



Carlotte Smith, *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784ff.): Inaugurating the Romantic Sonnet Revival

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Outline

1) *Elegiac Sonnets* and the Life of Charlotte Smith

2) The Romantic Sonnet Revival

3) Afterlives

Portrait of Charlotte Smith
by George Romney (1792);
Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal





1) *Elegiac Sonnets* and the Life of Charlotte Smith

I count myself lucky to be the teacher of both Eighteenth-Century Literature and Romantic Literature in our English department, and thus to have the opportunity to teach Charlotte Smith as a late-arriving rock star of the eighteenth-century novel of sensibility, and also as an early, innovative poet of the Romantic Period.

Kathryn Pratt Russell (Clayton State University)

<http://www.romtext.org.uk/teaching-romanticism-ix-charlotte-smith/>



Smith's well-known biography is the key to opening up her works for students who find themselves facing a daunting schedule of poetry-reading in my Romantic Literature course. A good number of my students are single parents, and so the relentless melancholy of the *Elegiac Sonnets* seems more than just a literary mode to them once we've covered Smith's early, unhappy marriage, her time spent in debtor's prison with her feckless husband, her eventual separation from him and her struggle to provide for herself and her children through her writing, and her protracted legal battles over her father-in-law's will.

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The Life of Charlotte Turner Smith

1749 (May 7) Charlotte Turner born in London.

1752 Charlotte's mother, Anna Towers Turner, dies; Charlotte and her sisters are raised by a maternal aunt, receiving a good education (dancing, drawing, music, acting).

1761 Charlotte leaves school and enters society.

1764 Charlotte's father, Nicolas Turner, remarries.

1765 Charlotte (15) is arranged to marry Benjamin Smith (21), the son of a West India merchant, Richard Smith.

1774 Charlotte, Benjamin, and their seven children move to Lys Farm, Hampshire

1776 Benjamin's father dies leaving behind a will so complicated that it sparks a legal battle that continues for nearly forty years.

1782 Because of large financial debts, Benjamin Smith is imprisoned. Charlotte lives with him in prison for seven months.

1784 Desperate for money, Charlotte compiles the sonnets she has written in *Elegiac Sonnets*. Publication is sponsored by William Hayley, a published poet and neighbour of the Turners.



1784 The success of *Elegiac Sonnets* releases Benjamin Smith from prison and the family moves to Dieppe in France, returning to England in 1785.

1787 Charlotte leaves Benjamin Smith without a legal agreement, so that he continues to have a claim on her earnings.

1788-1798 Charlotte writes and publishes 10 novels to support herself and her twelve children.

1992/93 radical political writing (*Desmond/The Emigrants*)

1795 Charlotte successfully turns to writing for children and adolescents.

1799 Charlotte unsuccessfully turns to writing for the theatre.

1806 February: Benjamin Smith dies. October: Charlotte Smith dies.

Fletcher, Lorraine. *Charlotte Smith: A Critical Biography*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.



WORKS BY CHARLOTTE SMITH (1)

- 1784 *Elegiac Sonnets and Other Essays.*
Subsequent editions: 1784 (2nd), 1786 (3rd), 1786 (4th),
1789 (5th), 1792 (6th), 1795 (7th), 1797 (8th, 2 vols.), 1800
(9th, 2 vols.), 1811 (10th, 2 vols.), 1827 (comprised in 1 vol.)
- 1785 *Manon L'Escaut* (translated from the French of Abbé
Prevost)
- 1786 *Romance of Real Life* (translated from the French of Les
Causes Célébres)
- 1788 *Emmeline; or, The Orphan of the Castle; a Novel*
- 1789 *Ethelinde; or, The Recluse of the Lake*
- 1791 *Celestina; a Novel*
- 1792 *Desmond; a Novel*
- 1793 *The Emigrants; a poem, in two books*
- 1793 *The Old Manor House; a Novel*
- 1794 *The Wanderings of Warwick*
- 1794 *The Banished Man*



WORKS BY CHARLOTTE SMITH (2)

- 1795 *Rural Walks: in dialogues intended for the use of young persons*
- 1795 *Montalbert; a Novel*
- 1796 *Rambles Further: a continuation of Rural Walks: in dialogues intended for the use of young persons*
- 1796 *A Narrative of the loss of the Catherine, Venus and Piedmont Transports, and the Thomas, Golden Grove and Aeolus Merchantships near Weymouth*
- 1796 *Marchmont; a Novel*
- 1798 *Minor Morals, interspersed with sketches of natural history, historical anecdotes, and original stories*
- 1798 *The Young Philosopher, a Novel*
- 1799 *Letters of a Solitary Wanderer, containing narratives of various descriptions*
- [1799] *What Is She? a comedy, in five acts, as performed at the Theatre Royal, Covent-Garden*



