

Charlotte Smith

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That Charlotte Smith (1749-1806) would be most remembered for her melancholy sonnets is appropriate given the life she lived. Financial difficulties would be the theme of Smith's life from an early age. Born to a well-off family, her father was forced to agree to an early marriage for Charlotte in the face of financial problems caused by his reckless spending and the early death of Charlotte's mother. Just short of her sixteenth birthday he arranged for Charlotte to be married to Benjamin Smith, the son of a wealthy merchant, an act she would never forgive her father for. Benjamin was an abusive, promiscuous, and profligate husband, soon spending not only his wages but a sizable amount of the fund left by his deceased father to his and Charlotte's children. As a result, Benjamin was jailed for his debts in 1783, where Charlotte joined him. Here Charlotte would pen the *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784) and publish them at her own expense to pay their debts and leave debtors' prison. This work would have lasting legacies, both for the sonnet form in the English language and for her contemporary poets, especially William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Jail taught Benjamin little: he would soon encounter continued financial difficulties and left the country to go into hiding, leaving Charlotte and their surviving nine young children to fend for themselves. With what remained of the fund left to her children stuck in legal wrangling with her husband's family, Charlotte turned to more lucrative efforts to maintain her family. Though she would always consider herself foremost a poet, Smith's precarious financial position saw her attentions pulled toward the more profitable novel. While constrained by cultural notions of what a woman could and should write, Smith was able to imbue as much of her own political and feminist beliefs as the book-buying public would allow. Smith became well-known for her novels, supplemented by new editions of the *Elegiac Sonnets*, and she was one of the young Jane Austen's favourite writers.

The Emigrants (1793), a blank verse poem, balances Smith's progressive and reformist views with allusions to the plight of those forced from France for political and religious reasons. By paralleling their difficulties with her own troubled situation, Smith was able to garner positive reviews for her work. Despite this critical success, her next few novels drew fewer and fewer sales. Events had

conspired to continue to make Smith's life difficult: her early support for the French Revolution came back to haunt her as English taste for the war soured. As she aged and her income decreased, she fell prey to sickness and poverty. The last years of Smith's life saw her struggling to keep herself fed and warm, the cold only worsening her arthritis. Unable to write, she was forced to sell her precious collection of books to avoid returning to prison for debt. The death of her separated husband Benjamin in February of 1806 saw some money at last head in her direction. However, by this time Smith's condition had deteriorated. She would die only a few months later in October 1806. The trust left to her children would not be settled for seven years after her death, yet she was able to properly provide for her children until her death.

Smith's most famous work, *The Elegiac Sonnets*, is also her most anthologized work. Anthologies, however, tend to stick to the same Smith sonnets year after year, and "Sonnet III, To A Nightingale" is rarely included. Influenced by both Petrarch's and Milton's sonnets on nightingales, Smith's own take perhaps influenced John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale." Though Keats does not explicitly allude to her poem, he was a voracious reader, and Smith's work was popular. Smith eventually included three sonnets addressed to nightingales in her *Elegiac Sonnets*, with a further three mentioning the bird in passing. Birds are a common theme for Smith within the *Sonnets*: almost twenty mentions of them occur, but the nightingale features twice as often as any other species. This is in line with many poets, as the nightingale's mythic connections made it a popular muse. In the Greek myth, Philomela is an Athenian princess raped and mutilated by her sister's husband and transformed into the nightingale after getting her revenge. The nightingale became therefore a symbol of lament, of sorrow for violence suffered, an appropriate metaphor given Smith's history. Smith's sonnet is Petrarchan in style, comprised of an octave, introducing the theme or problem of the poem, and a sestet solving it. Smith experiments throughout the *Sonnets*, attempting to be simpler and more direct in her English than Petrarch was in Italian.

Further Reading

Blank, Antje. "Charlotte Smith." *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 23 June 2003.

Curran, Stuart. "Charlotte Smith and British Romanticism." *South Central Review*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1994, pp. 66-78.

Myers, Mary Anne. "Unsexing Petrarch: Charlotte Smith's Lessons in the Sonnet as a Social Medium." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2014, pp. 239-263.

Sonnet III: “To A Nightingale”¹

POOR, melancholy bird – that all night long²

Tell’st to the Moon³ thy tale of tender woe;⁴

From what sad cause can such sweet sorrow flow,

And whence this mournful melody of song?

Thy poet’s musing fancy would translate

5

What mean the sounds that swell thy little breast,

When still at dewy eve thou leav’st thy nest,

Thus to the listening night to sing thy fate?

Pale Sorrow’s victims wert thou once among,

Tho’ now releas’d⁵ in woodlands wild to rove?

10

Say – hast thou felt from friends some cruel wrong,⁶

Or died’st thou – martyr of disastrous love?⁷

Ah! songstress⁸ sad! that such my lot might be,

To sigh and sing at liberty⁹ – like thee!

¹ First published in 1784, then subsequently in editions with additional poems. The sixth (1792) is the copytext here.

² [Smith’s note] The idea from the 43d Sonnet of Petrarch. Secondo parte. “Quel rosignuol, che si soave piagne.”

³ The moon is often a feminine symbol. Smith regularly advocated for female rights and included female representations of independence in her works.

⁴ Nightingales, native to Europe, are one of few birds to sing during the night as well as the day. Their song is loud and variable, leading to connections with artistic creation.

⁵ Smith moved from London to the countryside after her husband fled England to escape debt.

⁶ Smith frequently alludes to her personal life in her works, here her financial troubles.

⁷ Smith’s marriage was a source of great pain to her.

⁸ The singing nightingale is usually female in poetry and art, when in fact it is the male who sings to find a mate and to defend his territory.

⁹ Smith is not referencing the French Revolution: it would not begin until five years after this sonnet was first written.



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