean Hills and their romantic heritage: Past and present* (Myriam Di Maio, Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio" Chieti-Pescara)

## SEM4. Abstracts

### Slavery, abolition and cultural memory: The role of the museum

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Since the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain in 2007, universities, cultural institutions, museums, and art galleries around the world have increasingly sought new ways to interpret, discuss, and represent the often painful history of British involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, which reached its peak between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A key challenge shared by educational institutions and museums has been how to convey this complex history to diverse audiences in an accessible, engaging, and respectful manner.

In response, literary scholars—particularly those focused on the Romantic period—and museum curators have revised their methodologies, employing texts and objects as powerful tools to explore this pivotal historical era, which continues to resonate in contemporary society. In particular, museums have increasingly incorporated physical artifacts, audiovisual materials, personal narratives, and interpretive texts to encourage active dialogue and reflection. This emphasis on sensory engagement echoes the strategies of nineteenth-century abolitionist writers, who used poems, novels, and pamphlets to elicit emotional and embodied responses from their readers.

British museums such as *Wilberforce House* and the *Equiano Exhibition* at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery actively address the legacy of slavery using modern technology. These institutions employ interactive elements—such as outline drawings and recessed display spaces—to evoke the confined conditions of the Middle Passage. Similarly, the *International Slavery Museum in Liverpool* utilizes audiovisual installations to communicate lived experiences. Such embodied approaches mark important efforts to narrate the history of slavery through sensory and corporeal means.

This talk examines how nineteenth-century narrative strategies of abolition in Britain are reinterpreted and performed in contemporary museum spaces alongside the display of objects engaging sight and sense in a path of remembrance and awareness. It argues that integrating literary approaches with museum practices can deepen public understanding of both the historical realities and the enduring legacies of slavery and abolition in global society.

## References

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### **Piazza di Spagna: British Romanticism's gateway to Italy and Europe**

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The Keats Shelley Memorial House in Piazza di Spagna, Rome, is the house where Keats lived the last three months of his life. To quote a former curator of the house: “In every way it is an impressive house, belonging to Piazza di Spagna, that very Roman piazza, but because of Keats, belonging to the world” (Cacciatore, 1970). At the same time we may point out that this “very Roman piazza” was, after the Napoleonic Wars, virtually an English colony (Morgan, 1824, II, 248). The centrality and importance of Piazza di Spagna as a cultural hub is emphasised in the following passage which quotes G. M. Trevelyan: “From the Piazza di Spagna the ordinary nineteenth century tourist could radiate in all directions to that vast outer world of Rome which is ‘the heart of Europe and the chronicle of Man’s long march to civilization’” (Rogers, 1970). Gabriele D’Annunzio seems to have recognised the importance of the piazza when he says of one of his characters: “Egli avrebbe dato... il Campo Vaccino per la piazza di Spagna” (D’Annunzio, 2016, 38). The house is the seat of a very important library where we can find in particular the works of the second generation of Romantic poets. Thus, Piazza di Spagna is the site of a unique cultural heritage which enriches the humanities and acts as a bridge between English and Italian cultures. It is also in a zone with which Shelley, his wife Mary and Byron were familiar. At the same time, it is important to remember that these writers not only enriched the humanities but also showed themselves to be humane by identifying themselves with the struggles of the Italians against Austria. This applies in particular to Byron who, through his connections with the family of his last mistress, Teresa Guiccioli, collaborated with the carbonari. The aim of my paper is to show how this cultural heritage which bears witness to Anglo-Italian cooperation down the centuries can continue to act as a bridge between England and Italy, not to speak of Europe, by drawing on the lessons of the past in order to shape the future. It is not an accident the King Charles, in his speech to the Italian Parliament spoke about “two peoples, two nations whose stories are deeply intertwined-including of course with that of our European continent”, and this at a time when, notwithstanding Brexit, the United Kingdom seems to be moving closer to Europe.