WORKS BY CHARLOTTE SMITH (3)

- 1804 *Conversations, Introducing Poetry; chiefly on subjects of natural history for the use of children and young persons*
- 1806 *History of England, from the earliest records, to the Peace of Amiens; in a series of letters to a young lady at school*
- 1807 *Beachy Head, with other poems* (incomplete, posthumous)
- 1807 *The Natural History of Birds, intended chiefly for young persons* (posthumous)

Editions:

Stuart Curran, ed., *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Stuart Curran, General Editor, *The Works of Charlotte Smith*, Vols. 1-14. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005-2007.



ELEGIAC SONNETS,

AND

OTHER ESSAYS.

By CHARLOTTE SMITH,
OF
BIGNOR PARK, IN SUSSEX.

THE SECOND EDITION.

CHICHESTER:
PRINTED BY DENNETT JAQUES
AND SOLD BY
BODSLEY, GARDNER, BALDWIN, AND BEW, LONDON.

MDCCLXXXIV.

ELEGIAC SONNETS,

AND

Other Poems,

BY

CHARLOTTE SMITH.

COMPRISED IN ONE VOLUME.

LONDON:
PUBLISHED BY JONES & COMPANY,
3, ACTON PLACE, KINGSLAND ROAD.

1827.

(36 sonnets -----> 92 sonnets)



SONNET I

THE partial Muse, has from my earliest hours,
Smil'd on the rugged path I'm doom'd to tread,
And still with sportive hand has snatch'd wild flowers,
To weave fantastic garlands for my head:
But far, far happier is the lot of those
Who never learn'd her dear delusive art;
Which, while it decks the head with many a rose,
Reserves the thorn, to fester in the heart.
For still she bids soft Pity's melting eye
Stream o'er the ills she knows not to remove,
Points every pang, and deepens every sigh
Of mourning friendship or unhappy love.
Ah! then, how dear the Muse's favours cost,
If those paint sorrow best--who feel it most!



SONNET XXXII.

TO MELANCHOLY. *Written on the banks of the Arun, Oct. 1785.*

WHEN latest Autumn spreads her evening veil,
 And the grey mists from these dim waves arise,
 I love to listen to the hollow sighs,
Through the half-leafless wood that breathes the gale:
For at such hours the shadowy phantom, pale,
 Oft seems to fleet before the poet's eyes;
 Strange sounds are heard, and mournful melodies,
As of night wanderers, who their woes bewail
Here, by his native stream, at such an hour,
 Pity's own Otway I methinks could meet,
 And hear his deep sighs swell the sadden'd wind!
O Melancholy!--such thy magic power,
 That to the soul these dreams are often sweet,
 And sooth the pensive visionary mind!



Focus of interest:

transformation of private/individual experience
into art/literary communication

> life vs. art

> expression (innovation/originality) vs. tradition

Expression:

1) Addressing the World (25x)

(2-6, 8, 11, 26, 28, 30, 32-35, 39, 41, 47, 57, 72, 77, 79, 80, 82, 84, 89, 90)

2) Addressing Persons (12x)

(10, 18-20, 29, 34, 37, 48, 60, 65, 73, 76)

3) Written in and about Places (17x)

(12, 31, 32, 42, 44-46, 49, 62, 64, 66, 68, 69, 71, 72, 86, 92)



4) Sonnets from Charlotte Smith's novels (15x)

40 (*Emmeline*), 49-53 (*Celestina*), 61-62 (*The Old Manor House*),
64 (*The Banished Man*), 66-67 (*Montalbert*), 76 (*Marchmont*),
85-87 (*The Young Philosopher*)

5) Early sonnets explicitly picking up literary models (10x)

13-16 ("From Petrarch")

17 ("From the thirteenth cantata of Metastasio")

21-25 ("Supposed to be written by Werther")



Formal Variety:

(Sonnet: 14 lines, iambic pentameter, * = turn/*volta*)

Shakespearean Sonnets

(abab cdcd efef*gg):

1, 2, 4-7, 10, 11, 13, 15-19, 21-26, 28, 30, 33, 35, 36, 40, 53, 55, 58, 60-64, 67-68, 71, 75-76, 78, 80 (40x)

Petrarchan Sonnets

(abba abba*cde cde or varying sestet form): 32 (1x)

Irregular/mixed:

3, 8-9, 12, 14, 20, 27, 29, 31, 34, 37-39, 41-52, 54, 56-57, 59, 65-66, 69-70, 72-74, 76, 77, 79, 81-92 (51x)

Cf. Jacqueline M. Labbe, "Introduction." *The Works of Charlotte Smith*.
Vol. 14: *Elegiac Sonnets, Volumes I and II, The Emigrants, Beachy Head: With other Poems, Uncollected Poems*. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007: vii-xxiii/1-3.



