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Women Mourners, Mourning “NoBody”

Jennifer Pecora

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Women Mourners, Mourning “NoBody”

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Historian David Bell recently suggested that scholars reconsider the impact of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815) upon modern culture, naming them the first “total war” in modern history. My thesis explores the significance of the wars specifically in the British mourning culture of the period by studying the war literature of four women writers: Anna Letitia Barbauld, Amelia Opie, Jane Austen, and Felicia Hemans. This paper further asks how these authors contributed to the development of a national consciousness studied by Georg Lukács, Benedict Anderson, and others.

I argue that women had a representative experience of non-combatants’ struggle to mourn war deaths occurring in relatively foreign lands and circumstances. Women writers recorded and contributed to this representative experience that aided the development of a national consciousness in its strong sense of shared anxieties and grief for soldiers. Excluded physically and experientially, women would have had an especially difficult time attempting to mourn combatant deaths while struggling to imagine the places and manners in which those deaths occurred, especially when no physical bodies came home to “testify” of their loved ones’ experiences. Women writers’ literary portraits of imagined women mourning those whose bodies never came home provide interesting insights into the strategies employed during the grieving process and ultimately demonstrate their contribution to a collective British consciousness based on mourning.

The questions I explore in the first section of this thesis circle around the idea of women as writers and mourners: What were writers saying about war, death, and mourning? What common themes begin to appear in the women’s Romantic war literature? And, perhaps most importantly, how did such mourning literature affect the growing sense of nationality coming out of this period? In the second section, I consider more precisely how these literary contributions affected mourning culture when no bodies were present for burial and advanced the development of a national consciousness that recognized the wars’ “nobodies.” How did women’s experiences of being left behind and marginalized in the war efforts prepare them to conceptualize destructive mass deaths abroad, and, conceptualizing them, to mourn them?

Keywords: Amelia Opie, Anna Letitia Barbauld, body, Britain, burial, death, Felicia Hemans, French Revolutionary War, Jane Austen, literature, mourning, Napoleonic Wars, national consciousness, relic, Romantic, war, women

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## I. Introduction

I passed near a man who lay stretched upon his back, dead; ... I was so struck with this man's ghastly appearance, that I thought with myself, "Were I a poet, I would choose, as my subject, the horrors of war, that I might persuade mankind not to engage in it."  
*Narrative of a Private Soldier in His Majesty's 92d Regiment of Foot (1798-1801)*

Historian David Bell recently argued that the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815) were the first "total war" in modern history. He provides some astonishing numbers regarding the scope of "the horrors of war" at the turn of the nineteenth century in Europe:

Before 1790, only a handful of battles had involved more than 100,000 combatants; in 1809, the battle of Wagram, the largest yet seen in the gunpowder age, involved 300,000. Four years later, the battle of Leipzig drew 500,000, with fully 150,000 of them killed or wounded. During the Napoleonic period, France alone counted close to a million war deaths.... The toll across Europe may have reached as high as 5 million. (7)

The fast-growing and unprecedented death toll coming out of these wars would have been difficult for anyone to conceptualize, but how much harder would it have been for a non-combatant living far removed from the battlegrounds and often excluded from war politics? Due to "Realigned social structures [that] effected a fundamental division between female and male spheres," Christiane Holm claims, "in the eighteenth century, mourning became a female task" (139). But how were women to mourn the *war* dead?

The impact of war upon a nation's mourning culture is the subject of David Simpson's recent work *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*. He begins contrasting Romantic memorial culture with today's, noting that some modern responses to violent death began to develop during the Napoleonic Wars. He refers to Lukács's claim that "the European wars of the Napoleonic period were indeed the first to involve citizen armies on such a grand scale, and that

this circumstance was responsible for the development of a national consciousness and a ‘mass experience’ among those formerly deemed not worth naming” (26).<sup>1</sup> These were important changes that, I argue, were greatly influenced by women of the period, particularly the writers.

In tracing such changes, Simpson turns to the work of prominent literary figures of the early nineteenth century. However, like many other scholars who look at literature to understand mourning culture during periods of warfare (especially twentieth- and twenty-first century warfare), Simpson overlooks popular women writers who were responding to the same problematic circumstances as their male counterparts and fails to ask if women had any particular insights into mourning. Evan Gottlieb is one scholar who has begun to analyze the wars’ effects on gender roles, specifically women’s participation. “British women,” he suggests, “were officially restricted from taking part in any of the manifold theaters of war during the entire period of the conflict with Revolutionary and then Napoleonic France. If women were not allowed to fight, however, they were certainly able to voice their opinions in print” (327)—and if writing was one of the few means available to women desiring to engage in national concerns, then it seems important that we pay some attention to what they put down on paper.

Therefore, in this essay I will explore that question of women’s particular insight into the changing culture of both war and mourning in the period of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and how women writers consequently contributed to the development of a national consciousness that Lukács and others mention. Due to their marginalized position and their experience of being left behind, women would have had a representative experience of non-

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<sup>1</sup> Simpson is careful to note that valorization of the private soldier on a national and bureaucratic level was a slow process and “at best uneven” (26): for example, regimental lists began to be kept “in response to a directive apparently issued by the Duke of York to his commanders in 1797, ... report[ing] all of the war dead by name. But no formal or bureaucratic mechanisms seem to have existed for getting that information back to the families of the dead” (25).

combatants' struggle to mourn war deaths occurring in lands and circumstances relatively foreign to them—people who, as Mary A. Favret explains, “experienced war at a distance” (“Everyday War” 608; see also *War at a Distance*). Women writers recorded and contributed to this representative experience that pushed along the development of a national consciousness, a strong sense of shared anxieties and grief for the men lost from families throughout the nation. Excluded physically as well as experientially, women would have had an especially difficult time attempting to mourn combatant deaths while struggling to imagine the places and manners in which those deaths occurred, especially when no physical bodies came home to “testify” of their loved ones’ experiences. Women writers’ literary portraits of imagined women mourning those whose bodies never came home provide interesting insights into the strategies employed during the grieving process and ultimately demonstrate their contribution to a collective British consciousness based on mourning.