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### **From verse to vista: Romantic memory and place-making in Lerici and Portovenere**

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The Cinque Terre, a series of five towns on the coast of Liguria, first gained popularity as a tourist destination in the 1970s due to their scenic allure, but also as the result of place branding strategies. In 1997, UNESCO included the area in the World Heritage Site list, acknowledging its “outstanding universal value” as a model of sustainable interaction between the environment and anthropic presence (UNESCO, 2025; Vegnuti, 2020). Two towns, Lerici and Portovenere, are an especially significant destination for literary tourism because of their association with British Romantic poets. In April 1822, the Shelleys rented Casa Magni in San Terenzo, while Byron allegedly swam across the Gulf of La Spezia. Notwithstanding the lack of documentary and literary records, the event is part of an enduring legend, as the Grotta Byron suggests. Shelley’s tragic death off the coast of Viareggio further contributed to branding Cinque Terre as a “lieu de mémoire” (Nora, 1989), placing the area not only on the tourist map, but also in cultural memory. In this paper I argue

that “The Gulf of Poets”, the toponymic metaphor with which the Gulf of La Spezia is referred to, calls for an examination of the role of Byron and Shelley in constructing the cultural identity of the region between history, literature, and discursivity (O’Neill 2019; Ramazani, 2020; MacLeod 2024). Accordingly, I firstly suggest that Portovenere and Lerici are instances of “cultural landscape” as defined by the UNESCO Convention (2017) in that their institutionalization as sites of memory relies on associations between places and cultural artifacts. Secondly, I examine the ways in which Shelley’s and Byron’s poetry has been instrumental in constructing the Gulf of Poets as a heritage site, creating travel itineraries through a storytelling approach that predates the global popularity of Cinque Terre. Finally, I focus on the local celebration of literary heritage through events such as the “Coppa Byron”, an annual swimming competition across the Gulf, and the “Sentiero delle parole”, a walking tour in Lerici that combines landscape and poetry. These initiatives ritualise and recontextualise Byron’s and Shelley’s literary legacy, transforming it into an enduring cultural asset.

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## From Netley Abbey to *Northanger Abbey*: Gothic tourism and the cultural legacy of the dissolution of the monasteries

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This paper examines the role of Netley Abbey (Hampshire, England) as a site of particular importance to the rise of both the Gothic aesthetic and Gothic tourism in the XVIII century (Townshend, 2014, 378). The abbey, founded in the XIII century by bishop of Winchester Peter des Roches, like many other religious buildings, fell prey to King Henry VIII’s Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536. Consequently, the monastic life of the Cistercian monastery came to an abrupt end and the edifice was converted into a great country mansion which was abandoned at the beginning of the XVIII century. The neglected site came to be celebrated as a romantic ruin and started to attract visitors, especially artists and also celebrated authors such as Horace Walpole and Thomas Gray. According to Dale Townshend, between the years 1764 and 1807 the ruins of Netley prompted and inspired approximately ten poetic responses (Townshend, 2024, 382). In addition, the abbey was also included in various tourist guidebooks of the time, such as Thomas Linden’s, who recommended a visit to the site also due to the long-established legend of the abbey’s haunting related to the death of local speculator Walter Taylor (Butler, 2019, 3). Hence Netley ruins became increasingly attractive in the second half of the XVIII century, as the romantic movement gathered strength and people were increasingly interested in England’s religious and medieval past (Hare, 1993, 222). It is reported that Jane Austen herself visited Netley in 1807, finding inspiration for her novel *Northanger Abbey* (1817). Thus, apart from assessing Netley Abbey’s significance as a culturally significant destination for eighteenth-century travellers who sought out ruins, churches, and graveyards that stimulated the feelings of horror and awe they knew from Graveyard Poetry and popular fiction (Uden, 2022, 10), the aim of this article is also to consider Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* as a case study to evaluate the impact on society of the Suppression of the Monasteries. Namely, this novel is believed to articulate a sense of loss over the dissolution of the monasteries, which in the past had served as spaces of hospitality and universal welcome (Cox, 2019, 6). In the novel, Austen situates the narrative within the ruins of a dissolved English monastery to reflect on and foreground the socio-economic and religious consequences of the Dissolution, revealing a longstanding engagement with England’s monastic past and a sense of nostalgia for the dissolved abbeys (Moore, 2011, 57, 61).

