Charlotte Smith in British Romanticism

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Jacqueline Labbe

In cheerless solitude, bereft
Of youth and health, thou still art left,
  When hope and fortune have deceived me;
Thou, far unlike the summer friend,
Did still my falt'ring steps attend,
  And with thy plaintive voice relieved me.

And as the time ere long must come
When I lie silent in the tomb,
  Thou wilt preserve these mournful pages;
For gentle minds will love my verse,
And Pity shall my strains rehearse,
  And tell my name to distant ages.[1]

When Charlotte Smith died, 202 years ago, her reputation was established as a poet and novelist of sensibility. Keen readers appreciated her sharp politics and her flair with poetic structure; most had enjoyed her semi-Gothic, increasingly real-world plots throughout the 1790s, while her poetry had moved on from establishing the parameters of a Romantic genre to interrogating Romantic form and structure towards the end of her life. As an author, she was a thorough and well-informed businesswoman as well as an innovator and compelling storyteller: her letters show her voluminous correspondence with almost all of her publishers (with the exception of Richard Phillips, who disposed of her letters) and her desire to influence almost every level of the publication process, down to page layout and certainly including payment. Her self-definition as a writer extended to viewing her publishers as her bankers: so thoroughly did she feel a part of their world, she saw nothing unusual in drawing on her publishers not only for advances on money owed or expected to be earned, but also in using them as guarantors for loans and drafts. Although her publishers did not always share her conviction that this was justified behaviour, Smith's letters show her again and again chastising them for letting her down, casting them as ungentlemanly and unreliable, and then backtracking swiftly to regain their confidence and custom. What emerges from the correspondence is Smith's complete

self-identification as a writer, which chimes in interesting ways with her readers' identification of her as an author. Bound up in words and print, the Smith we know today is shaped by what, and how, she wrote.

This collection of essays pulls together many Smiths. For the first time in one volume we read of her as novelist, poet, playwright, letter-writer – and literary icon, gaining and then losing a posthumous identity through how others wrote about her. Perhaps because of the ways in which she has subsequently been recovered – moving from minor novelist and pre-Romantic poet to proto-feminist, 'personal is political' figurehead, to central 1790s novelist and essential Romantic poet – Smith occupies several different rhetorical positions. This can be seen, for instance, in how the several editors of her novels and poetry have read and presented her, as well as how she writes and presents herself. Smith, significantly, composes herself anew according to genre; readers both recognize and complicate this process. Consider, for instance, the debates surrounding the novel and romance in the late eighteenth century. This is the literary context for a novel like *The Old Manor House* (1793), usually designated a romance with Gothic elements. It is no surprise if a novelist as skilled and perceptive as Smith, however, uses her text both to plot a story and to reflect on the narrative devices available to and inherent in novel-writing. Consequently, in my edition of Smith's *The Old Manor House*,[2] I identified what I saw as Smith's complex net of metaphoricity, and argued that she preserves a detachment that allows her to explore the possibilities of genre. Unlike some of her other novels, *The Old Manor House* dispenses with the thinly-disguised self-portraits that readers and critics alike have found intrusive, and instead uses imagery to comment on the implausibility of legal, cultural and social norms. But when I turned to editing Smith's poetry, it became apparent that the detached but sharply aware Smith of *The Old Manor House* does not inhabit the poetry. Rather, Smith here creates a web of subjective narrators, held together by an underlying referral to the poet as a real woman with real sorrows. More than simply self-portraits in the manner of Mrs Stafford in *Emmeline* (1788), and different altogether to the objective voice of *The Old Manor House*, Smith's poetic speaker(s) function as extensions of a thoroughly poeticized subjectivity: that is, a subjectivity both created by and dependent on poetry. In this way Smith exploits the possibilities of genre as she does in her novels, but to a different end. Put simply, writing in different genres allows Smith to enlarge her rendering of subjectivity; reading her different works complicates understandings of her persona as an expression of gendered experience. This emerges even more strongly in surveying the variety of editorial approaches to 'Mrs Smith'.

