



Romanticism on the Net

Paper

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Abstract

Thomas Carlyle characterised pre-Revolutionary France as “The Paper Age,” where paper signifies a flimsy and fraudulent culture of inflated ideas and depreciated money. Yet paper was also the substantial vehicle of Romantic literary and intellectual endeavour and the circulation of ideas—a ubiquitous, multifarious medium and powerful agent of cultural change across Romantic Europe. *Paper* means books, magazines, manuscripts, letters, but also wallcoverings, wrappings, papier maché objets d’art, and waste. This essay explores the multivalencies of Romantic paper: at once fragile, vulnerable, and ephemeral (the single sheet) and resilient, flexible, and enduring (the bound book); both high culture (Wordsworth’s *The Excursion*) and high prestige (Coleridge’s unique Malta notebook) but also low culture (playbills) and low prestige (manufactured from rags). Shifting attention from the inky message to the paper medium, and drawing on technological, economic, ecological, regional, and labour contexts of paper manufacture, distribution, use, and reuse, this article aims to theorise and apprehend anew a tactile and affectively loaded Romantic material that can be invisible and elusive in its portability, transformability, and pervasiveness.

Biographical Note

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If all the world were paper,
And all the sea were ink . . .
—Traditional nursery rhyme

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1. Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution* (1837) is not only an essential work for assessing the historiography of Romantic Europe but also an illuminating source for thinking through the complex and multifarious valences of paper in the period. Famously, the book's composition was interrupted in 1835 when the first tranche of the manuscript was mistakenly used as kindling while in the care of John Stuart Mill, the overworked friend who had passed on to Carlyle both his book contract and his research library. The anecdote graphically demonstrates paper's fundamental importance to literary and intellectual endeavour and the circulation of ideas, its ambivalent portability and precarity, and how its value changes according to the user and context: Carlyle's precious "fruit of five months' hard toil" and future canonical history was, to the maid going about her daily work, wastepaper and a useful firelighter (Carlyle viii). Less well known is that Carlyle's labour of rewriting the first volume includes book 2, which characterises 1780s France, during the calm before the revolutionary storm, as "The Paper Age." Carlyle's metaphor rests on a contentious contemporary economic policy, the substitution of printed paper money for specie:

[S]hall we call it, what all men thought it, the new Age of Gold? Call it, at least, of Paper; which, in many ways, is the succedaneum of Gold. Bank-paper, wherewith you can still buy when there is no gold left; Book-paper, splendent with Theories, Philosophies, Sensibilities,—beautiful art, not only of revealing Thought, but also of so beautifully hiding from us the want of Thought! Paper is made from the *rags* of things that did once exist; there are endless excellencies in Paper. (Carlyle 32)

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Carlyle's identification of paper with inflated ideas and depreciated money rests as much on the Bank of England's 1797–1821 suspension of the gold standard as on the bubble economics of pre-Revolutionary France (Crosby). Here the spirit of the age is papery because superficial, insubstantial, and fraudulent; the attractive simulacra of prosperity and knowledge are passed off as the real thing. As recent commentators on the rise of nineteenth-century mass media point out, Carlyle's extended metaphor indicting vacuous "monetary and literary inflation" paradoxically depends on the very "material support" it defines as lacking substance (McLaughlin 1–2). Carlyle attempts to finesse this paradox by referring dismissively to the textile basis of Romantic paper manufacturing as "the *rags* of things that did once exist," as though paper was uncannily constituted by the ghosts of clothing.

2. I will return later to recycled rags' importance to paper as the primary medium for circulating ideas, literature, art, and culture within and across national borders and the natural boundaries of rivers, seas, and mountains in Romantic Europe. What is striking here is how the ideologically loaded abstraction "The Paper Age" takes insistently specific, concrete, and mobile forms through Carlyle's many examples. There are the bureaucratic "paper-bundles tied in tape" which represent the government in retreat at Versailles; there are the "eighty thousand copies" of Louis XVI's dismissed finance minister Jacques Necker's best-selling *De l'administration des Finances de la France* (1784); chapter 8 ("Printed Paper") surveys the democratic sentiments spread through a mass of street ballads, epigraphs, manuscript newspapers, pamphlets disguised as foreign imprints

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“Printed at Peking,” and newspapers such as the *Courier de l’Europe* “regularly published at London” (Carlyle 41, 47, 53).