SONNET XCII.

Written at Bignor Park in Sussex, in August, 1799.

LOW murmurs creep along the woody vale,
The tremulous aspens shudder in the breeze,
Slow o'er the downs the leaden vapours sail,
While I, beneath these old paternal trees,
Mark the dark shadows of the threaten'd storm,
As gathering clouds o'erveil the morning sun;
They pass! – But oh! ye visions bright and warm
With which even here my sanguine youth begun,
Ye are obscured forever! – And too late
The poor slave shakes the unworthy bond away
Which crush'd her! – Lo! the radiant star of day
Lights up this lovely scene anew – My fate
Nor hope nor joy illumines – Nor for me
Return those rosy hours which here I used to see.



2) The Romantic Sonnet Revival

Paul Oppenheimer, *The Birth of the Modern Mind: Self, Consciousness, and the Invention of the Sonnet*. New York/Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989.

Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjur'd Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1986.

Early Modern English Sonnetry

Influence of Francesco Petrarca from Italy > Petrarchism, the courtly makers:
Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-42); Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1516/17-47)
Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86), *Astrophel and Stella* (1580s)
Sir Edmund Spenser (1552/53-99), *Amoretti* (1595)

William Shakespeare (1564?-1616), *Sonnets* (1609)
John Donne (1572-1631), *Holy Sonnets* (1633)
John Milton (1608-74), *Sonnets*



Rejection of the Sonnet in Neoclassicism (c. 1700-45)

- heroic couplets vs. the sonnet
- *A Dictionary of the English Language* by Samuel Johnson (1755):
Sonnet. n.s. [*sonnet*, French; *sonetto*, Italian.]
 1. A short poem consisting of fourteen lines, of which the rhymes are adjusted by a particular rule. It is not very suitable to the English language, and has not been used by any man of eminence since Milton.

vs.

The Romantic Sonnet Revival

“Sonnets of **sensibility** flooded forth like tears. Starting in the 1780s and continuing for some four decades of rediscovery, this most exacting small form of the British tradition was bent, stretched, reshaped, rethought. Its rebirth coincides with the rise of a definable woman’s literary movement and with the beginnings of **Romanticism**. The palm in both cases should go to Charlotte Turner Smith.” (Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986: 30)



Famous Romantic Sonnets:

Charlotte Smith, “Written on the Sea Shore, October 1784” (XII),
“Written in the Church-yard at Middleton in Sussex” (XLIV)