Over the years different editors of Smith have characterized her work in ways that reflect both the progress of feminist criticism and the changing assumptions about Smith's own place in the canon. When Anne Ehrenpreis edited *The*

Old Manor House in 1969 and *Emmeline* in 1971 for Oxford World Classics,[3] Smith was considered to be one of the 'minor' novelists (much as Bishop Hunt's valuable and underappreciated 1971 article 'Wordworth and Charlotte Smith' could only conclude that Smith was the lesser artist, despite the clear affinities between their works) and, as such, Ehrenpreis spends much of the Introduction to *Emmeline*, for instance, tracing similarities between Smith's novel and her forebear Fanny Burney's *Cecilia* as well as her descendant Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. For the rest of the Introduction she follows a plot-based summary that recognizes the popularity of Smith's first novel but does not claim much significance for the novel until the last paragraph, when it is stated that Smith 'broke new ground' with her 'innovations' such as her 'use of her own poetry within a prose narrative, and her sensitive description of landscape',[4] both aspects that subsequent literary scholars make much of. For Ehrenpreis, Smith is 'Mrs Smith' to the end.

By the time of Janet Todd's Pandora edition of *The Old Manor House* (1987), one of the series 'Mothers of the Novel',[5] 'Mrs Smith' has transmuted into 'Charlotte Smith', and details of her life make their way into a discussion of the work, specifically to situate her as a woman writer struggling against an oppressive society. Todd's necessarily brief Introduction nonetheless sees Smith as a more significant literary figure than did Ehrenpreis's, concentrating more heavily on themes and tropes rather than simply plot, and tracing her interest in social commentary 'in novel after novel'.[6] But for both, Smith functions solely as author; by this I mean that neither editor explores Smith's narrator as a persona, but rather, by implication, situate 'her' as a direct reflection of the author. However, in Todd's and Antje Blank's edition of *Desmond* (1792),[7] an interesting change has taken place: Smith is 'Charlotte' when the editors sketch out her life, but 'Smith' when they turn to her as author; the Introduction (with the luxury of space denied Todd in the Pandora edition) treats her seriously as a major novelist and an innovator, and ample discussion of plot, thematics, history, and structure are offered. Smith is still contextualized as a woman writer, but less as an individual beating against the storm, and more as a fully-informed and skilful writer, one who 'handles' her characters and 'ensure[s] that the romance plot of *Desmond* embodied a political argument in its own right' in order to 'stay true to her progressive beliefs'.[8] While little is made of the constructed nature of the narrator, nonetheless implicitly this edition sees Smith as an author working creatively with her text.

For these editors, Smith the novelist may be derivative, innovative, courageous, historical, well-informed, skilful, reflective, etc; her identity moves from traditionally other-defined ('Mrs Smith') to individualized and authoritative ('Smith'); her novels from 'minor' to central. But it is significant that no editor spends much time exploring how Smith uses voice and personality in her construc-

tion of her narrator. Certainly, most at least mention her use of autobiographical details in her development of her characters, from the 'plainly confessional' self-portrait of Mrs C. Stafford in *Emmeline* to the children named after three of her own in *Desmond*. But this is not the same as investigating the figure of the narrator. By privileging the person of the author in their introductions, editors have done one of two things: imply an identification between author and speaker, or simply ignore the possibility that the narrator could be anyone other than the author. In my own edition of *The Old Manor House*, I used the Introduction to provide a short biography, explore certain themes, and introduce the idea that for Smith, politics, law, and genre itself expand beyond their own parameters into metaphor; in doing so she 'engag[es] with the abstracts relied on by society and reveal[s] them as constructs, as conceits .... as the thematics whereby a culture defines, and confines, itself'.[9] *My* only nod to the separation of author and narrator occurs obliquely, when I note Smith's 'repeated appeals to her readers *in her own voice* embedded in works of fiction and the created scenario' (emphasis added).[10] So at some point I must have become aware that to talk about the author is not the same as discussing the device of the narrator, an obvious point perhaps, but one often elided, especially when the author is female.