Authors like Anna Letitia Barbauld, Amelia Opie, Jane Austen, and Felicia Hemans all drew upon and contributed to social knowledge about mourning in their literature. Austen and Hemans, in particular, had several family members serving in the army or navy.<sup>2</sup> Thus, looking at the literature of these four authors, the questions I will explore in the first section of this paper circle around the idea of women as writers and mourners: What were popular women writers saying about war, death, and mourning? What common themes begin to appear in the women’s Romantic war literature? And, perhaps most importantly, how did such mourning literature affect the growing sense of nationality coming out of this period? In the second section, I will consider more precisely how these literary contributions affected British mourning culture and advanced the development of a national consciousness that recognized the wars’ “nobodies.”

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<sup>2</sup> For more details, see the women’s biographical entries in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*; on Austen, also see Brian Southam’s *Jane Austen and the Navy*.



## II. Women Mourners

Inviting various comparative readings with other literature written by women in the Romantic period, Austen's *Persuasion* is an important contribution to a societal discourse on mourning that developed in direct response to the wars taking place on the Continent. Consider the timing of the novel. Deidre Lynch's introduction to the Oxford version points out that "On the same day [8 August 1815] that [Austen's] contemporaries learned of Bonaparte's [final] journey into exile, Jane Austen began to write *Persuasion*" (vii). The novel itself is set in the short period of peace between the signing of the Treaty of Ghent (24 December 1814) and Napoleon's "Hundred Days" leading up to Waterloo (18 June 1815). For reasons of plot, it is understandable why Austen chose to set her novel in a moment of peace, while Napoleon was exiled on Elba, since so many of her important characters are naval officers who would have been off fighting during periods of warfare. However, her choice to set the story particularly in a relatively brief moment of peace—*before* rather than *after* Waterloo—is interesting. Austen's readers would have been highly aware of the threat of unexpectedly renewed warfare that Austen's characters could only guess at. The historical setting added a poignancy to the novel's discussion of loss and mourning. Readers knew that the characters' world was hanging on the brink of further disturbance and potential loss.

Although Austen's heroine, Anne Elliot, cannot know her future, in a famous conversation with Captain Harville she still explores the issues of loss and gendered mourning. After all, her romantic past has taught her to grieve a lost love, a man who regularly risks his life at war. Austen, via Anne, suggests that women's experiences with grieving differ from men's because, while men are able to go out into the world and thus distract themselves from their grief, women tend to be left behind to a sterile, monotonous life where they spend much of their

time recalling whom and what they have lost. In their debate, Harville has just challenged Anne's claim that women remember lost loved ones longer than men do, when she responds,

We [women] certainly do not forget you [men], so soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions. (187)

The debate continues for a few moments longer and then concludes as they both agree to disagree, with Anne quietly adamant in defense of her gender's unique (though hardly enviable) ability to mourn.

Anne's argument would be understandable in the general course of women's lives at the turn of the nineteenth century, but taken in context of the wars with France it was even more true to women's lived experience. Not only were the battles occurring in far-flung places, but the battles were also changing in the number of men who fought and died and how warfare was viewed by those involved. Bell chides other historians who "disregard the astonishing increase in the scope and intensity of warfare" in the conflicts of 1792 to 1815 (48). Earlier wars were different in that "the technology of war was still less deadly.... Armies were smaller as well" (44-45). Bell adds, "although [eighteenth-century] battles were murderous, most generals did their best to avoid them.... Only after 1792 did the frequency of battle increase" (45). Moreover, in 1793, France began a *levée en masse* system, institutionalized in 1798 (210), to build up the army (149). This trend towards mass conscription meant that the wars directly affected a large portion of society; there would hardly have been a woman who was not affected in some way.

Anna Letitia Barbauld was one of the writers in the Romantic period who acknowledged the challenge that women faced during the war due to their general removal from the sites of battle. For instance, in her long political poem *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (published in 1812), Barbauld begins her third stanza by writing about “the matron” (23): “No son returns to press her widow’d hand, / Her fallen blossoms strew a foreign strand” (25-26). In the same stanza, she describes women’s experiences of waiting at home, apart from the action, worrying about and mourning absent loved ones:

Oft o’er the daily page some soft-one bends  
 To learn the fate of husband, brothers, friends,  
 Or the spread of map with anxious eye explores,  
 Its dotted boundaries and penciled shores,  
 Asks *where* the spot that wrecked her bliss is found,  
 And learns its name but to detest the sound. (33-38)

Barbauld provides the image of women cut out from the full experience of warfare. Her women, “soft-ones,” had to resort to newspapers and maps to try to understand what was happening during the wars with France. The archetypal image of newspaper reading analyzed in Benedict Anderson’s work on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, is distinctly feminized in this poem. In many ways, this ritualistic reading of newspapers would have been the experience of any non-combatant living in England who had little to no experience with warfare or foreign lands, but the fact that Barbauld uses the portrait of a female character to symbolize or stand in for all British non-combatants is striking. It suggests implicitly that this new experience of national consciousness was more typical of women than men, more *female* in some way.

A survey of Romantic texts like Barbauld's indicates that a specifically feminine societal discourse on mourning developed in response to this "first total war." In making this claim, I am building on Esther Schor's argument that while mourning is a personal psychological process, it is also a collective, communal experience that generates a discourse among the living as well as a sense of personal and national identity. Schor writes in her introduction to *Bearing the Dead*, "mourning must be redefined to accommodate the social diffusion of grief through sympathy" (4). Literature like Barbauld's poem is certainly about sympathizing with other, imagined mourners in order to grieve collectively for the *nation's* dead. Schor concludes that mourning should be interpreted "as a phenomenon of far greater extension and duration than an individual's traumatic grief; as a force that constitutes communities and makes it possible to conceptualize history" (4). Thus, the mourning culture that was becoming more and more associated with women was one of the important forces contributing to the development of an imagined community, a national consciousness.

