

Charlotte Smith's Suffocating Romanticism

There is something distinctly exasperating about coming across a scholarly article discussing 18th and 19th century poetry that resorts to using *Wordsworthian* or *Keatsian* to describe a theme, expression, or tone in analysis. While poets William Wordsworth and John Keats had an undeniable influence on poetry during their lifetimes, it is ridiculous that they get specific adjectives to describe their styles of writing while other influential poets of the period are pigeonholed under the broad genre of Romanticism. An excellent example of a poet snubbed from rightful recognition of the originality of her work is Charlotte Smith, who has always been tightly bound to Romanticism, especially for her most famous collection of work, *Elegiac Sonnets, and Other Poems*. However, recent academic scholars such as Stuart Curran and Jacqueline M. Labbe have begun to explore nuances within Smith's pieces that call into question whether her work can be properly considered entirely Romantic. In fact, scholar Kathrine Ellis offers a daring argument that some of Smith's prose belongs under the Gothic umbrella. I believe that unique aspects of Smith's personality, from her political rigidity to her distinct view of nature, mean her collection of poetry *Elegiac Sonnets* is not purely of the Romantic genre, but also fused with enough Gothic influence to create a compendium of work that is uniquely *Smithian*.

Before diving into the intricacies of Smith's poetry and its relationship with Romanticism, it is wise to attempt to formally define the notoriously slippery Romantic genre. A bare-bones, dictionary definition for those completely unfamiliar with the genre, Romantic literature and poetry are primarily defined by their "reaction against neoclassicism and emphasis on the imagination and emotions," with common components of "exaltation of the primitive and

the common man, an appreciation of external nature, an interest in the remote, a predilection for melancholy, and the use in poetry of older verse forms” (“Romanticism”). Another way to define the Romantic genre, which may seem contradictory given my earlier denouncement of the adjective *Wordsworthian*, is that in a way, *Wordsworth* is the definition of Romanticism. Alan Richardson elaborates on this idea with his commentary on the difference between somebody claiming “Wordsworth cannot properly be considered a Romantic poet” and “Blake cannot properly be considered a Romantic poet” (qtd. in Labbe 9). The second claim, says Richardson, is typically interpreted as “Blake seems eccentric in relation to British Romanticism,” while the first is “an argument deconstructing the category of Romanticism altogether: if Wordsworth can’t be a Romantic poet, who can?” (qtd. in Labbe 8-9). Essentially, Wordsworth’s ideas are so definitive of the Romantic genre, he *is* in a way Romanticism.

But how does Wordsworth’s domination of the definition of Romanticism relate to Smith’s placement within the genre? Jacqueline M Labbe directs attention to Smith’s influence on Wordsworth’s early career in poetry and is quick to note that Wordsworth was something of a failure in recreating the success of a Smithian sonnet with his early composition “Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep.” In Labbe’s view, “Wordsworth’s sonnet, with its layers of not-seeing and theatrical over-feeling, places itself within a mode of sensibility that draws from, yet overwrites, Smith’s as it was then read” (Labbe 2). This analysis of Wordsworth’s early sonnet is the first hint of evidence that Smith isn’t a good fit in the Romantic genre: If Wordsworth defines the Romantic genre, and Wordsworth could not adequately replicate Smith’s style and tone, Smith is distinct from Wordsworth, and syllogistically from the Romantic genre as a whole.

Departing from the definition of Romanticism through Wordsworth, there are still plenty of other lenses to use to see exactly how Smith fits, or doesn't, into the genre of Romanticism in its other classifications. Stuart Curran's article "Charlotte Smith and British Romanticism" is an excellent starting point for the grouping of major reasons as to why Smith cannot be neatly classified within the genre. One of the most crucial aspects of Smith's individuality among other popular poets of the time was the unique relationship she had with her readers and patrons.