Significantly, editions of Smith's poetry delve much deeper into the identity of the speaker of the poetry. This is partly because her poetry, especially but not exclusively the sonnets, offers a fully-fledged Romantic subjectivity, an 'I' predicated on an acknowledgement of familiarity we are used to from reading Wordsworth and Coleridge, following their leads and accepting that, for instance, 'Frost at Midnight' is 'about' Coleridge's own reflections, and 'Tintern Abbey' is 'about' what happens when Wordsworth revisits the banks of the Wye. Similarly, editors of Smith's poetry (and likewise critics), conclude that the speaker of Smith's poetry is, indeed, Smith (most overlook, as Stuart Curran does not, the numerous sonnets that clearly ventriloquize another speaker, such as the Werter sonnets). In a trade press edition, the editor Judith Willson is insistent that 'Smith's sonnets of loss and solitude were particularly expressive of a female character', that in the poems' 'formal skill there is an obvious sense in which a woman is here consciously appropriating the poetic role', that 'Smith can be seen finding a language for female experience within poetic conventions'.[11] Even for Curran, the ventriloquized sonnets 'revers[e] traditional gender roles':[12] the speaker is still feminine even if the source-text features a masculine 'I'. Whereas editors of the novels tend to overlook the presence of a narrator, editors of the poetry have tended to see only one narrator, and that is the poet herself, endlessly returning to the Self in her explorations of 'woman's position'. It is the actuality of the author, therefore, that occludes explorations of the speaker or narrator (an actuality, I would add, that in the poetry at least Smith is complicit with). The only remaining question, in this scenario, is the personality of the actual-

ized author, since, as my brief overview has suggested, for editors of the novels Smith is an increasingly astute and intelligent user of tropes, interventionist in the formation of literary histories, and chronicler of manners, mores, and events. For editors of the poetry, Smith is a woman speaking from a specifically female position of need, loss, and sorrow, less an interventionist than a victim, less a chronicler than an *experiencer* of events.

What is striking about this personality map are its irresolvable contradictions. The author/writer thus presented occupies multiple, almost mutually exclusive positions. Very few Smith scholars work actively on both the novels and the poetry, and consequently we have been learning about two separate Smiths, each closely linked to the genre she writes in, neither closely linked to the other. Because the novel during the Romantic period is undergoing an extraordinary amount of change and innovation, as it moves closer to its modern form, editors of the novels (myself included) tend to focus on Smith's techniques and innovations, her use of tropes and themes, her facility with genres and description. Conversely, because Romantic poetry in the Smithian tradition is so closely tied up with explorations of selfhood and subjectivity, memory and a personalized past, editors of the poetry tend to present it as reflective of a personalized state of mind, of 'woman's' experience, treating its manifold themes and narratives as, finally, reducible to and manifested from Smith's life. Is it all to do with inherent qualities of genre, or is it more to do with the expectations we as readers bring to different genres? Genre, it seems, carries a greater force in constructing our preconceptions of identity than has been recognized, and Smith is a case in point, a case we can crack by studying closely Smith's style and techniques *across* genres. It is probably not entirely inaccurate to characterize the poetry as 'personal' and the novels as, somehow, less so. And yet, the Werter or Petrarch sonnets, which Curran sees as 'reversing ... traditional gender roles', that is, replacing the male speaker asserting love and desire with a female one, are palpably about performance: not Smith taking Werter's position, but Smith the author writing a poem about Werter, spoken by Werter, expressive of Werter's sorrows and not somehow disguising Smith's own. Underlying these sonnets is a bedrock of art and artifice, not authenticity and sincerity. Editorial efforts to uncover the real Charlotte Smith, then, have led to enhanced understandings of genre and expectation, subjectivity and faithfulness. And, as the essays in this volume show, there are, fruitfully, myriad Smith personae to complement and enhance her thematics and imagery. By grouping the essays according to genre, while simultaneously addressing nearly all the forms in which Smith wrote, this volume invites the scrutiny across generic borders that leads to the next stage in Smith studies: her position as a major Romantic-period writer who happens to be female.

