

2016

Reclaiming the Female Melancholic Artist in Charlotte Smith's Elegiac Sonnets

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Recommended Citation

Denommé, Emily, "Reclaiming the Female Melancholic Artist in Charlotte Smith's Elegiac Sonnets" (2016). *2016 Undergraduate Awards*. 16.

https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/ungradawards_2016/16

Reclaiming the Female Melancholic Artist in Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*

Abstract: Charlotte Smith is often considered a proto-Romantic poet, and her *Elegiac Sonnets* a precursor to the Romantic poetry of the next century. However, Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* is also heavily influenced by late-eighteenth century currents of thought, most especially the cult of sentiment that had extreme literary significance in the later decades of the eighteenth century. Additionally, changing perceptions of the melancholic artistic genius as a specifically male figure meant that Smith, as a poet for whom melancholy in *Elegiac Sonnets* was a central element of her artistry, had to demonstrate her claim, as a woman, to the space of the melancholic poet. This claim is accentuated in the fifth edition and onwards of *Elegiac Sonnets* with the introduction of more and more dramatic levels of melancholy, where poetry's inability to provide consolation transforms into a renunciation of poetry itself. This essay examines two sonnets from earlier editions of *Elegiac Sonnets*, "Sonnet I" and "Sonnet XXXII", and two sonnets from the fifth edition and beyond, "Sonnet XLVII" and "Sonnet XXXIV", in an attempt to trace Smith's changing efforts at claiming poetic melancholy for herself.

Charlotte Smith is frequently described as a poet whose work anticipates Romanticism, largely because of her use of heightened emotions and natural landscapes reflective of inner feeling in such works as her *Elegiac Sonnets*. It would be a mistake, however, to overlook the influence of contemporary late eighteenth-century cultural phenomena on her poems. This is especially true of her artistic exchange with the cult of sentiment and the interest in melancholy that had existed since the mid-century, which informs not only the themes and subjects of her poetry, but also her perception of herself as a poet. Inevitably influential was also the fact of her gender, since, in the late eighteenth-century, female artists would have been discouraged from entering the public realm of the published poet. In her *Elegiac Sonnets*, published in ten editions beginning in 1784, Smith explores what it means to be a poet of melancholy, and particularly what it means to be a female melancholic artist. In her many of her earlier sonnets, such as "Sonnet I" and "Sonnet XXXII", Smith uses melancholy and loss in such a way as to reveal a specifically female artistic force. This use of melancholy is reconstructed in the 1789 fifth edition of her sonnets and beyond, such as in "Sonnet XLVII" and "Sonnet LXXXIV", into an insistence on poetry's inability to provide consolation, and on the potential for the loss of poetic ability itself. It is also in this later period, however, that Smith becomes most passively assertive in making a claim to poetic power.

Smith's untitled first sonnet in *Elegiac Sonnets* sets up her early poetic self-understanding, and it immediately links Smith's poetic ability to her melancholy in such a way that the two are utterly inseparable. The sonnet opens with the observation that "The partial muse has, from my earliest hours, / Smil'd on the rugged path I'm doomed to tread" (1-2), indicating that her difficult life has always been favoured by her poetic guardian spirit. This

overseer is, however, only a “partial muse”, a poetic talent that is inherently flawed. This flaw may be the dual nature of her poetic talent that she describes further on in the sonnet: this is a poetic ability that relies on the same faculties that cause the poet intense suffering, and therefore what gives her artistic power also brings her pain. Her muse

. . .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 heard her dear delusive art;
 Which, while it decks with the head many a rose,
 Reserves the thorn, to fester in the heart. (3-8)

This muse adorns her with poetic ability, but its power is ultimately “delusive”; whatever beauty it brings her is only part of its gift, and is ultimately unable to bring any kind of relief from “the rugged path” which she is “doom'd to tread” (2). As Weisman writes, this poem implies that “poets suffer deeper hurts” (np); her poetic ability is both the profit of and what prolongs her suffering.