The increasingly political nature of mourning the war dead in this era is clear. Schor contends that with the beginning of the French Revolution, discourses of mourning began to change from "straight up" sentimentalism to sentimentalism with a political function: "The highly developed rhetoric of sympathy, which had only recently been viewed as a liability for the diffusion of virtue, became turned vigorously outward to a variety of political agendas" (7-8). The discourse of mourning that developed among Austen and her female contemporaries certainly had political coloring and consequences.

Why this politicized mourning might have become "a female task" in this era, as Holm contends, becomes clearer as we consider the arguments on female grief that Austen lays out in *Persuasion*—arguments that resonate within the literature of other women. In the first place,

Austen proposes, via Anne, that the differences between male and female mourning do not necessarily stem from any natural sexual differences. Rather than making an essentialist argument, Austen demonstrates that the differences derived from the expectations and boundaries society placed upon women. Because society limited women's opportunities and behavior, women became more susceptible to remembering and grieving for a longer time than active men, who carried a larger load of public responsibilities and cares; men could distract themselves, whereas women could only remember. Austen further developed her idea of circumstantially-driven gender differences by portraying how women, precisely because of their social circumstances, suffered separation more keenly than men. She seemed to claim that separation and absence were more thoroughly feared by women than men. In losing their husbands, sons, and other male relations, women were losing both loved ones *and* financial providers and traditional protectors. Arguably, women's losses would be more cataclysmic, more disastrous to their future well-being, financially—and thus physically—as well as emotionally. Most women would not have been able to go out and distract themselves from grief with work as men could, but they also would not have been able to go out and substantially *provide* for themselves with work in the same way that men were able.

Women suffered being left behind not only because they had less business in the world to occupy them, but also because they waited in dreadful anticipation, fearing the deaths of the men who left to fight—and the resulting blows to their own emotional and temporal well-being. Women experienced the sort of suspenseful alarm that Favret studies: “the external world is essentially belligerent and life-threatening” and thus “we must remain on high alert” (“Everyday War” 618)—especially during wartime. Indeed, women's anxiety upon separation was both comprehensive and long-lasting. At a later point in the debate between Anne and Harville, the

captain tries to describe to Anne “what a man suffers when he takes a last look at his wife and children” before setting off for sea (189). Anne acknowledges that men could feel real emotional pain in those circumstances but critiques the conditions of men’s pain. Anne argues that Harville, a man, could certainly be constant “so long as you have an object. I mean while the woman you love lives, and lives for you” (189). Men’s constancy upon separation was conditional, limited.

Furthermore, Anne implies that the separation men really feared was either a temporary separation from families or a permanent separation caused by their own deaths, not the deaths of those left behind at home. Yet Austen emphasizes the irony of Fanny Harville’s death—namely, that she was the one who died though Captain Benwick was the one abroad at war. Anne’s argument would mean that even as men faced the fear of their own death upon leaving home, they could find solace and hope in the idea that back home women lived and loved them and would continue to do so even after the men’s death. The opposite claim, that men would remember and grieve long after the women’s deaths, was distinctly denied by Anne: “All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone” (189).

The text seems to bear that argument out, not only in the example of Benwick’s speedy recovery and reengagement after Fanny’s death, but also in Mr. Elliot’s shortened mourning period and even Wentworth’s admission that he was able to suppress his feelings for Anne by focusing on his anger and on his work as a naval officer. Although Wentworth claims to have “persisted in having loved none but [Anne],” he is also “obliged to acknowledge—that he had been constant unconsciously, nay unintentionally; that he had meant to forget her, and believed it to be done” (194). Contrast that with Anne’s feelings of *painfully* conscious constancy. Though Wentworth claims to have always loved Anne, he admits more or less to forgetting that love and

appreciation for her character: “I could not bring it [love] into play: it was overwhelmed, buried, lost in those earlier feelings [of anger and betrayal], which I had been smarting under year after year. I could think of you only as one who had yielded, who had given me up” (197). Perhaps Wentworth focuses on Anne’s supposed inconstancy to avoid acknowledging his own; while his love was technically constant, practically speaking, it was not worth a whole lot during those years of separation.

Anne, on the other hand, continued to love Wentworth wholeheartedly despite his absence (his figurative death, or rather his living under the shadow of death) and the loss of her own hope for reconciliation. *Persuasion* demonstrates that women feared separation from the men they loved because women feared having to live permanently without the men. Men leaving home for war feared separation more because of the risk of their own deaths; women feared the same separation because of the risk of their beloveds’ deaths, partly because the men’s deaths would have such a tragic impact on the women’s future well-being. The anxiety was painful enough that Mrs. Croft, Admiral Croft’s wife, braved the dangers of the sea and the war in order to prevent being left behind. She argues,

While we were together, you know, there was nothing to be feared.... The only time I ever really suffered in body or mind, ... or had any ideas of danger, was the winter that I passed by myself at Deal, when Admiral Croft ... was in the North Sea. I lived in perpetual fright at that time, and had all manner of imaginary complaints from not knowing what to do with myself, or when I should hear from him next; but as long as we could be together, nothing ever ailed me. (61)

Mrs. Musgrove readily concurs that “There is nothing so bad as a separation,” adding that when Mr. Musgrove leaves for business that she is always “so glad when ... he [was] safe back again”

(61). Even Louisa Musgrove indicates her agreement with the sentiment: ““If I loved a man, as [Mrs. Croft] loves the Admiral, I would always be with him, nothing should ever separate us, and I would rather be overturned [in the carriage] by him, than driven safely by anybody else”” (72). The feeling is that Louisa refers to more than just a risky ride in a carriage. These women are so afraid of the danger men face going about their business in the world that they would rather jeopardize themselves alongside the men than suffer the anticipation of the men’s injury upon their separation. Nowhere in the novel does a male character make a similar argument.