Curran chalks up this peculiarity to money:

With no opportunities for fruitful employment outside her writing and. . . generally deprived of the advantages of a professional network, Smith did have to bend continually to the dictates of the marketplace. This experience separates her at once from the mainline of canonical Romanticism which may be accurately characterized as disdaining the public it simultaneously courted. (Curran 68)

Smith was further ostracized from the mainline of Romanticism due to the fact that "she did not have a patron to underwrite her publications financially" (Keane 13), meaning Smith had to publish her works through open market publishers without monetary and critical support from trusted private investors. These general publishers became creditors as well for Smith, a fact that "did not sit lightly on Smith's shoulders, and informed the way in which she characterized the labour of writing" (Keane 13). For Smith, writing was in part a catharsis, but her ball-and-chain as well, in which good public reception to her work was crucial for her financial stability. This tailoring to the general public was never a pressing concern for big-ticket names like Coleridge and Wordsworth, who may have *personally* enjoyed a positive reception to their work but were never under more intense financial pressures to be viewed positively in the eyes of the public. The sheer number of times Smith republished *Sonnets* is a good example of how Smith viewed

writing as something more transactional and economic than other writers of the period. With nine separate editions and a later second volume all published in under 20 years (Pratt 563), Smith was well aware that the popularity of *Sonnets* was something she had to continue to capitalize on financially, which she did through these different edits and additions to the collection.

Ironically, even under heightened restriction from publishers and financial obligations, another unique aspect of Smith's poetry is her steadfastness in her political beliefs. In comparison with other Romantic poets, "Smith's absolute refusal to compromise her convictions provides a useful corrective to what, from the prominence of Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth in the historical account of the first generation of Romanticism, has appeared a legacy of temporizing with authority and backsliding from an early enthusiasm for a political reconstruction" (Curran 70). Men of the Romantic era had an exasperating habit of declaring enthusiastic support for the ideas of the French Revolution before backpedaling madly to withdraw said support after watching the horror of the Reign of Terror unfold. Smith, in contrast, remained consistent in her political ideology without retreat. In a preface of a 1797 edition of *Sonnets*, Curran notes that Smith "remarks the impossibility of preserving the goodwill of those 'who can never forgive an author that has, in the story of a Novel, or the composition of a Sonnet, ventured to hint at any opinions different from those which the liberal-minded personages are determined to find the best'" (Curran 69-70). Published three years after the Reign of Terror ("Reign of Terror"), this polemic by Smith against her detractors is unapologetic in a way that no other Romantic poet even began to approach in the period, yet Smith had no qualms in defending herself and her past views, even if those views had become unpopular in the current time period. This sort of fiery political nature is apparent in Smith's "The Dead Beggar,"

in which she condemns the “cold, reluctant, Parish Charity” (Smith 3) for their indirect support in pushing a beggar to “mingle with his kindred mold” (Smith 4). Smith directly challenged the hegemony of the English church, simply because she was unsatisfied with its *modus operandi*. The unflinching nature of Smith’s confrontations with various opponents is something not witnessed to the same degree in other Romantic poets; for instance, Percy Shelly had to use a convoluted mythological metaphor in *Adonais* to criticize literary critics, but “The Dead Beggar” felt no need for such obfuscations.

Another distinct point of Curran’s about Smith’s individuality in the Romantic genre deals with Smith’s view of nature, a point that can be supported with Melissa Bailes’ research on Smith’s interest in taxonomy of plants and birds. Curran believes “For the three canonical male poets of the first generation of British Romanticism, however differently they construe its forces, nature is essentially an abstraction,” while in the mind of Smith “it is not natural law but corrosive individual experience and repressive social codes that abstract” (Curran 77). Most major Romantic poets saw nature as an intangible thing, and society as the reality, but Smith in turn believed that nature was the reality and society was the enigmatic irrational imaginary. Bailes’ research furthers this conclusion on Smith’s analytical view of nature through Smith’s endnotes in the third edition of *Elegiac Sonnets*, in which Smith detailed “the Latin and full common names of the wood anemone and an extended description of the clematis plant” (Bailes 97). This detail may seem extraneous, and Smith’s passions for botany could easily be dismissed as a simple hobby, but the quantifying and scientific nature of her precise taxonomy leads to the conclusion that Smith sees nature as something tangible, quantifiable, and explorable, and that she saw and defined nature in an organized fashion. Compare this calculated observation and classification of nature with other Romantic poets, who frequently employ the generalized

apostrophe to Nature, and it is again apparent that Smith is the black sheep of the Romantic poets, not quite settling under the scope of the genre.