This figure of the “partial muse” may also be attributed to the pose of modesty demanded of women in the eighteenth century. As Hawley writes, female poets and writers often prefaced their work with a claim of artistic inadequacy due to their gender (188). The traces of Smith’s particularly female authorship of this poem can also be seen in her choice of form. In this sonnet, Smith uses the Shakespearean rhyme scheme and structure, a form which, as Roberts points out, was not used often at this time due to a general unfamiliarity with Shakespeare’s sonnets; Smith’s faithful use of the form, then, means that this first sonnet, and

many of the ones that follow, are “disconnected from [her contemporary] literary tradition” (659). The final couplet of the sonnet, which succinctly summarizes her vision of poetic melancholy, also hints at her interest in the English literary tradition and her place (or lack of a place) within it. As Robinson writes, the last lines, “Ah! then, how dear the Muse’s favours cost, / *If those paint sorrow best – who feel it most!*” (13-14), are a paraphrase of the final lines of Pope’s “Eloisa to Abelard”. However, instead of ending with the claim that a male poet, more capable of telling her story than Eloisa herself, will immortalize their tale in poetry, Smith takes over this final statement and insists that she will write poems of her own suffering; she will write the poems that Eloisa cannot (Robinson 205). Smith’s first sonnet in her collection sets out her early poetic self-interpretation: a female poet who both benefits and suffers from her artistic ability.

The importance that Smith places on melancholy and suffering in this and other sonnets, and what this means for her as an artist, cannot be understood without an awareness of the cult of sentiment that was still at work in the late eighteenth century when Smith first published *Elegiac Sonnets*. A vital aspect of Smith’s enormous popularity during her lifetime is her work’s correspondence with the ideals of the cult of sentiment, which valorized displays of emotion and the empathy that arose in the spectators or readers of such displays. In this understanding, experiencing melancholy was pleasurable (Robinson 196). If a major draw of literary sensibility was that it elicited sympathy in its readers, then contemporary reactions to Smith’s poems showed that they did just that. Robinson asserts that “[m]ost periodical reviewers. . .initially responded enthusiastically to the elegance and perceived sincerity of Smith’s sonnets and claimed to have genuinely felt for the sorrows that occasioned them”

(195). He also points out that, like Smith herself in her first sonnet, many responses to her poetry linked her suffering with her poetic capabilities, suggesting that suffering was an essential part of artistic genius (197-198). As Dolan writes, melancholy had been an indication of literary genius since the time of Aristotle (22). However, she also specifies that by the late eighteenth century, when there was more skepticism surrounding the sincerity of the cult of sentiment, medical texts had drawn a sharp distinction between what was understood as extreme male and female displays of emotion (22). She points out that writers as early and influential as Robert Burton, author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, wrote that women, though capable of experiencing the same melancholy as men, did not draw genius from it; instead, they became nonsensical, a state which medical writers later in the century would term hysteria (23). Hysteria was “a condition attributed to women’s ungovernable bodies and overindulgence in sensibility”, and melancholia, the medial understanding of melancholy, became more closely associated with men and rational capacity (Dolan 23). This, of course, was a significant shift in the understanding of the capabilities of the female melancholic artist, and in claiming melancholy as an essential part of her poetic power, Smith attempts to recover the place of the female melancholic genius. As Dolan points out, Smith stresses her rational ability as well as her emotional experiences in her poems of melancholy; in the first sonnet, besides presenting melancholy as a boon to her poetic talents, Smith’s “ventriloquizing [of other poets] demonstrates to her readers that in moments of intense suffering, the poet’s rational mind is fully engaged” (34). Thus, Smith both practices and challenges the conventions of the cult of sentiment of her time in order to fully create herself as a female poet of melancholy.