Despite the play Austen makes at presenting a balanced argument for both male and female experiences of grief in the conversation between Harville and Anne, a close reading of her own text and a comparison of her arguments to other authors’ suggests that Austen fell squarely on the side of her heroine. Her portrayal of women’s anxious suspense, long-term grief, and hopeless yet loving remembrance supports the argument that in this historical period women had a unique perspective on loss and made, therefore, particular contributions to Britain’s mourning culture at large, contributions which will become clearer as this paper continues.

In stressing how women suffer separation when left behind by men who go off to war, *Persuasion* reverberates with a poem written a few years before, Amelia Opie’s “The Warrior’s Return” (1808). In the narrative poem, Editha, the wife and mother, has already cried once upon separation from her husband, Sir Walter, who left to fight in the Holy Lands (13-14). However, this does not prevent her son, Alfred, from eventually asking for permission to leave home as well, to join his father in battle. The poem recounts their conversation, in which Editha tellingly asks Alfred, ““And think’st thou ... with the son I can part, / Till the father be safe in my arms? / No....hope not I’ll add to the fears of the wife / The mother’s as poignant alarms”” (61-64). If Alfred leaves, Editha will be doubly left behind and have double the cause to worry and grieve



her loss; in addition to her intense emotional pain, she will be financially and physically vulnerable. Alfred, in contrast, responds by focusing on the activities he would participate in if he left, not on any sorrow he would feel upon separation. In fact, he cries over *not* being able to go, rather than having to leave (67-68). Editha caves in, giving Alfred permission to leave, while adding ““Thy mother will gladly, to dry up *thy* tears, / Endure an increase of *her own*”” (71-72). Like the women in Austen’s novel, Opie’s heroine must resign herself to years of anxious waiting either for the men in her life to return or to receive word of their deaths abroad.

Opie repeats the popular trope of the waiting, mourning wife in other war poems, as well. In “Lines Written at Norwich on the First News of Peace” (1802), Opie’s speaker singles out the “fond parents, faithful wives, / Who’ve long for sons and husbands feared” (29-30). This image appears yet again in Opie’s poem “The Orphan Boy’s Tale” (1802), which ups the ante by portraying a woman who, upon learning of her husband’s death, kisses her son, calls him “her poor Orphan Boy” (24) and then “suddenly gasp[s] for breath” (26), closes her eyes, and directly dies (27-28). Indeed, the tale of a woman who dies upon learning of her lover’s death occurs in numerous war poems written in this period—an extreme reaction to death that reinforces arguments like Austen’s that women mourn their lovers’ death severely and have little hope of recovering and moving on—emotionally, financially, socially—when their men die.<sup>3</sup> The repetition of this trope further suggests that the new sense of national community developing in this period was one of shared anxiety, and especially anxiety shared among women. In other words, as women suffered the pain of separations and the uncertainties of war, they began to imagine the suffering of others like them, as these women authors did, creating “imagined communities” in the sense that Anderson has discussed.

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<sup>3</sup> See Betty T. Bennett’s *British War Poetry in the Age of Romanticism, 1793-1815*. New York: Garland, 1976.

Some years later, Felicia Hemans would also contribute to this national female community of mourners by similarly highlighting how historical circumstances and the realities of the wars contrived to make women suffer separation especially severely, but also especially well—“well” meaning, as Anne describes, with constancy and care. As part of her “song cycle,” *Songs of Captivity* (1833), Hemans writes “The Brother’s Dirge,” a poem wherein the male speaker, captive in Africa, addresses his military brother who died and was buried at sea. Hemans’s speaker laments the wrongness of such a burial, contrasting it with his forbearers’—“warrior fathers” (2)—traditional, honorable burials at home. However, Hemans shifts the focus of the poem in the third and final stanza to the image of the men’s sister: “In a shelter’d home of England / Our sister dwells alone, / With quick heart listening for the sound / Of footsteps that are gone” (17-20). Left at home, “captive” in the domestic scene, the sister is described as anxiously waiting, “With quick heart,” despite the absence of any real hope for her brothers’ return. Hemans’s portrayal of the sister closely resembles the waiting women found in the literature of writers like Opie and Austen.

Textual similarities, such as the one above, within the war literature produced in the Romantic period demonstrate the importance of these gendered concerns regarding war and mourning. And *Persuasion*, remarkably, hit on two of the significant issues that were explored in the ongoing conversation between women authors: first, the idea that, due to their limited participation in the nation’s wartime activities, women had a unique insight into mourning the war deaths of the period; secondly, and more specifically, that women suffered the separation from and the absences of loved ones in a uniquely painful way. This was especially true of *permanent* absences, in which women participated in the men’s deaths in the sense that often the women’s futures were closed off in significant ways upon the loss of their male protectors and

providers. Because of these experiences, women were able to make important contributions to how the national mourning culture, and in turn a national consciousness, developed in response to the wars. They created a “community” of literature that portrayed the common anxiety and grief of women and other non-combatants throughout the nation, reinforcing the national consciousness that was developing in the “real world” outside of the literature.

Considering women’s contributions to the mourning culture, we are led to ask if women offered particular insights into what it meant to mourn specifically for the *common* soldiers, men who often went unnamed or unrecognized in national memorials (as Simpson discusses in *9/11*). Gary Kelly argues that Hemans, by “feminizing” history, gave “a Romantic feminist turn to Romantic death” (28), i.e., a “culture of death [that] was a response to what many saw as the meaningless mass death of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic cataclysm” (27). How did women’s experiences of being left behind and marginalized in the war efforts prepare them to conceptualize destructive mass deaths abroad, and, conceptualizing them, to mourn them? In the following section, we will see how women’s own experiences and fears of being left behind indeed led to important contributions in mourning the absent dead. Furthermore, the new imagination of the nation (as described by Lukács and Anderson) was in some ways distinctly democratized by women’s contributions to the mourning culture developing out of the wars.