3. In Carlyle’s account, it is not only as the medium of words and ideas that paper is an active, material agent in society. He deadpans that in 1783, “[f]rom Réveillon’s Paper-warehouse there, in the Rue St. Antoine (a noted Warehouse),—the new Montgolfier air-ship launches itself” (Carlyle 49). This is not merely a satirical cheap shot at the craze for aeronautic ballooning, presented as another absurd flight of contemporary fancy (Brant). The allusion to Jean-Baptiste Réveillon (1725–1811), entrepreneurial manufacturer of fashionable wallpaper in the English style, has pointed political resonance. Not only was Étienne de Montgolfier’s balloon covered in a specially designed paper which advertised Réveillon’s mastery of the art (an early form of aerial balloon sponsorship), but Carlyle also anticipates an early episode of the Revolution, when in April 1789 rioters torched Réveillon’s mansion and warehouse after the owner’s remarks on bread prices seemed to argue for further lowering workers’ wages (Rosenband 483–85). Paper was not only a sign of the times but a ubiquitous, multifarious medium and agent of cultural change across Romantic Europe.

4. Technical innovations in the later eighteenth century contributed to the industrialisation of papermaking and a taste for even-textured, uniform modern papers. Traditional laid paper’s characteristic furrowed texture, with many horizontal laid lines and widely spaced vertical chain lines impressed by the wire mould, was not well suited to rendering the favoured crisp lines of new typefaces or high-quality engraved images. Kentish papermaker James

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Whatman (1702–1759) the Elder developed a woven brass mesh or wire cloth which produced paper with a much smoother surface, known as wove paper or, on the continent, *papier vélin* (“Whatmans”). From the early 1800s, the Fourdrinier machine, invented in France by Louis-Nicolas Robert (1799), then improved and patented in Britain by the Fourdrinier brothers (1806), rapidly became dominant (Hills 92–104). The machine’s commercial advantage was to use a constantly moving woven mesh bed to “produce continuous rolls of paper of almost any desired width or length” (Barker-Benfield 11). Techniques such as hot-pressing and glazing produced a polished surface that satirists identified with literary pretension and style over substance. In *The Pursuits of Literature* (1794), the Author sarcastically questions whether he should “With *wire-wove hot press’d* paper’s glossy glare / Blind all the wise, and make the stupid stare,” while Octavius later agrees that “In one glaz’d glare tracts, sermons, pamphlets vie, / And hot-press’d nonsense claims a dignity” (Mathias 75, 223). In T. J. Mathias’s role-reversal metaphor, vulgar modern paper boldly stares down the discerning reader so we avert our gaze from the content’s vacuity.

5. Such highly processed papers were one extreme of the spectrum of contemporary papermaking, but until large-scale mechanisation, the resource-heavy and labour-intensive hand production process meant even standard quality papers were not cheap; “paper was the main cost factor in printing in the eighteenth century” (Shorter; Müller 134). Thus, this highly adaptable and quotidian yet valuable commodity was used, reused, recycled, and upcycled for everything from window-mending to toilet paper, trunk linings to scrapbook content, curling papers to decoupage, dress patterns to packaging. The hoary trope of the

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disappointed author, who finds their underappreciated publications rapidly converted into waste paper, took new forms. Mrs Rose, a character in *Poverty and Nobleness of Mind: A Play*, a popular 1799 English translation of August von Kotzebue's play *Armut und Edelsinn* (1793), laments that her late husband "printed a very fine sermon against duelling, but nobody buys it, nobody reads it. A whole ream of them went to the cheesemongers for waste paper" (Kotzebue 84). Starting a new journal at Ravenna in early 1821, Byron sourly described the author's lot as "but passing from one counter to another, from the bookseller's to the other tradesman's—grocer or pastry-cook. For my part, I have met with most poetry upon trunks; so that I am apt to consider the trunk-maker as the sexton of authorship" (Byron 2: 396). Romantic writers might equally look closer to home for authorship's sexton—and resurrectionist; the book trade routinely repurposed misprinted, damaged, or surplus printed paper for exterior binding, endpapers, or concealed reinforcement beneath the spine (Beal 37).