Smith's "Sonnet XXXII – To Melancholy. Written on the Banks of the Arun" demonstrates this complicated exchange between melancholy and female poetic ability. In this sonnet, melancholy is explicitly presented as inspiring poetic abilities. The poem, which is one of the first in her collection to follow the Petrarchan form, details in the octave the melancholic location where the poet finds inspiration:

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! (1-8)

This sonnet presents a scene of a late autumn evening, a time doubly of the beginning of death or darkness in its season and time of day. The scene is also melancholic in that its curious quality of being in between life and death also renders it haunting and haunted; she hears "hollow sighs," "Strange sounds," and "mournful melodies," and fleetingly sees "the shadowy phantom", all of which imaginatively cumulates into "night wanderers, who their woes bewail!" (8). This is also specifically the experience of the poet, whom Smith identifies as the onlooker of this scene. What Smith presents in the octave, then, is a metaphor for the poetic space of the melancholic poet: a haunted place, in between death and life, where one can hear more clearly the "mournful melodies" and "woes" present in the world and within the artistic mind.

This poem also returns to the male melancholic poetic tradition that Smith both asserts and disrupts. The speaker states that in this space “Pity’s own Otway I methinks could meet” (10), referring to another male writer of sentimental works (Roberts 655). Smith simultaneously gains inspiration from Otway’s potential presence – he is like the other phantoms, whose “deep sighs swell the sadden’d wind!” (11) – and also, following Dolan’s argument, asserts her ability as a female melancholic poet by revealing her rational capacity in the face of extreme emotion. Roberts expands on this concept of Smith’s interaction with the male poetic tradition in her study of Smith’s River Arun sonnets. Roberts argues that the river in her sonnets is a “male poetic space” whose “linear motion. . . evokes an inheritance-based male succession” (655-656). Roberts further writes that this particular sonnet “figures as a particularly strange and alienating landscape that can be read as a reaction to male literary and sonnet tradition” (659). While there may certainly be some unease with the male tradition and her place within it present in this and other sonnets, to identify this space as “alienating” may be to overlook the creative fertility of melancholy for Smith as a poet. The final three lines of the sestet extol melancholy’s power, by raising such specters as Otway and the other ghostly wanderers encountered in this space, to inspire the poet with evocative scenes: “O Melancholy! – such thy magic power, / That to the souls these dreams are often sweet, / And sooth the pensive visionary mind!” (12-14). What is unsettling about this scene is exactly what makes it fruitful for the poet; as in the cult of sentiment, melancholy is here pleasurable and indicative of the capabilities of the artist.

In Smith’s sonnets beginning with the fifth edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* in 1789, there is a shift in her understanding of the relationship between melancholy and the poet and what

poetry can achieve. While her earlier sonnets may have either presented a dualistic understanding of her melancholic poetic ability, such as in “Sonnet I”, or a more generally positive one, such as in “Sonnet XXXII”, her later sonnets tend to disparage her own poetic ability and underline the insurmountability of her grief. “Sonnet XLVII – To Fancy” exhibits this tendency towards what appears to be extreme despondency. This sonnet is noteworthy because it is the first out of all of Smith’s poems in *Elegiac Sonnets* that seems to fully renounce poetry and whatever fruitfulness it might provide. The sonnet starts with a dramatic apostrophe to the personified figure of Fancy, which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, was around this time synonymous with imagination and was also defined as “the process, and the faculty, of forming mental representations of things not present to the senses; chiefly applied to the so-called creative or productive imagination, which frames images of objects, events, or conditions that have not occurred in actual experience.” (“fancy, n. and adj.”) The speaker, therefore, may be seen as addressing an essential component of creative artistic production; what is shocking, then, is how powerfully it is repudiated. Fancy produces nothing substantial; it shows “the beauteous rather than the true” (1, 4). The speaker contrasts her current state with her earlier one, when fancy was like a light, variously described as an “early radiance” and “glowing tints”, and aided in artistic creation; the speaker refers to, for instance, “the scenes thy sportive pencil drew” (3, 5, 2). This state was lost, however, with the acquisition of “Experience” (7), and now the speaker seems to seek the renunciation of melancholic poetic ability: “Nor seek perfection with a poet’s eye, / Nor suffer anguish with a poet’s heart!” (13-14). The speaker’s melancholy seems to have overwhelmed her other faculties, leaving her with only despair.