### III. Mourning “NoBody”

One major problem that British mourners of the Romantic period had to deal with was mourning dead soldiers without their physical bodies. Hemans, for instance, dramatized this problem by writing a poem about a family torn apart by deaths abroad. Entitled “The Graves of a Household” (1825), the poem begins with an idyllic image of domestic unity and life: “They grew in beauty, side by side, / They fill’d one home with glee” (1-2). Hemans then immediately

disrupts the image, turning the sense of proximity into one of distance, the physical presence into absence, and the comfortable domestic into exotic foreignness: “Their graves are sever’d, far and wide, / By mount, and stream, and sea” (3-4). She continues the eight-stanza poem by describing where each sibling lies, apart from each other and from “home” in every sense. Explicitly highlighting the specific problem that mourners at home would experience when loved ones died abroad, Hemans includes in her inventory of burial spots a description of a brother lost at sea: “*He* was the lov’d of all, yet none / O’er his low bed may weep” (15-16). Hemans was one of many writers concerned with how the wars were problematizing mourning by precluding burials of lost loved ones on “home ground,” where those who grieved could testify of the physical reality of the body upon burial and later return to the grave to continue the process of grieving.

Of course, this circumstance itself was not new, but the scope of the problem was. As Bell and other historians have estimated, as many as 5 million died in Europe; more precisely, Samuel Dumas and K. O. Vedel-Petersen count 311,806 deaths in the British army and navy between 1804 and 1815 (29-31). Additionally, the extended geography of the battlefields added to the problem, touching as the wars did upon five continents. Both Britain and France sought to extend their fight into the economic arena by closing each other’s international trade. Britain captured and occupied many of France’s colonies in the West Indies, South America, Africa, and the Indian Ocean. The combination of an unprecedented death toll and the global scope of the wars created a situation in which traditional mourning practices had to be adjusted. More and more mourners were finding it impossible to inter the remains of their loved ones and to mark the spot where the bodies lay buried.

The families of the “nobodies,” the common soldiers, were the ones most likely to have no bodies returned home for them to grieve over and inter. In an early protest to the war, Anna

Barbauld foresaw the problem of mourning “the private soldier” who was not considered important enough to have his body returned, if possible, for interment or at least to receive some sort of public memorial upon his death (“Sins of Government” 313). Lacking a public memorial or gravesite, the death of a common soldier might seem unremarkable and unmemorable to those outside the small circle of grieverers who personally knew the man, preventing the communal experience of grief that Schor writes of. Women like Barbauld resist this public erasure of the common soldiers throughout the nation by criticizing such treatment in a sympathetic portrait of those who are left behind to mourn them. Barbauld critiques how, in contrast to “the gallant officer dying in the bed of honour, the subject of picture and song,” a regular soldier dies “useless and suffering” in a field hospital (313). She continues, describing the loved ones who are left behind to mourn, “We must think of the uncounted tears of her who weeps alone ...; no martial music sounds in unison with her feelings; the long day passes and he returns not. She does not shed her sorrows over his grave, for she has never learnt whether he ever had one” (313). Barbauld’s poem calls public attention to the problem by dramatizing the circumstances where a regular soldier—“a small imperceptible part of a human machine” (313)—typically would not have his body returned to Britain for burial by his family or friends, and where, due to the difficulties of communication, his loved ones might never have known if or where the soldier was buried abroad.

Putting aside the issue of soldiers who died and were buried at sea, historical accounts describe bodies left on the fields, the beaches, and the roadside. The anonymous author of *Narrative of a Private Soldier in His Majesty’s 92d Regiment of Foot* relates an instance where “Numbers of dead bodies were still unburied [after a skirmish “a few days before”]; some of them lying in ditches, and the swine feeding on them” (25). He would write of a later experience,

saying, “The day after the battle, we buried such of our dead as were adjacent to us” (79).

Depending on the circumstances, either side might try to bury the dead soldiers nearby before moving on with the war. *Bulletins of the Campaign*, sometimes entitled *Bulletin from the London Gazette*, gives accounts of officers being buried with honors in foreign cities close to where the men died, such as Lieutenant Western who, according to a 1793 bulletin, was buried in the Church of Dordrecht (Holland) after being shot “at the Noord Post” (10). On the other hand, a bulletin entry from 1798 describes how, under gunfire, “the Enemy ... dispersed in short Time, and must have left a considerable Number dead: Some were killed in attempting to carry away dead Bodies” while retreating, making it clear that soldiers could not always take care of their fallen comrades due to the extremities of war (104).

David Stevenson traces the changes in the treatment of the dead bodies in wartime that led up to the creation of military cemeteries in response to WWI. He remarks, in 1914 “The Western European belligerents quickly established that all dead soldiers of whatever rank would be buried in special cemeteries. American legislation during the Civil War provided a precedent, but there was little in Europe, where the Napoleonic dead had been shoveled into mass graves” (443). Whether the men died on land or on sea, in the Napoleonic period it was customary for the physical remains of the war dead to lie, more or less, where they fell; mourners would have had to find a way to grieve without original bodies.

This lack of bodies at home, as Hemans and Barbauld indicated, led to problems in mourning practices during wartime. Elaine Scarry explains the importance of bodies in war, arguing that it is the presence of wounded or dead bodies that “lend[s] the aura of material reality to the winning construct” (21). In other words, as the structure of war (a form of contests between nations) stands right now, injured bodies are necessary for the rhetorical “embodiment”

of each side's agenda and are a determining factor in deciding who "wins" (21). In her complicated discussion on the issue, one of her arguments is that death is "The 'unmaking' of the human being" (122) and that, with such an "unmaking," "the act of 'dying' ... can be lifted away and coupled with a different referent" (124). Restated, because death unmakes the physical reality of a person's life, what is left, the dead body, can become attached to new interpretations of what the termination of that life meant. Different national motives can be attached to that unmade, dead body; more particularly, the agendas that become substantiated in the body "can borrow the appearance of reality from the realm that from the very start has compelling reality to the human mind, the physical body itself" (125). Understanding this concept, it is not strange that the lack of the physical bodies of the dead created a sort of crisis among those who were trying to mourn the fallen soldiers. It stands to reason that, because it is possible for different referents or significations to become associated with the bodies, if no bodies are present to "lend the aura of material reality," then meanings other than the ones endorsed and encouraged by the politics of the nation become possible, as in literature that criticizes the wars because of the heavy losses.