While it can be concluded that the Romantic genre is not big enough to entirely encapsulate Smith's *Sonnets*, analyzing her poems through a Gothic lens can offer many unrevealed insights to her work. Popularized by Henry Walpole and Ann Radcliffe (Ellis 51), the tropes of the Gothic genre have been applied by Kathrine Ellis to Smith's prose, but remain deeply relevant to *Sonnets* as well. A key point of Smith's about the function of the Gothic novel is "they provide a particular kind of space in which can be acted out certain 'subversive impulses' which, in a realistic setting, would have violated the strict rules of decorum that the eighteenth-century novel . . . had increasingly embraced" (Ellis 51). Is it not clear that Smith's *Sonnets* are devised for the sake of creative output for some of her more controversial feelings? Take "Sonnet IV: To the Moon," in which Smith declares to the moon "O! That I soon may reach thy world serene / Poor wearied pilgrim in this toiling scene!" (Smith 13-14). Using the shroud of an ode to the moon, Smith is able to express her mild suicidal ideation during a period where such thoughts were seen as unacceptable. Ellis explains further that the mechanism for this removal of societal strictness occurs primarily through the use of horror to render all social codes useless (Ellis 52), and again plenty of poems in *Sonnets* offer proof as to that Smith was employing just that strategy. Her sonnet "Written in the Churchyard at Middleton in Sussex" describes in bone chilling detail the encroachment of the sea on a shoreside graveyard, with wind that

Drives the huge billows from their heaving bed;
Tears from their grassy tombs the village dead,
And breaks the silent sabbath of the grave! (Smith 6-8)

These details distract from the more controversial aspect of the sonnet: “While I am doom’d, by life’s long storm oppress, / To gaze with envy on their gloomy rest” (Smith 11-12). With readers distracted by the horrifying images of corpses being lifted from their places of rest, Smith slips in the divisive idea that she is longing to be dead as well.

Further evidence of the Gothic genre’s effect on Smith’s sonnets is her attitude towards children. Writes Ellis, “In the Gothic novel, right is always on the side of the child, not the parent” (Ellis 52). Smith, unwillingly sold off to a miserable marriage on her Father’s command (Ellis 52), likely felt a personal connection to this theme, believing that her childhood innocence was stolen from her by arrogant adults. There is no better example than “Sonnet XXVII,” in which Smith laments of the youth

O happy age! When Hope’s unclouded ray
Lights their green path, and prompts their simple mirth
Ere yet they feel the thorns that lurking lay
To wound the wretched pilgrims of the earth
Making them rue the hour that gave them birth,
And threw them on a world so full of pain. (Smith 5-10)

Smith believes in the inherent purity and justness in each child and feels that as children grow, they are sullied by adulthood in an irreversible way. Other elegiac poets, such as Thomas Gray in “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” touch upon this theme of childhood innocence, but Smith’s emphasis on the superiority of children, coupled with her personal experience of the tyranny of adults, suggests more of a deliberate use of Gothic themes than Gray.

While it can be concluded that Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* contain too many discrete unique aspects to be completely comfortable under the Romantic genre, there still begs the question as

to why this reclassification is important. In some ways, this argument is merely made to prove that adjectives like *Wordsworthian* and *Keatsian* are ridiculous to a point that they should either be abolished completely from the vernacular or applied equally to all writers, for it is not difficult to define an original style for each and every poet. Then, there's the question of whether this reclassification would even be beneficial to Smith, as she has already been pushed to the perimeter of the discussion of Romantic poetry. If Smith were to be commonly classified as outside of the genre, would there be even less study and discussion of her work? Perhaps it is better to, instead of declaring Smith outside the Romantic genre, expand the boundaries of the genre to include Smith within it. This can be achieved not only by pulling Gothicism into Romanticism as a subgenre, but also by acknowledging that Romantic ideas in general can come from poets other than the most studied six.

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