6. In the middle ground between poetry publishing and trunk linings lies the contemporary popular media of sociable "ephemerology" undergoing scholarly recovery, such as advertising bills, visiting cards, paper novelties, or entry tickets (Russell). Only a few of the paper objects curated in *RÊVE (Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition)* fall into this category. Following traditional curatorial practice, the online exhibition privileges books and manuscripts with association value, such as [Percy Bysshe Shelley's copy of Homer's *Odyssey*](#), with the poet's name inscribed on the flyleaf (albeit by Mary Shelley), or rarity value, as with the University of Glasgow's copy of the "Kilmarnock" edition of Robert Burns's debut, [Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect](#) (1786), one of only eighty-four

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surviving copies from the first edition (Varinelli; Carruthers). According to this privileging of canonical Romantic knowledge producers and creators, paper's worth lies primarily in what is written, drawn, painted, or printed on it. As readers and writers, we privilege the ink and its symbolisation and relegate paper to a support, surface, or vehicle that carries the text. Indeed, the cognitive processes of reading text and decoding images make the medium temporarily invisible.

7. However, if we attempt not only to “see” the paper but to respond to its object qualities and their valences in the historical context, its capacity to move and shapeshift through time and place, literary and visual texts gain a new dimension. Paper can present as all surface, vanishingly thin when viewed at its edge. The attributes which make it adaptable—lightness, flexibility, manipulability—also make it vulnerable to damage by liquid, fire, mould, natural light, and atmospheric conditions. It could be painstakingly cut or casually torn into smaller pieces and collaged to make new pictures and texts. It was also used to enclose space and wrap objects, acquired an interior and exterior when folded or processed into solid three-dimensional domestic objects, as with the fashion for japanned papier-mâché picture frames, trays, and boxes (“Clay, Henry”). Better-off Romantic Europeans increasingly lived *inside* paper. Scaled up and decorated, paper furnished interior spaces, creating dramatic but relatively affordable visual art and *trompe l'œil* effects that articulated a taste for the exotic and cosmopolitan. Horace Walpole made ingenious use of painted wallpaper to create the illusion of Gothic stonework and stucco at his Gothic Revival villa, Strawberry Hill (Walpole 4, 21). Through its depiction of alpine scenery and characters, Pierre-Antoine Mongin's fashionable [panoramic wallpaper](#) allowed travellers

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and connoisseurs to recreate “Swissness” in their own domestic interiors (Seth). Still on display in the drawing room at Abbotsford, Sir Walter Scott’s eclectic Gothic Revival mansion in the Scottish borders, is vivid green, hand-painted Chinese wallpaper depicting figures engaged in everyday activities in a landscape of flowering and fruiting trees, birds, animals, and insects (“Chinese Drawing Room”); the luxury paper was the gift in 1822 of Scott’s cousin, Captain Hugh Scott, who made several voyages to China during his time in the Naval Service of the East India Company (Clifford 63–64).

8. Paper’s transformability contributes to its reputation as paradoxical, complicated. As Lisa Gitelman proposes in *Paper Knowledge*:

Consider that paper is a figure both for all that is sturdy and stable (as in, “Let’s get that on paper!”), and for all that is insubstantial and ephemeral (including the paper tiger and the house of cards). Likewise, paper is familiarly the arena of clarity and literalism—of things in black and white—at the same time that it is the essential enabler of abstraction and theory. . . . Paper serves as a figure for all that is external to the mind—the world on paper—as well as all that is proper to it, the *tabula rasa*. (3–4)

Especially pertinent for the paper objects of European Romanticism curated in *RÊVE* is the interplay between the two formats which we most readily recognise as paper: on the one hand, the single sheet or page and, on the other, the collection of sheets gathered and bound up into book form (pamphlet, magazine, newspaper, book). The large format sheet

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produced by the stationer is entirely recognisable when folded into a bifolium or pamphlet or re-encountered multiplied and stitched and glued into a book within a binding (especially when the pages remain uncut); yet the paper is also transformed by its recontextualization and multiplication into a textual body. The single sheet is at once self-sufficient and incomplete, bounded and inviting addition and recomposition into new forms. Equally, the bound book asserts a unity and authority which is only contingent. It can be unbound and rebound. Repeated readings, handling over time, annotation, and other interactions—including wilfully destructive acts—loosen pages from their stitching, boards become detached, the spine peels away (perhaps revealing binding waste, a concealed text), the text block breaks down into gatherings, and the book defoliates and disperses as inchoate sheets.