However, the reader may have reason to question this apparent total disavowal of poetic ability, not least because it is articulated through a poem. As Labbe would argue, announcing the repudiation of poetry within a poem highlights the performative nature of the entire activity. Labbe writes that it is important to remember the highly “performative aspect of sensibility”, and that Smith is performing a particular culturally recognizable role: that of the distressed woman in need of help (91). Labbe further elaborates that Smith essentially “sets a scene of unremitting sorrow starring herself. The distressed woman takes centre stage and engrosses our attention” (94). There is more to this poem, then, than simply artistic defeat, and Smith is once again using and simultaneously subverting the cult of sentiment to further her artistic pose as the melancholic female poet. In fact, the imagery of the poem potentially suggests the opposite of total failure. While Fancy is identified with light when Smith is describing her youth, Fancy is also represented as a darkness at several points in the sonnet. Initially and boldly, Fancy is described as the “queen of shadows”; later, the speaker also explains that she will no longer be able to see “Through thy false medium” (1, 9). Furthermore, the poem stages an instance of the artistic power of this dark Fancy when the speaker describes its new role in her life: “And now ‘tis thine in darkest hues to dress / The spot where pale Experience hangs her head / O’er the sad grave of murder’d Happiness!” (6-8). The speaker’s fancy may no longer create purely pleasant artistic experiences, but it is also capable of a different, more melancholic kind of artistic power that is born from loss. One may imagine that it is exactly this type of Fancy that would envision the melancholic scenes described in earlier poems, such as “Sonnet XXXII”, if not reach its more confident conclusions. Moreover, this poem is artistically fruitful in a subtler way; unlike the earlier sonnets, which followed regular

English or Italian form, in this and her other later poems, Smith breaks away from conventional sonnet form and forges a new path. Though the poem seems to break up along the typical octave/sestet Italian form, with a turn towards the poet's future in the sestet, the rhyme scheme, ababcdcd efgefg, is an odd mix of English (for the first eight lines) and Italian (for the last six) that initially suggests a form structured by quatrains, which leads to a surprise in the appearance of a final, sestet perhaps in accordance with the rather shocking decision to renounce poetry made after the volta; both form and content take the reader in a perhaps unexpected direction. In this poem, then, Smith both undermines and reaffirms her stance as a female melancholic poet; the artificiality of her distress highlights the performative aspect of the figure of the helpless melancholic woman and simultaneously draws power from it while asserting a different kind of poetic force. Smith presents a passive female artist figure in a way that ultimately renders her assertive in her claims as an artist and all the more powerful.

One of Smith's last sonnets, "Sonnet LXXXIV – To the Muse", an overtly self-reflexive poem, continues in this vein of passive assertiveness. This poem again seems to renounce the speaker's claim to poetic ability; speaking to her muse, she demands to know if it is leaving her:

WILT thou forsake me who in life's bright May
 Lent warmer lustre to the radiant morn;
 And even o'er summer scenes by tempests torn,
 Shed with illusive light the dewy ray
 Of pensive pleasure? Wilt thou, while the day
 Of saddening autumn closes, as I mourn
 In languid, hopeless sorrow, far away
 Bend thy soft step, and never more return? (1-8)

