

## **The 'Storied Urn' and the 'Unlettered Muse': class, literacy, and the book in eighteenth-century memorial sculpture**

Vincent Quinn, University of Sussex

Countless eighteenth-century church memorials feature wooden or stone representations of scrolls, writing tablets, books, quills, and pages. Because they are literally 'monumental', such sculptures constitute a peculiarly conspicuous form of material culture. Illiterate and semi-literate church-goers would have found these representations of reading and writing more real and immediate than most printed books, yet little work has been done on what memorial sculptures might contribute to histories of reading and the book. Accordingly, this paper will argue that there is a mutually constitutive relationship between eighteenth-century memorial tablets and contemporaneous conceptualisations of reading. In particular, I want to highlight the interplay between sculptural representations of reading and the way that memorial plaques are themselves a subject of literary commentary.

As a test-case, I will examine monuments from Bath Abbey and Chichester Cathedral alongside Thomas Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Church Yard'. The latter is an obvious focus for discussion, partly because it is an iconic poem, but also because it connects scenes of reading, and of failed reading, to questions of class, gender, and poetic production. The 'Elegy' is often described as the most anthologised poem in the English language, but I will argue that its reach is even greater than this suggests.

By influencing the wording and composition of subsequent grave monuments, Gray's poem impinges upon the consciousness of everyday church-goers, including those for whom poetry would otherwise have been a closed book. If we take the response of these readers seriously, a picture emerges in which the greatest impact of Gray's poem may be among people who read simplified or condensed versions of it in their local churchyard, rather than among educated readers who encountered it in literary periodicals. The energetic exchange between Gray's classically-influenced poetry and the more naïve forms used by anonymous epitaph-writers undermines later assumptions about the relative worth of both registers. As a consequence, the unsophisticated products of the 'unlettered muse' suddenly become available as legitimate targets of literary analysis. This in turn enlarges our sense of eighteenth-century literary culture, and its relation to the plastic arts.

Besides Gray, the paper will refer to Samuel Johnson's and William's Wordsworth's essays on epitaphs, and to art historical research by Matthew Craske, Nigel Llewellyn, Alan Bray, and Marcia Pointon. However the main focus will be on the 'Elegy' and its monumental imitations.

Vincent Quinn  
Senior Lecturer, School of English  
University of Sussex  
BN1 9QN  
V.R.Quinn@sussex.ac.uk