As Kerri Andrews notes in her essay, Smith understood the value of the autobiographical, but she made a much more nuanced use of the self than was the

norm, moving beyond a simple presentation of a unified subjectivity. Smith was, vitally, aware of the ramifications of being read; she thus constructed a self to *be* read, using personal and historical detail in the service of such structural aspects as meter. The 'inclusion of self' becomes 'an act of defiance', as Smith finds ways to extend the autobiographical into the metaphorical. As she is so well able to do with cultural mores such as primogeniture, Smith transforms the poetry of complaint into a poetics of plaintiveness, even as she extends the structural limitations of the sonnet from within. Ultimately, 'Smith's autobiographical incursions' bridge the old and the new, 'older poetic forms and an emerging Romantic voice'. Crucially, Smith 'negotiates' (with) autobiography, treating it as terrain to be explored as well as a kind of feint for something beyond itself. This notion that the self operates at a structural level within poetry finds play in Dahlia Porter's treatment of *Conversations Introducing Poetry* (1804) as a forerunner of the self-(re)collection evident in *Beachy Head* (1807). These late works push genre in new directions even as they function to provide Smith with a forum in which to examine and remember her life of work. Porter sees *Conversations* as heralding a new kind of hybrid text, wherein the narration facilitates the poetry rather than the poetry acting merely as ornament. Arguing that the text acts as a 'generic and thematic composite', Porter supports an understanding of the poetry's status as signalling moral development: in other words, as the spoiled child Caroline matures, she becomes increasingly able to view the natural world appreciatively, and, most importantly, increasingly adept at poetry. Porter's intriguing conclusion is that the practice of creating a 'cabinet' of poetry in *Conversations* leads Smith to use *Beachy Head* to review and reassess the collection of selves she has amassed over her career, which 'actively resist incorporation into the monolith' of the text.

Beachy Head is for many readers Smith's ultimate poetic achievement; her 'local poem' contains within its 731 lines a staggering array of layers, exploring history, science, literature and memory; the past, present and future; emergent Romanticism as a new collection of tropes and ideologies; the passing of an Enlightenment structure of order and method; and pathways yet to be marked out. Kari Lokke and Christoph Bode both focus on this poem, their very different approaches and conclusions amply demonstrating the poem's interpretative fertility. Lokke's essay seizes on the figure of the hermit with which the poem concludes, contextualizing him as a signal Romantic trope also used by Wordsworth and Coleridge but of especial significance to women writers of the period for whom the hermit/recluse acts 'as a metaphorical magnet for the representation of the moral meaning of emotion'. Lokke's essay thus situates *Beachy Head* within two traditions for which Smith's writing acted as a prototype: the Romantic emphasis on the unknown and unknowable as a figure, paradoxically, of knowledge, and the woman writer's investigation of sensibility as emotionally

flexible as well as stifling. Bode, on the other hand, sees in *Beachy Head* the blueprint for how the systems of modern society facilitate the development of new forms of subjectivity. Describing literature as an 'autonomous social sub-system', Bode demonstrates how Smith's poetry, and *Beachy Head* in particular, both supports and withstands the weight and intensity of discursive theory. 'Smith dialectically dissolves easy binaries', and *Beachy Head* is 'at once a signification and the very thing itself'. In other words, *Beachy Head* is a poem about writing a poem about Beachy Head. As these four essays amply demonstrate, Smith writes poetry that responds especially well to varied and complex approaches; she uses surface and depth meaningfully and embeds meaning within structure as well as what might be called plot. It is an oft-made point that Smith valued poetry as the genre which legitimized her as an author, but it is as essential to note that Smith understood the possibilities for expression and content that distinguish poetry when it is written well and considered deeply. With Smith's poetry, the more one looks the more one finds; it is significantly, deeply Romantic because it asks to be – it requires being – read *into*.

Smith's mastery of poetry and poetics, her appreciation of what can be done with words, textually and linguistically, finds play as well in her novels. Although not under direct discussion in this volume, her early novels (*Emmeline*, *Ethelinde*, *Celestina*) are only superficially novels of sensibility. Each pushes the boundaries of its genre, whether through the inclusion of a redeemable 'fallen woman', the expansion of feminine independence and self-sufficiency, or the application of disabling sensibility to a new version of (ineffectual) masculinity. And the influence of these novels was profound and lasting. However, with *Desmond* and subsequent novels Smith begins to do with the novel what she has and will continue to do with poetry: she begins to explore what can be done when plot and characterization perform beyond their expected entertainment thresholds. As Barbara Tarling sees it, Smith's engagement with political history in *Desmond*, *The Old Manor House* and *The Young Philosopher* (1798) allow a radical politics to underpin the novels, forming a plotted response to Edmund Burke's reactionary distaste for the social shake-up premised by the French Revolution that emerges from her treatment of the American Revolutionary War 'as a symbol of political reform'. For Smith, the American War as portrayed in *The Old Manor House* 'achieves a break with the past' while also 'preserv[ing] the possibility of establishing a future built on its foundations'. However, this is 'transitional and unrepresentative'; once linked with the French Revolution in its initial phase, the two uprisings combine to provide an ideal of political and social reform. As Tarling notes, this is an inherently radical argument in the increasingly repressive atmosphere of the 1790s. A. A. Markley extends this point in an essay that makes use of newly discovered letters to substantiate claims about Smith's radicalism. Exploring the evidence that Smith was friendly with both William Godwin and