9. The format description to many *RÊVE* paper exhibits includes a variant on the phrase “ink on paper.” The generic descriptors “ink” and “paper” suppose a simple, shared understanding of universal media. However, attending to the materiality of these representative yet idiosyncratic objects of European Romanticism is an encouragement to attend to a plurality of inks and papers. As Lothar Müller remarks, “The eighteenth century saw a wide range of papers, from lightly sized printing paper and fine writing and post paper, through the coarser, greyish draft paper, all the way to the thin ‘bogus paper’ made from leftover material and used for sacks and packaging” (74). Professional printers’ inks had a different chemical composition from writing inks used domestically with quill pens and, from the 1820s, steel dip pens. Pigments of diverse colours and compositions mark the paper medium in multifarious ways, traced by various writing implements, printed by

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moveable type, or pressed from lithographic stone onto a plethora of papers of different colours, weights, finishes, origins, and makers.

10. Although paper's portability was crucial to the transnational circulation of Romantic ideas, paper also transported intriguing if at times cryptic markers of its local, regional, and national provenance. I know of no definitive comparative study of the diverse paper cultures of Romantic Europe. However, Bruce Barker-Benfield's forensic analysis of the commercial notebooks, homemade booklets, loose papers, and letters that Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Shelley created during their travels in England, northern Europe, and Italy in 1814–23, now at the Bodleian Library, is a fascinating and suggestive case study. The Shelleys' itinerancy and incessant literary productivity necessitated both carrying their own supplies of writing materials and regularly purchasing (and borrowing) paper and notebooks en route. Barker-Benfield combines the evidence of watermarks, weight, texture, and appearance when held up to the light to differentiate places of manufacture: "the Italian papers tend to be crisper and often thinner; the English laid papers may be thicker with a coarser surface-texture, whilst the English wove papers often feel almost artificially smooth. The few specimens from the continental expeditions of 1814 or 1816 seem generally different again, sometimes with a rougher surface and greyish colour" (13). Watermark designs based on the manufacturer's name or monogrammed initials can be linked with specific mills: "BOTFIELD 1815" originates in South Shropshire; "GM" probably denotes Giorgio Magnani's mill in Tuscany (14). The post horn is the commonest traditional symbol in use in Europe; Britannia ("a seated female figure, with helmet, shield and trident") dominates in nineteenth-century Britain (12). Even the watermark's

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orientation can be meaningful (continental watermarks tend to be legible from the “mould” side of the paper, English watermarks from the “felt” side, when the wet sheet is first laid on absorbent fabric to dry). Yet the market for imported papers and the Italian paper trade’s international networks led to hybrids and anomalies: an Italian-made notebook with a text block of English paper watermarked “SMITH & ALLNUTT | 1816”; paper apparently made for an English manufacturer at an Italian mill (13). Indeed, Barker-Benfield speculates that the most decisive factor in understanding the Shelleys’ use of paper in Italy was the paper supply at the port city of Livorno, whether manufactured “elsewhere in Tuscany or in other Italian states, in England or even in Spain” (13).

11. The Shelleys often pillaged bound notebooks for loose sheets and pinned or sewed loose pages into homemade or commercial notebooks. Two broad classes of paper objects in *RÊVE* are particularly illuminating when considered in relation to the tenuous but tenacious relationship between the single page and the bound volume: letters and manuscript books which document sociable practices. Both forms challenge us to think about how the ostensibly uniform plain page can dramatically change its nature and function through the ways it is used and inscribed. In its transformability and mobility, paper is at once a ubiquitous literal and material vehicle for circulating Romantic sociocultural ideas and ideals and a resonant figure for mass-mediation (Multigraph Collective 223–42). Paper does not merely support but transports evidence of distinctive European and transnational cultural practices across two hundred years. These characteristic Romantic paper forms were extraordinarily flexible messengers, crossing borders and languages, genres and

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media, and creating and recording artistic, intellectual, social, and political networks which spanned the European continent, the British Isles, and their colonies.