The speaker complains that, when she was young and lived a life of happiness and light, her muse was with her even in what seemed like difficult times, but that now that “the day / Of saddening autumn closes” and she reaches the end of her life, it is abandoning her to “languid, hopeless sorrow” (5-6, 7). This muse earlier brought her a kind of contemplative joy, a “pensive pleasure” (5), as Fancy brought artistic ability to the speaker in “Sonnet XLVII”. Once again, however, the light that the muse, like Fancy, brings is “illusive” and ultimately deceptive (4). Lines 9-11 reveal the tremendous suffering to which the muse has abandoned the speaker: “Crush’d to the earth, by bitterest anguish press’d, / From my faint eyes thy graceful form recedes; / Thou canst not heal a heart like mine that bleeds.” Poetry is ultimately insufficient to heal the sorrow that the speaker feels, a fact which is powerfully accentuated by the grammar of lines 10-11; both end with the forceful end-stop of the semicolon, isolating line 11 from the lines that come before and after it and intensifying its emotional statement. As Hawley points out, the inconsolability of Smith’s poems is extremely unusual for an elegy, which usually offers “consolation and renewal” (184). Hawley’s intriguing thesis is that “Smith appears to be writing an elegy for herself, for her own lost promise. . . This state of abjection can be seen as symptomatic of the position of the woman/poet in this period. . . Her sensitivity to her alienation and dispossession are existential and typical” (188). However, for Hawley this lack of consolation is not simply a pessimistic declaration of loss, but also potentially worthwhile: “Smith’s perverse refusals also endow her with grace, strength, and energy. . . she maintains a self-possession which comes from her dispossession” (189). Smith’s inconsolability is a refusal to leave her passive state of suffering for any kind of restoration, a maneuver which deftly maintains Smith’s particular kind of artistic self. Dolan also writes that her refusal of consolation

is a rejection of “the cultural value placed on women’s fortitude in the eighteenth century”, when women were expected to suffer quietly and stoically (30-31). If Smith gains her poetic power from her melancholy and loss, to accept consolation would be to renounce this power.

Instead, Smith in her sonnets fully embraces her suffering. “Sonnet LXXXIV” goes so far as to end with her death, but in such a way that her poetic influence seems to continue. Once again, as in “Sonnet XLVII” Smith is not the poet of light and beauty, but the poet of darkness and melancholy. The last three lines of the poem address her muse on the topic of her death: “But, when in quiet earth that heart shall rest, / Haply mayst thou one sorrowing vigil keep, / Where Pity and Remembrance bend and weep!” (12-14). In this final image, the speaker’s muse lives on past her death, keeping a vigil over her grave along with pity and remembrance. This image can be interpreted in several ways. Perhaps the speaker imagines that her poetry will live on and act as her last remaining presence in the world; perhaps her poetry will go on to inspire others who will thereby keep her vigil in pity and remembrance. The contemporary reactions to Smith’s poetry that Robinson records seem to uphold the latter interpretation; many poets wrote poems in response to Smith’s work during her lifetime, including some that mourned her death (196-197), and Wordsworth, of course, famously admired her (Wolfson 637). Once again, Smith is boldly reclaiming the position of the melancholic poetic genius for herself in asserting that her artistic abilities will grant her a kind of immortality, but does so through the ultimate passivity of death. This sonnet is also, even more so than “Sonnet XLVII”, formally highly irregular and innovative. The poem’s rhyme scheme, abbaabab cddcee, is so unusual that it is difficult at first to disentangle its English and Italian aspects. It seems to largely follow the Italian octave/sestet form, but with a distinct couplet at the end that is decidedly English.

Roberts traces a similar formal innovation in her study of Smith's later "sea" sonnets, in opposition to her earlier river sonnets. She writes that these later sonnets "are characterized by fragmentation and fracture", and that this contrasts the conventional river poems that chronicle Smith's poetic experience within the male literary tradition; the later sonnets are for Roberts, therefore, indicative of a freer, female literary space (663-664). The later sonnets, perhaps even more so than her earlier ones, represent a particularly female melancholic poetry, where renunciation and sorrow become fertile symbols of artistic power.

Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* present several instances of artist self-reflection that reveal Smith's evolving poetic vision. Influenced by the currents of her contemporary culture – particularly the cult of sentiment – Smith most especially, and perhaps unusually in its extent, used melancholy as a form of artistic self-creation. In her earlier work, she expresses her suffering in the context of the male literary tradition, and in doing so both appreciated and challenged it; in her later poems, her sorrow becomes so intense that she appears to forsake poetry itself. In going to these extremes, Smith finds a place for a poetic vision even more her own, a vision born, ironically, out of passivity and darkness. Smith's sonnets discover what is fruitful in melancholy and what can be gained from loss.

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