Mary Wollstonecraft from the late 1790s, Markley sets the scene for a new political and literary backdrop for Smith at this time, as she moved from the rural gentility of Hayley and his circle to the urban modernity of radical London. This move, says Markley, coincided with the interest in formal experimentation that bears fruit in *The Young Philosopher*'s presentation of a new kind of first-person narration, what Markley calls 'a virtual symphony of first-person voices ... [an] operatic ... complexity of ... competing and complementing strains and layers of narrative' demonstrating 'how truth can be spoken to power'.

The issues of power and truth also underlay Amy Garnai's essay, in which the familiar Smithian theme of exile takes on a new political resonance in light of the Alien Act of 1793. Smith's personal experience of exile coupled with her daughter's marriage to a French émigré whose movements were threatened by the Act find play in works like *The Emigrants* (1793) and the novels of the early and mid-1790s, but, as Garnai shows, she remains keenly aware of the intrusion of political conservatism and repression into private life well into the 1800s. Moreover, as the century turns, Smith goes further and further afield in her texts; the American locales give way to the West Indies and Eastern Europe in the five-volume *The Letters of a Solitary Wanderer* (1800; 1802). Focusing on Hungary in Volume IV, Smith enlarges her trope of exile so that the familiar, England, becomes the strange for the protagonist Leopold. Further, she institutes what we now call the transnational as she establishes that borders are as much about pushing out as keeping in, and that 'border-crossings imply, more than the movement *towards* heterogeneity, hybridity, and an idea of universal citizenship, a movement *away from* ... despotism, intolerance and tyranny'. Travel itself metastatizes, becomes ongoing; 'the consciousness of displacement prevails'. With *Letters*, Smith does something new with plot; the action of the story transcends its own boundaries and takes on the duties of metaphor.

The final two essays in this section establish Smith's importance for her literary descendants and her international readers. In my own essay, I uncover the embedded source for Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) by demonstrating the nearly-identical plot and characterization arcs of the two novels. However, the essay argues that Smith 'provides more than simply plot outlines or character traits'. In focusing on how each novelist treats the theme of seduction within their texts, I also discuss how the two novelists use their texts to reflect on the very nature of novel-writing in an age of generic transition and definition. Austen does not merely borrow from Smith; she shows a 'dynamic commitment' to Smith's own experimental techniques that illustrates the modernity of both writers. Further, as Katherine Astbury's illuminating essay shows, Smith had a significant impact on readers in France. 'Almost all of Smith's novels were translated into French', making Smith 'an important literary figure in France during the Revolution'. But Smith's novels also underwent some interesting changes as a

result of the translation process. Using as a case study *The Banished Man* (1794; *Le proscrit*), Astbury shows how easily translation can become adaptation, and how what strikes Smith's English readers as radical could be seen as conservative, even reactionary, in a different national context. As much as there still remains to do with Smith's work in its original forms, Astbury's essay shows how tantalizing are the implications of translation and the potential for reading a new, Europeanized Smith.