12. In the age of Romanticism, the letter can be an intimate expressive form which brings geographically separated private individuals into dialogue, but the formal and rhetorical conventions also construct and perform personae and professional relationships with an eye to wider circulation (Callaghan and Howe). The expected elements—place and date, salutation and subscription, address, postmark, and seal—help define and fix the genre and provide a semiformal frame for the textual content. Yet the letters exhibited in *RÊVE* are suggestively incomplete: they draw attention to the form's conventions through not conforming. Take the philosopher and economist [Adam Smith's 1765 letter written](#) from Toulouse seeking to dissuade David Hume from settling in Paris while at the same time asking for letters of introduction to help him penetrate Parisian salon culture's resistant networks. As Carmen Casaliggi observes, Smith's letter "evidences the transnational networks connecting the British community in Paris with Swiss and French circles, but also showcases the ways in which the 'sociable letter' worked: the web of correspondence co-exists with face-to-face encounters in Europe's salons." However, the octavo sheet folded to make four small pages is a letter which has "no signature, no date, no address, and no sealing," and there are burn marks and excisions. Analysis makes some of these deficiencies explicable. Lacking a street address, the letter must have been hand-delivered; the burns are filing holes from later archiving. Casaliggi speculates that the cut-out section is an act of censorship, removing allusions to politically sensitive material. There is a more mundane explanation; that Smith's autograph was cut out as a souvenir for a collector. But

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the hole in the paper shows that even the self-evident form of a single-sheet letter is susceptible to division and dispersal through the simple tool of a pair of scissors.

13. This tallies with a fragmentary [letter by Jane Austen](#) in the Chawton collection. Again, there is no signature, date, or address, and the second leaf of the letter bifolium is missing. Editorial scholarship identifies the letter as written on November 29, 1814, from Austen's brother's London house to her niece Anna. However, as Kathryn Sutherland notes, the letter's fragmentary state may stand for the common fate of celebrity authors' letters: "a resilient survival of an act of loving destruction, representing the largest part of a four-page letter, dismembered for keepsakes." The aura of Austen's autograph hand is intensified by its rarity value and leads to the sacrifice of the second leaf, and the lack of signature.

14. Transgressive incompleteness is intriguingly and performatively designed in Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau's enigmatic [note to Bettine von Arnim](#), dated July 16, 1834, now at the Frankfurter Goethe-Museum (Bohnenkamp). As with Smith's letter to Hume, the object's overt value lies in its celebrated author and addressee, here the well-travelled German garden designer Pückler-Muskau and the epistolary novelist Bettine von Arnim (1785–1859), members of an extended circle of artists and intellectuals that included Goethe and Beethoven. The sheet only has the barest indications that it is a finished letter—the place and date of writing, and the salutation "Bettine" followed by an exclamation mark (the verso inscription "Frau von Arnim / nee Fraulein Brentano / frey / in Berlin" is a necessary gloss). In Anne Bohnenkamp's analysis, "The sender used the empty space of the paper to give room to the unspeakable," and the ellipsis demonstrates an unspoken

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understanding between the two. Although the writer designed the nearly wordless letter as a complete document, only contextual evidence makes it legible to later readers. Bettine's reply shows she could decode the affectively charged enigma: "The call-out from Franckfurt was a great pleasure to me, and I am answering it warmly <...>." In Bohnenkamp's terms, "The blank paper of this one-word-letter expresses both the difficult situation and the emotional attachment to the addressee in a single shocking sigh."

15. The lack of content in Pückler-Muskau's semaphoric "letter" draws attention to its materiality; it allows us to perceive the paper which becomes a tactile souvenir and container for affect. The rough left edge suggests it was a page spontaneously torn out of a notebook; on the flattened sheet a residual grid pattern shows how the sheet was folded inward to form a small rectangle which could be addressed; traces of red sealing wax on the right edge have stained other parts of the sheet; there are pinholes in the folds. So much pressure was exerted when writing Bettine's name that the pen nib went through the paper when the "I" was dotted and the exclamation mark made. For all its reticence, the letter compressed into a name or a groan is a flamboyant gesture. The writer was short on money but could afford to post a nearly blank sheet to carry a message—a stark contrast with the average Romantic manuscript letter, closely covered in handwriting, written edge to edge or cross-written. Such disregard for the cost of paper and postage intimates that money is trivial compared to the urgent communication of feeling. The materialised sigh, the private signal between the writer and addressee, was not intended to last. That it has done so is due partly to the celebrity of the two parties, but also to the conspicuous reflexivity of the letter (nearly) without a text.