Instead of a dead body substantiating the militant ideal "*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*" or the call to arms "let this heroic sacrifice, no matter how grisly or tragic, be not in vain," the absent body—one that does not receive public accolades that tie national meanings to it—might come to signify the abuse of the government. In lieu of finding comfort in the designated signification of the dead body, mourners might find in the open signification of the absent body feelings of confusion, anger, and a more profound, more absolute sense of loss. Thus, in Romantic-era Britain, rather than having a nationally-endorsed signification made obvious in the ritual treatments (e.g., a heroic burial) of the dead, mourners were required to reimagine the experience and the attached meanings of the absent dead bodies. In trying to reconstruct missing

bodies imaginatively so that they could come to some understanding of the meanings of these deaths and, in that understanding, find some closure to their grief, mourners turned to relics or representations that could “lend the aura of material reality” in place of the bodies. The question then arises, what replaces the original body in Romantic mourning culture and what kind of new relations, new traditions result?

One way of answering this question involves looking at the war literature of the period, specifically literary representations of mourning. Arguably, this war literature itself becomes one of the objects that replace the absent dead body in the mourning process. In artistically portraying the deaths of loved ones and the consequences of those deaths, literature calls to the minds of its readers mental images of the dead. The evocative quality of mourning literature makes it a “body” in itself. I am also interested in the other replacements to which such literature points. A thorough analysis will not be possible here, but a survey of some of the war literature by popular women writers of the period will indicate some of strategies employed by those mourning lost loved ones in Britain during its wars with France. Reading such literature, we find that various objects were used to “replace” the physical body in the mourning practices of the period. For instance, the bodies of dead soldiers were replaced by representations of the bodies (e.g., miniature portraits), relics associated with the bodies (e.g., locks of hair, belongings of the dead), and by poetic “bodies.”

The nature of the first two strategies of reproduction and replacement are evident in Austen’s *Persuasion*. At one point, Harville discusses with Anne the inappropriateness of Benwick’s desire to give a miniature portrait of himself to his fiancée, Louisa Musgrove. Miniature portraits served as “*things*, material and tangible objects” (Brown 398) that could replace the physical body its absence. Primarily, such a portrait would serve as a reminder of the



person whom it portrayed, recording some of his or her physical features. In a sort of visual metonymy, the portrait could come to take the place of the absent body. Providing loved ones with portraits of oneself in the case of absence, even the permanent absence of death, was relatively common among those who could afford it. Therefore, the problem is not in Benwick's desire to provide his fiancée with an object intended to remind her of him in his absence. After all, Benwick is a naval captain who has fought in the wars with France, and he knows that he may have to leave to engage in future conflicts as well. His line of work—"a most uncertain profession" (Austen 27)—came with a certain danger of death—in particular, a death on the sea, which would result in a permanent absence from his loved ones at home as his body would be thrown overboard.

The reason Benwick's gift is inappropriate is that the portrait was commissioned for his previous fiancée, Fanny Harville, who died the summer before. The function of the object has changed due to its history, at least in Captain Harville's eyes. He seriously explains to Anne the circumstances of the portrait's origin:

Yes, and you [Anne] may guess who it is for. But (in a deep tone) it was not done for her [Louisa].... This was drawn at the Cape.... in compliance with a promise to my poor sister [Fanny], [Benwick] was bringing it home for her. And I have now the charge of getting it properly set for another!... Poor Fanny! she would not have forgotten him so soon! (185)

Because the commission of the portrait was prompted by Fanny and because the miniature was originally intended to belong to her, upon her death it is as if it is truly hers and not Benwick's. Fanny's brother sees the miniature more as a memento that should be used to remember and grieve for Fanny than as an object to remind viewers of Benwick. The origins of the portrait and

its associations with Fanny have changed it from an object *of* the body of Benwick into an object *from* the body of Fanny. Benwick's failure to see the object in this light indicates to Harville that Benwick has ceased to mourn Fanny.

In addition to portraits, Austen suggests a textual memento, one that demonstrates the power of a copy to reimagine and redefine the original. Mrs. Musgrove uses a collection of letters written by her son, Richard, to grieve for his death that occurred abroad while he was serving in the navy. Although the novel does not provide details of his death, one wonders if his body was ever returned to Uppercross; all we know for certain is that the "intelligence" of that death did so (46)—as was the case for many families who only received word of war deaths through communications like letters or newspaper lists, which became substitutes for the loved ones' dead bodies. Upon perusing Richard's letters two years after this intelligence, Mrs. Musgrove is "thrown ... into greater grief for him than she had known on first hearing of his death. Mr. Musgrove [i]s, in a lesser degree, affected likewise" (46). The letters take on such an imaginative quality in the minds of his parents that they come to embody a memorial of a son who is actually better than the original. In life, "poor Richard" was "nothing better than a thick-headed, unfeeling, unprofitable Dick" (46), a man "whom alive nobody had cared for" (59); in death—especially a death that is memorialized in an imagined "copy" of the original Dick—Dick, now "gone for ever," could become "poor Richard," a man whose faults could be forgotten (46), a man of whom "it would be rather a pleasure to hear him talked of" (58), a man whom his mother could claim Wentworth was "such a good friend" to (58). His letters became a relic that embodied not the original Dick but a new, imagined Richard. Because of the way relics both assisted and transformed mourning practices when no dead body (the primary and original relic of the deceased) was present, "secondary" relics—those to which the emotional investment

originally attached to the primary relic has been transferred—took on added importance during the wars.