One of the strengths of this volume of essays is the inclusion of work on all of Smith's main forms of composition. To this end, Diego Saglia and Judith Stanton's essays cover genres not usually directly treated in Smith studies. Saglia's essay deals with Smith's play *What Is She?* (1798), offering theatrical context as well as a historicized understanding of the theme of curiosity. In Saglia's reading, curiosity is both inhibiting (for men) and liberating (for women); it allows the penetration of masquerade and disguise and encourages female self-actualization and the achievement of identity. Through her comedy of manners, 'Smith envisages the possibility of an assumed and fabricated identity that defeats curiosity and its damaging intrusions in order to protect a secret core of genuine identity'. Genuine identity is key to Judith Stanton's quest, over a period of more than thirty years, to assemble a complete oeuvre of letters written by Smith. Stanton's essay is a history of a scholar's detective work, the closest we may come to uncovering a 'real' Charlotte Smith, but as Stanton's article suggests, in her letters as in her poems and novels Smith was adept at suiting her tone and self-construction to her audience and her compositional needs. As Stanton notes, Smith's letters reveal not 'querulous egotism' but a kind of 'treatise on the rights of woman as [eloquent] as woman could well write'. And as the story of Stanton's quest develops, we see the rise of Smith from a 'minor' figure whose correspondence could not be valued since it 'did not shed light on the greater (read: canonized) literary figures in whose shadows ... Smith laboured' to the major author whose *Works* can now be accessed in almost any university library.

The final essays in this volume address Smith's involvement with the literature of her day, and her status *as* literature in the years and decades following her death. As the editors of Smith's texts for Pickering & Chatto well understand, Smith's complex webs of allusion, quotation, and reference prove her deep involvement with the world of literature. Stuart Curran draws together Smith's myriad sources to show that for her, literature was 'world' before such an idea was culturally understood. Her 'obsessive dialogue with other literature' gives us insight into her opinions and conclusions about her peers and forebears, and illustrate her 'engage[ment] in establishing the nature of a foundational authority for her voice [rather than simply] displaying her learning as a ... female accomplishment' (much as her letters transcend their tone to reveal Smith's sense of autonomy and social and cultural worth). In creating a pantheon through quota-

tion and allusion, Smith also constructs a kind of bridge between her works and those she references, which ultimately works to assert her own literary status, and to remind us, once again, how intensely Smith valued her identity as author.

The final two essays show the ways in which Smith was read and textually reassembled by her admirers, and chart how deeply the changing criteria by which women and their work was judged affected Smith's posthumous reputation. Stephen Behrendt's essay investigates an intertextuality of a sort rather different to Curran's: how Smith appeared in the writings of others. In his reading, Smith's poetic legacy was to inspire and people the poetry of her admirers, and, as Behrendt determines, there was a gendered response to her life and work: her male followers set out to rescue her reputation from oblivion, while her female emulators aspire to her achievements: she provides them with inspiration. As Behrendt shows, for several years after her death Smith's work stimulated her devotees, 'while there is no question that her *life* ... continued to hold real interest for many ... in the several decades following her death'. And this forms the focus for Louise Duckling's survey of Smith's posthumous appearances in the anthologies of 'poetesses' that appeared throughout the nineteenth century. In tracing Smith's afterlives, Duckling finds that the life overtakes the work, and replaces it; that Smith's careful delineation of a self in need comes to seem the only reading possible of this prime example of a bereft woman; and that, ironically, even this eventually works against Smith, establishing the 'moaning' stereotype that was one of the first misapplied commonplaces about Smith's poetry to be challenged by the feminist critics that first took her seriously as a writer. From 'idealized specimen of womanly excellence' to inappropriately political, irreligious, and indiscreet complainer: Smith's anthologizers react less to her work than to their conception of her personality. As Duckling shows, this persisted into the 1970s; it was only challenged by the sea-change in cultural understandings of women's historical position.

In its fourteen essays, this collection illustrates Smith's depth and versatility as an author. It offers varied and astute readings of her work as deeply informed by history, culture, and politics, and, through Behrendt's and Duckling's essays on her posthumous reputation and her literary afterlives, it shows how Smith's centrality transmuted into a marginality derived from cultural insistences on seeing her as a woman who wrote, rather than a writer who was female. Countering the few lingering descriptions of Smith as obscure or minor, the essays in this volume aptly demonstrate how seriously scholars need to treat her work, and how vital and central she is to our understanding of British Romanticism. And there is ample evidence of this. A quick search of the MLA Bibliographical Database using 'Charlotte Smith' as a title keyword shows an astonishing upward curve in Smith publications. Between 1900 and 1969 there were five articles published; between 1970 and 1979 there were eleven; between 1980 and 1989 thirteen;