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16. The cultured salon sociability of Bettine von Arnim's circle links to *RÊVE*'s cluster of sociable manuscript books wherein the versatility of the single page is vertiginously multiplied through a strong binding and the volume's association with a celebrated person or place, thereby attracting a host of visitors and contributors. [*The Livre d'or des visiteurs a la Croix de la Flégère*](#) in the Musée Alpin, Chamonix, is a folio-sized, leather-bound visitors' book of 635 pages containing, by Patrick Vincent's calculations, "over fifteen thousand names, comments in various languages, and roughly a hundred and fifty poems, sketches, and doodles" recorded over two decades (1831–55). The Flégère visitors' book has many aristocratic and celebrity contributors, but is most significant as a record of the mass of ordinary people involved in the rise of Alpine tourism, from "the local inn-keepers, hotel staff, guides, and mule-drivers, a surprisingly number of whom signed their names in the book," to the escalating numbers of tourists "of both genders [...] different age groups, social classes, and nationalities"—especially the English, Irish, and Scottish (Vincent). The visitors' book appears robust, despite its heavy usage by many hands, but is a lucky survival; as Vincent notes, it is "one of the few extant alpine visitor books from the first half of the nineteenth century, and the only one to cover such a wide time span." The vulnerability of such communally produced records is suggested by the inked writing and drawings which show through the pages, and the wear and staining at the margins.
17. The [dinner books](#) kept at London's Holland House in the first half of the nineteenth century were also functional registers crowded with thousands of names (seventy-seven thousand) and brief notes, but almost wholly the work of one writer, Elizabeth Vassall Fox, Lady

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Holland (1771?—1845) (Bowers). Just as Lady Holland had kept a journal from 1791 to 1815 documenting her extensive continental travels, the Holland House dinner books recorded a cosmopolitan set and style of entertaining indebted to the Hollands' time travelling in France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. Will Bowers notes that the Hollands' guests "were often leading figures in European literature and politics, including Etienne Dumont, the friend and translator of Jeremy Bentham," Germaine de Staël and Talleyrand; Spanish and Italian guests also characterised the set, as well as London-based politicians. The dinner books' elongated portrait format dictated the pithy style of Lady Holland's records of who dined and stayed overnight for over forty years; "Mundane and cryptic . . . yet one of the most comprehensive records of Romantic sociability" (Bowers). This institutional register yet also records the spousal separations regularly necessitated by Lord Holland's political career. To take just the one week in 1801 which illustrates Bowers's description: "L^y H dined Lady Affleck / Ld H dined Prince of Wales" (12 February); "Ld Hd dined at Ld Hain / L^y H alone" (14 February); "L^y H alone / Ld H House Commons" (16 February).

18. When the twenty-eight-year-old Lady Holland instituted her "uniform recording system" in 1799, she could not have anticipated that later volumes would record her husband's death in 1840 and indeed her own, noted by her loyal servant Harold Doggett in 1845. But to start the first register was a statement of intent, as she embarked on a project with a sense of purpose as formidable as her own character. The ledger's narrow portrait format creates a long central gutter, where the tight binding prevents writing across the page. However, the strong, practical binding is a benefit—loose sheets would be easily disordered or

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dispersed, while the book needed to be ready for rapid jottings and revisions. The daily entries are written in a rapid, functional hand, and care for accuracy rather than aesthetics is evident in crossings-out and notes squeezed in later. Ink has sometimes bled through the paper under the pressure of Lady Holland's pen, and ink transfer shows the book was often closed before the writing was dry.

19. The Holland House dinner books, like the [album amicorum of Polish Countess Michalina Weysenhoff Targonska](#) (1803–80) and [Marie Louise of Austria, Duchess of Parma's commonplace book](#), record forms of elite European sociability and leisured cultural exchange (Rączka-Jeziorska; Saglia and Sandrini). They owe their preservation and prestige to the great names associated with them. Yet shifting our attention from the inked inscriptions to the paper, and the raw materials and processes by which Romantic paper was manufactured, presents a more complicated view of elite society's interdependence with the labour and material culture of the lower classes. Before handsomely bound blank albums came into the possession of their aristocratic women owners and were handed around for contributions by celebrated writers, artists, politicians, and intellectuals, they had passed through many anonymous hands. Working backward from the point of sale, these included salesmen in stationery and fancy goods shops, wholesalers and porters, artisan binders who knocked up albums and registers in different sizes and formats for the trade or executed bespoke commissions. Taking another step back to the manufacturing process, workers beat cloth rags into wet pulp ("stuff") using a Hollander machine, and the skilled hands of the vatman, layer, and coucher used screens (with wires to create watermarks) to form the sheets, which were then dried.

