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‘A spectre is haunting Europe’: Napoleon’s reappearance in British literature of the 1840s

[Elisabeth Jay](#)

The Review of English Studies, Volume 67, Issue 280, 1 June 2016, Pages 523–537,
<https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgw023>

Published: 26 February 2016

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Abstract

This article considers the resurgence of British interest in their former foe, Napoleon Bonaparte, apparent in literature of the 1840s. The circumstances

surrounding his death and interment on St Helena had already given him mythical status. The British government's formal approval in May 1840 for the repatriation of his mortal remains to Paris prompted a renewed interest in this heroic figure on British shores. Thackeray, who had attended the Parisian ceremony and familiarized himself with ensuing fictional and historical re-appraisals of the Napoleonic wars, had recognized the potential of this material for anti-heroic treatment by the time he began *Vanity Fair*. However, by the April 1848 serial episode, in which the novel's narrative chronology closes down for a ten-year break, the contemporary political framework in which the novel was being written had changed. That March Thackeray had dined at the same table as Louis-Napoleon, the Emperor's heir, who had just returned from a premature attempt to claim his political inheritance. When Becky dons the exiled Emperor's mantle at the start of chapter LXIV, she serves as a reminder to Thackeray's initial readers that the Napoleonic legacy was still very much alive as a spectre haunting European politics.

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Online ISSN 1471-6968

Print ISSN 0034-6551

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