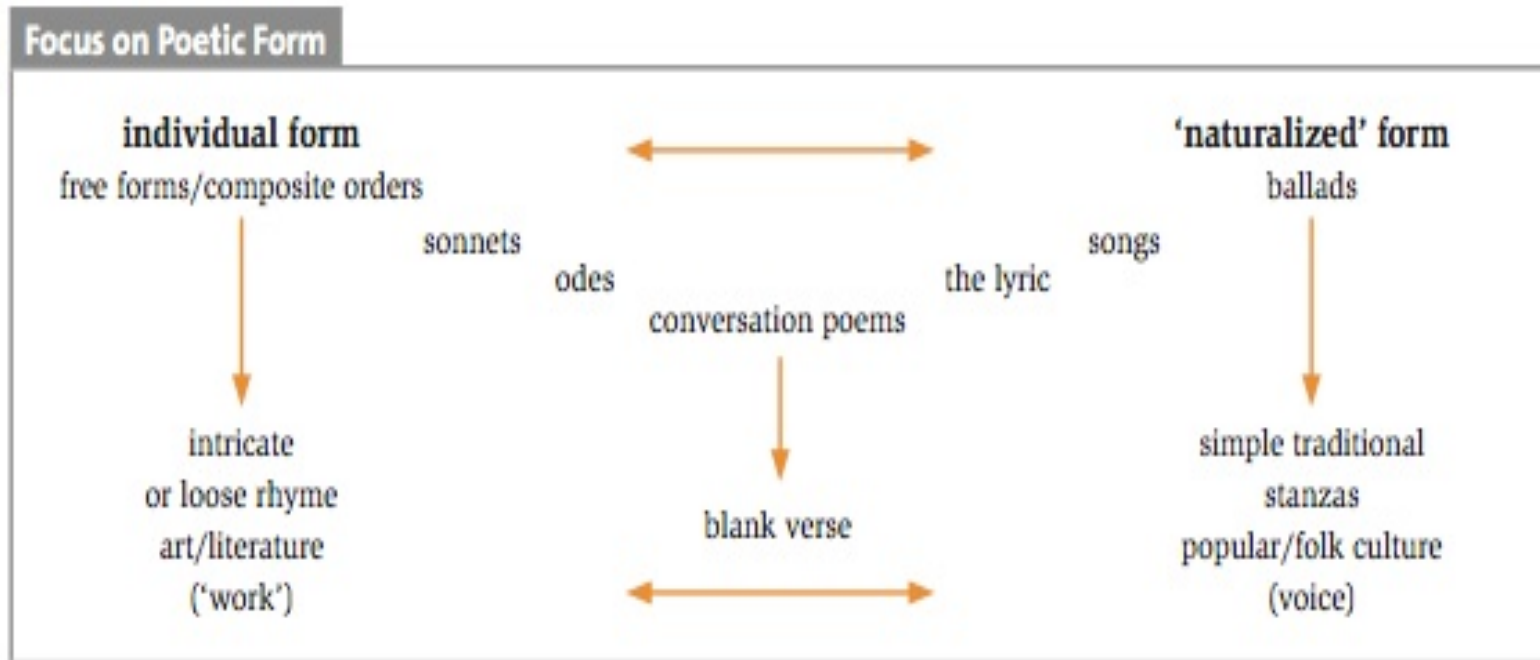
William Wordsworth, “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge,
September 3, 1802”, “The World is too much with us” (1807),
“Nuns fret not at their convent’s narrow room” (1807),
“Scorn not the Sonnet” (1827)

Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias” (1818), “Ode to the West
Wind” (1819), “Sonnet: England in 1819”

John Keats, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” (1816),
“When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be” (1818),
“If By Dull Rhymes Our English Must Be Chained” (1819)



Placing the Sonnet



From: Christoph Reinfandt, "Romanticism." In: Martin Middeke et al., eds., *English and American Studies: Theory and Practice*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2012: 46-55, 52. See also Christoph Reinfandt, *Englische Romantik: Eine Einführung*. Berlin: E. Schmidt, 2008: 71-130.



3) Afterlives

Wordsworth on Charlotte Smith:

“a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be acknowledged or remembered”

(in a footnote on “Stanzas Suggested in a Steamboat off St. Bee’s Head, 1833)

“Wordsworth was less innovative than was once assumed, he and Charlotte were developing pastoral and paring down diction simultaneously.”

(Fletcher 1998, 334)

See also Jacqueline Labbe, *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry, and the Culture of Gender*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003; “Smith, Wordsworth, and the Model of the Romantic Poet.” *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* 51, 2008 (web publication); *Writing Romanticism: Charlotte Smith and William Wordsworth, 1784-1807*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Charlotte Smith was the first poet in England whom in retrospect we would call Romantic. (Curran 2003, xix)



“The sonnet has many things going for it. It is concise enough to allow memorability, prescriptive enough to interest both the amateur and the professional poet, not so stringent as to be tedious (as can happen with its also-rans, the sestina and the villanelle), and it looks solidly, comfortingly square on the page. Its turn (...) seems to match our need to blink, have second thoughts, and come again, askance, or unstuck. You know where you are with a sonnet, though not necessarily where you are going (...) That the hardy sonnet form has continues to hold the thoughts of some of our greatest poets, showcases how such a small space can contain so much, and cocks a mocking snook at Johnson’s *Dictionary*’s dismissal of the form as ‘not very suitable to the English language.’”

Nick Laird, “In Small Packages.” *Times Literary Supplement* May 18 (2001): 24.



The Recipe

'A sonnet tells me nothing but itself',
as William Carlos Williams liked to say –
somewhat perversely lifting from the shelf
a pattern even free verse must obey.
Your sonnet's eight and six are sacrosanct;
the greatest chef would hardly dare to alter
the ancient taste for eight lines neatly ranked –
then six from what Italians call the *volta*.
A rhyme scheme down the side is *de rigueur*.
Elizabethan maybe – or Petrarchan.
And cooks from Spenser on will all concur
the sonnet is the dish to make your mark in.
By God, we're there and, yes, you're doing fine.
And now, like pepper, add the fourteenth line.

From: Geoffrey Howe, *Darker and Lighter* (2001)



Thank
you!