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20. A significant factor in the preservation of Romantic paper objects is the rags from which they were made. Compared with the wood-pulp paper which dominates the industry from the 1860s, Romantic rag paper was strong, flexible, and had good chemical and physical stability due to its composition from long, pure cellulose plant fibres. A crucial stage in creating high quality paper was skillful preparation of the linen, hemp, and cotton rags which made the stuff, and this labour was gendered:

Rag cutting and sorting was women's work, and it was moldy, dusty, physical work. Rags that had been put to all kinds of filthy uses had to be cleaned, made free of seams and fasteners, sorted by quality, and cut down to a size. . . . Women picked apart rags that had been chemically treated with bleaching agents, exposing hands and lungs to harsh chemics. . . . [T]he women in the rag room worked their daylight hours away at piecework measured in tons for a salary measured in pence. (Brylowe 5)

Thora Brylowe's account of Romantic "media ecology" reconsiders "the literary archive as an accretion of physical as well as intellectual labor," and she argues that Romantic authors were cognisant of the centrality of "increasingly industrialized agricultural work and textile production, as well as rag collecting and sorting" to the production of the paper they wrote on. As demand for paper increased, Britain became reliant on importing rags from Europe. Miranda Burgess points out "the constant problem of rag shortages, [was] attributed . . . to the French maritime blockade of Britain during the revolutionary and

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Napoleonic period, which prevented the importation of European rags as it curtailed the importation of European paper” (Burgess 366).

21. This growing attention to the “ecology of paper” in recent work by Brylowe, Burgess, and Jonathan Senchyne extends also to the shift from linen rags to dependence on the transatlantic cotton trade: “cotton bales sailed across the Atlantic only to be spun, woven, and sewn into cloth and clothing designed to be worn by enslaved people who grew cotton; rags from the Caribbean, in turn, were imported for use in English paper mills, and that cotton now bleached white returned as paper across the Atlantic yet again” (Brylowe 3). Thus, while the daily entries inked in Lady Holland’s dinner books record the Hollands’ extensive and highly mobile English and continental social and political network, the paper pages of the vellum-covered registers bear witness to nameless workers who laboured in the transatlantic cotton and rag trade. Did Elizabeth Vassall Fox, Lady Holland, a wealthy heiress of slave-worked sugar plantations in Jamaica, think about how her paper was made (Wright)?
22. Paper’s transformability, combustibility, and disposability create anxieties about loss, wastage, and ephemerality, whether the accidental burning of the manuscript of *The French Revolution* or the legally enforced destruction of the “hot literary commodity” of [Lord Byron’s lost memoirs](#) (Benatti). Yet alertness to paper’s vulnerability also puts into perspective the impressive survival rate of paper objects. The painstaking work of generations of owners, collectors, custodians, curators, and conservators plays its part. Yet it can seem incredible that some of these paper forms lasted long enough to enter an

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archive's protection, whether a unique, irreplaceable treasure such as the well-travelled "[Malta Notebook](#)" of Wordsworth's manuscript poems gifted to Coleridge in 1804 or mass-produced ephemera such as an [1826 Theatre Royal pantomime playbill](#) (Cowton; Watson). Paper is a paradoxically fragile yet permanent medium; compared with the rapid obsolescence of portable data storage devices in the computer age—from floppy disks through compact discs to tablets, USB sticks, and the Cloud—paper is an extraordinarily resilient technology.

23. In celebrating the durability of Romantic paper things—the still bright iron gall ink of Austen's 1814 letter, the robust rough-edged handmade paper of the "Malta Notebook"—we pay tribute also to linen and cotton rags, and to the nameless men and women who laboured to turn them into everything from fashionable high-end, hand-printed flock wallpapers to whitey-brown wrapping paper, and from wire-wove, hot-pressed paper for gift books and annuals to the humblest note paper. Until recently, "the physical bonds between clothes and texts" recoverable through investigation into the related "production and construction of fabric and paper" have been little remarked and the few textile objects in *RÊVE* only obliquely suggest this connection (Wigston Smith 48). A woman's [lace boudoir cap and undersleeves](#) in the Cowper and Newton Museum at Olney reminds us of William Cowper's sympathy and support for exploited local lace workers (Reynolds). The [heva or Tahitian mourning dress](#) in the ethnographic collections at the University of Göttingen, brought to Britain by Captain James Cook, is composed of shell, tortoiseshell, feathers, mother-of-pearl, coconut string, and barkcloth (Schaff). As the name suggests, barkcloth is a textile created not from rag but from beating strips of the fibrous inner bark

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of native trees into sheets; it is at once the product of a pre-industrial handcraft process and an anticipation of industrially manufactured wood-pulp papers.