A relic, to borrow Kate E. Brown's words, "functions as a form of mourning that at once perpetuates and disavows the felt absence of the lost one" (399). Of course, any personal object can take on such significance and become a secondary relic, or, in a sense, a relic of a relic. The absence of a physical body in the process of mourning opens up a space for any available replacement of that original object. In addition to miniatures and letters, other belongings associated with the lost loved one can become the focus of a mourner's grief. A poetic example of this replacement process is found in Opie's "The Warrior's Return." Sir Walter returns home after years fighting in the Crusades and recounts to his wife, Editha, the story of "One mournful memorial" he has brought home from his fights (116). He tells his wife how he and a young warrior fought over a Saracen chief that they both claimed to have overthrown (117-28); in his affronted pride, Sir Walter killed the other, unnamed soldier (133-36). Editha responds:

O ill-fated youth! how I bleed for his fate!  
 Perhaps that *his* mother, like me,  
 Had armed him, and blest him, and prays for his life,  
 As *I* pray, my Alfred, for thee!....  
 But never again shall he gladden her eyes,  
 And haste her fond blessing to crave!  
 O Walter! I tremble lest you in return  
 Be doomed to the sorrow you gave! (137-44)

The tragic irony of this moment is that it turns out that the unknown youth that Sir Walter has killed is actually his only son, Alfred, who had left home to join his father in the wars.

However, in the absence of Alfred's dead body, Editha could imagine another mother's grief and sympathize with the poor woman. In the absence of an original, an authentic authority is lost and a representation or relic can take its place and create a new kind of relation. In the poem, the absence of a body, with all its material markers, allows Editha to imagine the sorrow of a grieving mother, similar to her but not her. This imaginative relationship is possible so long as the gap created by the absence of the body is open in some way; the moment it is filled with another material object, this creative displacement is closed off. Such a replacement occurs when Editha notices the presence of the memorial Sir Walter had mentioned earlier: it is a scarf he took off of the young warrior, which, when Editha sees it, causes her to sink in recognition of the horrible signification that her son is dead (161-68). The scarf has appropriated the authority of Alfred's body to indicate his death and it becomes the material object that serves as his memorial. The signification of this relic is shockingly reconfigured to hold a personally tragic meaning.

The thing that replaces the body does not even have to have a physical quality. For instance, the absence of bodies due to soldiers' deaths in foreign locations could also lead to the replacement of dead bodies with *poetic* bodies. In "England's Dead" (1823), Hemans self-consciously addresses the problem of mourning the dead whose bodies are not only absent, but unknown or unidentified due to that absence. She attempts to create a poetic body that people could recognize, and in recognizing, remember, and in remembering, mourn. Though Hemans does not provide individual identities for the dead in the poem, she does create a unified identity for them, one that could be immortalized in the minds of her readers. In addition, she turns her poem into a memorial for the lost dead (the first "grave" for the unknown soldier?). "England's Dead" begins by asking of the nation, "Son of the ocean isle! / Where sleep your mighty dead?"

(1-2). The speaker then suggests a multitude of places in response: in “the deep” of the sea (5), “On Egypt’s burning plains” (9), “along the Indian shore” (18), “in green Columbia’s woods” (i.e. North America) (27), “In the snowy Pyrenees” (34), and “On the frozen deep’s repose / ... the cold-blue desert” (i.e. the Arctic) (41, 46). More so in this poem than any of the previous examples, the absence of physical bodies among the British mourners creates an ironically extended presence of the dead. The dead soldiers are present throughout the world and absent only where they are most wanted, at home where their loved ones are trying to go through the process of mourning. The absence is filled, then, with the “body” the poem creates out of the idea of absent bodies of the soldiers.

More than the physical materiality of the poem, its abstract rhetorical quality evokes a “body”: after each suggested resting spot for the dead, the speaker concludes with the repeated line, “*There* slumber England’s dead” (16, 24, 32, 40, 48). The beginning of the refrain “*There* slumber” echoes the first two words of a Latin epitaph *hic jacet*, indicating that the poem serves as a sort of sepulcher housing the slumbering bodies. They are no longer separate, unidentified or unknown bodies; they are “England’s dead,” identified and unified rhetorically in the poem’s title and refrain. In unifying the dead in a national poetic body, Hemans provided both an identity for the dead as well as a focus for her readers’ grief.

Furthermore, she provided a “place” for the dead. The italicized “*There*” in the poem’s refrain is a pronoun without any one antecedent; it follows descriptions of multiple places. It is this declaration of a location that constitutes the location, at least poetically. A true physical location for all of England’s dead is not practical and now, rhetorically, the poem makes a single physical place unnecessary because the poem itself becomes the marked grave for the representational body, an immortal memorial in the sense of the eternizing conceit evoked in

Shakespeare's Sonnet XVIII: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee" (13-14). "England's Dead" not only indicates that a "body" lies within it, but it does so in a very conscious manner, mimicking a trope found in classical headstone inscriptions. Many Roman roadside tomb markers began with the command *siste, viator* ("Halt, Traveler"), urging the passing stranger to halt and consider the dead buried in that spot. Similarly, Hemans's poem begins with an apostrophic address to the "Son of the ocean isle!" (1), and it continues at the beginning of the second stanza to declare, "Go, stranger!" (5). Here Hemans offers a sort of paralleled reversal of the Roman inscription, as if to stress the fact that mourners must go imaginatively outside of the traditional mourning space to grieve for the soldiers lost abroad. In short, Hemans gives us the *siste, viator* for a martial and imperial age.

No matter what ended up filling the space left by the absent bodies of the soldiers who died in unprecedented numbers during Britain's wars with France, in studying the war literature that came out of the Romantic period, it becomes apparent that *something* had to replace the bodies to facilitate the mourning process of the griever left behind. Arguably, this was especially true for women, who were not allowed to participate in the war efforts to any large extent and who often had trouble trying to conceptualize the experience of fighting and dying in a war taking place on foreign lands and seas because of their exclusion from matters of the "public sphere."