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### **From chivalric spectacle to cultural landscape: *Ivanhoe*'s legacy in Ashby-de-la-Zouch**

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This paper aims to explore the legacy of *Ivanhoe* (1819) by Walter Scott, from the 19th century re-enactments of medieval tournaments to the cultural and identity-making processes of the English town of Ashby-de-la-Zouch, a key setting in the novel's plot. Through a historical, literary, and cultural analysis, I aim to show how Scott's narrative acted as a driving force in the development of commemorative and touristic practices during the nineteenth century—such as the Eglinton Tournament of 1839 in Scotland (Bell, 2005; Pionke, 2008) and the creation of the Ivanhoe Baths in Ashby-de-la-Zouch—and how it continues to exert a significant influence on the town's public memory and symbolic economy. It is particularly interesting to observe that, although *Ivanhoe* no longer holds the cultural prominence it enjoyed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it still plays an important role in shaping Ashby-de-la-Zouch's identity. This influence persists through the formation of *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989) and the novel's continued circulation across various media forms (Rigney 2012). Today, *Ivanhoe* remains central to institutional initiatives that consolidate its status as intangible cultural heritage, including local museum exhibitions, place-naming (Ivanhoe College, Ivanhoe Line), and heritage promotion activities led by the English Heritage association. By situating this case study within the framework of “cultural landscapes” (UNESCO, 2017), this paper offers a concrete example of how British Romantic literature can generate layered forms of cultural heritage, capable of shaping space, institutions, and collective practices up to the present day.

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### **The Euganean Hills and their romantic heritage: Past and present**

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In the summer of 1818, after spending a short period at the Baths of Lucca, Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley continued their Grand Tour and travelled separately to Este (Padua), where they took up lodgings in an old villa Lord Byron had rented but allegedly never occupied (Selmin, 2017). Nestled in the hills a few miles away from Petrarch's house and tomb, which they visited, the Euganean Hills became their home until the next season, inspiring Shelley to write some of his most accomplished works: there he began his *Prometheus Unbound* and wrote *Julian and Maddalo* and *Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills*. This last poem was the result of “a day's excursion among those lovely mountains which surround what was once the retreat [...] of Petrarch,” proving the perfect place to shape the poet's Romantic self (Shelley, 2008). As Mary recalls in her notes, the young poet would spend most of his time in the summer house garden, “which

[he] made his study,” amazed by the beauty of the surrounding landscape and fascinated by its literary tradition and medieval past (Dowling, 2008). Struck by the picturesque beauty of the place, Mary herself set part of her historical novel *Valperga* in Este (1823). Thus, the Euganean territory quickly became part of these writers’ Romantic imagination; their works from the period often evoke the ex-Capuchin convent where they dwelled, the massive castle, the green hills with their exquisite vegetation, and Petrarch’s hamlet. Today, their short but significant stay is still remembered and celebrated by the municipality of Este and other local organisations. The villa facing the Carrarese castle is privately owned but remains associated with Byron and the Shelleys and is open to occasional visitors. As part of the “Francesco Petrarca and the Euganean Hills Literary Park,” the place has been equipped with commemorative plaques quoting famous passages, thus becoming a pilgrimage site for experts and literature enthusiasts. Since 2024, the entire area has also been designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, combining sustainability, ecotourism, and cultural promotion. The paper aims to examine the impact that English Romantic writers of the second generation have had on the Euganean territory, as well as their role in becoming a fundamental part of its long-established literary tradition and cultural heritage. It also aims to address the contemporary phenomenon of literary tourism and the institutionalisation of mixed literary trails.

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