24. Yet the significance of clothes and rags to the circulation of material texts and cultural artefacts in Romantic Europe is wittily, almost performatively, articulated by [Robert Southey's "Cottonian" books](#) (Lawson). In the early 1830s, the polymathic English poet laureate's daughters and their friends turned amateur bookbinders, using offcuts of printed cotton textiles to sew covers for hundreds of Southey's less precious books at the family home, Greta Hall, Keswick. The women adapted their handicraft skills and repurposed fabric waste from dressmaking in order to "dress" an eclectic range of printed books. Just as the punning allusion to Sir Robert Cotton's collection of antiquarian manuscripts (part of the British Museum's founding collection) hints at Southey's sense of humour, the women took pleasure in choosing prints which articulated or commented on their printed content, such as the dramatic design of black vines on a red ground used to suggest the exotic settings of J. J. Morier's Persia-inspired fiction *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (1824) (Lawson). It is also likely that the women had some understanding of the interdependence of the rag and paper trades, through their father's encyclopaedic book knowledge and their grandfather's work as a Bristol linen draper. Yet although the sheer number of volumes thus costumed connotes an impressively productive cottage industry, the Southey female circle's domestic labour was unmistakably genteel, voluntary, and unremunerated, a leisure pursuit to help while away the long winter afternoons and evenings.

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25. Southey's "Cottonian" books continue to provide inspiration for contemporary book artists and bookbinders ("Cottonian Binding Project"). A twenty-first-century artist's creative response differently draws the thread of connection between the endurance of Romantic paper forms and their fabrication from recycled textiles. When Louise Ann Wilson, the creator of the "[Dorothy's Room](#)" (2018) installation at Rydal Mount, Grasmere, examined Dorothy Wordsworth's six Rydal journals at Wordsworth Grasmere, she saw how Dorothy's everyday work with domestic textiles shaped her personal writing and the materiality of the books themselves. She found booklets of "creamy-white paper, some with hand-stitched covers bordered with strengthening running stitches and knotted in place," while Dorothy's handwritten entries share space with housekeeping lists, often related "to sewing—pins, needles, scissors, thread and buttons" (Wilson). The opened pages of the journals, which resembled humdrum domestic textiles, "a pair of pillowcases" or "folded bed sheets," resulted in the installation's centrepiece, a bed where journal extracts are "stitched into the bed linen with sheets, blankets and pillows becoming like journal pages." Whereas female ragpickers were long absent from the history of Romantic paper, Wilson's installation features the work of local "skilled craftspeople . . . including a small team of needle workers who stitched *Rydal Journal* extracts into the bed linen." By these and other means, Wilson honours Brylowe's challenge to "recast our paper archive as an accretion of labor that is legible well beyond the inscriptions on its surfaces" and thereby include those previously "written out" of the narrative (5).
26. Curated displays of paper objects have their limitations. In the conventional gallery, conservation and security protocols dictate low lighting, humidity controls, and glass cases,

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and there is certainly no handling or holding up to the light to assess “see-through” or decipher a watermark. The digital exhibition format enables magnification of high-quality reproductions and rich contextualisation, but accompanying critical commentaries only exceptionally engage with paper’s weight, texture, tactility, smell, and other specific qualities and properties. The viewer must supplement the single digital image with their memories and sensory experiences of modern papers and, if they are lucky, Romantic books and manuscripts in the archives. There are huge benefits to being able to widen awareness of and access to Romantic material culture through the online medium. At the same time, we should resist the tendency of the digital format to privilege the discursive text and the visual surface, for the image to substitute for the object. We may agree with Barker-Benfield that “information about the papers on which the Shelleys wrote must seem dry indeed in comparison to the words written on them”; yet a watermark retraced in ink by Shelley, doodling mid-composition, or the imprint of a coffee cup on the manuscript of Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, articulate the power of paper to evoke the moment of creation (Barker-Benfield 23n35).

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