The wars further complicated the already-changing mourning culture in Britain as it added the growing problem of mourning missing and unidentified bodies to the mourning rituals developing out of the preexisting cult of sensibility. From metonymic physical reproductions of the bodies to abstract replacements, women writers like Barbauld, Opie, Austen, and Hemans were recording and participating in the changing developments in British mourning culture at the

turn of the nineteenth century. Such representational replacements took on their own power and significance and became used in the process of grieving even when physical bodies were available; the copies became traditions in themselves. We can imagine how a reevaluation of original bodies and copies of bodies occurs by considering Walter Benjamin's statement, focusing more on the *process* of reproduction rather than the *technique*:

One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition. (325)

The wide variety of options and the ease with which they are made available makes mourning reproductions of bodies much easier to use than the original physical bodies in rituals of mourning. Furthermore, these "copies" can come to embody new meanings that the original bodies might not have: first, such copies have the potential to avoid the political agendas that Scarry identifies in the bodies of the war dead and, second, they have the potential to completely reimagine the person who has died, as Mrs. Musgrove did in her transformation of Dick into "Poor Richard." What began as a necessary process of replacement due to the lack of dead bodies in the wars became a custom in its own right, changing the mourning culture of Britain as secondary relics take on added importance and as women begin to imagine themselves in a national community of mourners, expressing sympathy for the losses of imagined wives and mothers.

Drawing on Benjamin's aesthetic theories helps us further to see that these women authors were also providing, consciously or not, a *critique* of both the wars and the mourning culture that tended to idealize them. Benjamin says that what is most important about the original piece of art is its aura, a historical embeddedness that cannot be reproduced. Applying his model of thought to bodies, in a sense the aura of a person is made up of the set of personal relationships that proceed from the body. *That* is what is lost when someone dies. And that is what copies try to recapture or reimagine.

However, even if one were capable of creating an exact replica of the original body that could be physically present among mourners, the equivalent of those relationships would not follow. Thus, an attempt to reproduce the body is really an attempt to reproduce the aura that surrounded the original, *and it cannot be done*. The very insufficiency of such attempts—such as a reliance on relics or poetic representations—points to the insufficiency of the nation's underlying mourning ideology, i.e., the notion that a present, original dead body could solve the problems of grief and loss as loved ones enact the ritual of a funeral service with an interment, honoring the dead as Scarry discusses. In other words, the insufficiency of “copies” of dead bodies ultimately reminds us that even having the dead body itself would never be a sufficient payback for the price of war, the human toll. In the end, all that these women writers can offer are memorials that require the use of the imagination in order to prompt a recollection of the lost aura. Thinking of these issues in this way, then, the women's work of replacing the absent body with relics and representations is nearly (if not equally) as good as having the original body itself present, since the body too would lack the original aura that was lost upon the soldier's death. The women did what they could to respond to an intense emotional need that would be impossible to meet fully.



#### IV. Conclusion

In the poem entitled “Anna’s Complaint; Or the Miseries of War; written in the Isle of Thanet, 1794,” Elizabeth Moody (1737-1814) writes about a woman who tortured herself by imagining the suffering and sorrow that her husband experienced while dying abroad:

O in that battle’s dismal day,  
 When thou, dear youth, didst gasping lay,  
 Why was not then thy Anna there,  
 To bind thy wounds with softest care?  
 To search with speed the nearest spring,  
 To thy parch’d lips the water bring,  
 To wash with tears thy bleeding face,  
 And sooth thee with a last embrace?  
 But thou, amid a savage train,  
 Wert mingled among heaps of slain,  
 Without one friend to hear thy sighs,  
 Or Anna’s hand to close thine eyes.

The speaker clearly agonized over the images of her husband dying without any loving attention, distinction, or respect. Perhaps Moody’s critique of the war and its treatment of the “common” dead derived from her own experiences as a woman at the turn of the century. In considering what we have discovered in the course of this paper, it seems a sensible speculation.

Indeed, in reviewing women’s war literature, it becomes evident that women were well suited to the task of mourning generally, but more specifically mourning the “nobodies,” regular soldiers whose remains were never returned home for burial. Women were in some danger of being left behind, forgotten, erased from history or the hearts of men. And they knew it. Their

fear of separation indicates that, and in imagining their own fears perhaps they were best prepared to imagine the complications of deaths of soldiers abroad because those deaths so closely aligned with their own anxieties. The reality of a missing body was that the process of mourning became complicated—there was the threat of being forgotten or becoming lost in the overwhelming numbers of other, relatively unrecognized, dead soldiers.

Women's literature demonstrates that women felt especially sympathetic towards the plight of the "nobodies." Consider Anne's intense reaction when Wentworth joked about his own death, suggesting that he would be among "the very set who may be least missed" (56). He was describing a close call, of escaping a terrible gale that would have destroyed the old ship he was captaining; if he had been only a few hours slower in docking in a sound, he said, "I should only have been a gallant Captain Wentworth, in a small paragraph at one corner of the newspapers; and being lost in only a sloop, nobody would have thought about me" (57). Anne shuddered at the idea. Despite Wentworth's being a "nobody" at the time (as those like Sir Walter and Lady Russell would have avowed), the novel shows that Anne never forgot Wentworth. Even in the years of the separation, when hope was gone, Anne kept track of Wentworth's career using "navy lists and newspapers for her authority" (29). While he may have been a "nobody" in the nation, and though his body may have been lost at sea in a gale, the novel suggests that if the very existence of Wentworth had been gone, Anne would have known of this loss, grieved for his death, and continued to love him. Even the Misses Musgrove sincerely exclaimed in "pity and horror" at Wentworth's cynical (yet realistic) understanding of what his death would have been worth to the nation when he was a poor captain in charge of a decrepit ship.

Women's distress over the potential for men to die abroad and be forgotten was such that certain tropes and themes began to appear repeatedly in their war literature, among them the

painful separation, the crisis of absence, the resignification of the dead, and the replacement, or representational copies, of missing bodies. Further exploration of these themes and others could produce greater insight into the changing culture of mourning in the Romantic period. If Favret and Bell are correct in arguing that many of our modern attitudes concerning warfare develop out of this period, it becomes even more important to analyze just what those attitudes were, where they were coming from, and how they were being expressed in the popular literature of the time. A more refined view of the wars' impact on the mourning culture in the Romantic period will enable scholars to conduct better studies into what develops out of this moment of history and whether modern responses to death—especially war deaths—are at all rooted in some of those historical developments.

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