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5. Botany to Beachy Head

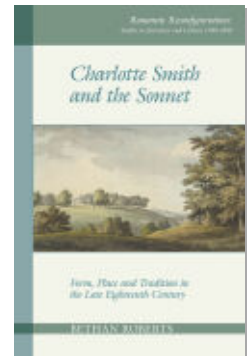
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Botany to Beachy Head

In this chapter I show that in the final edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* (1797 and 1800) several sonnets display an involvement with nature in rather a different mode from the vast seascape, steeped, in contrast, in the close-up observation of the botanist or naturalist. Rather than a specific landscape, at the crux of Smith's late poems is a certain mode of engaging with the natural world, through which she conceives a different model of literary inheritance. These sonnets reflect the development of Smith's wider interest in botany and natural history, which informs many of her late works, especially those written for children: *Rural Walks* (1795), *Rambles Farther* (1796), *Minor Morals* (1798) and *Conversations Introducing Poetry* (1804), as well as her novel *The Young Philosopher* (1798), and the poems of *Beachy Head* (1807). In 1797 Smith proposed the composition of a botanical guide, to be illustrated by her sister, to her publishers, although this never materialised. She also corresponded with the president of the Linnaean society, Dr James Edward Smith, to whom she wrote in 1798, after having relocated to London from the country: 'my passion for plants rather increases as the power of gratification diminishes; and [...] I must henceforth [...] botanize on annuals in garden pots out at a window' (*Letters*, p. 283). She goes on to describe botany as a 'delightful and soothing study' (p. 283), which seems to be its principal attraction for Smith, especially following the death of her daughter Anna Augusta in 1795. Accordingly, Smith features prominently in critical works that have explored the rise of botany as a female pursuit in the late eighteenth century, which found fruition in a variety of modes, ranging from poems and drawings to fashion items, and became an acceptable, genteel way for women to acquire knowledge on a scientific subject.¹ Smith's poem 'Flora' in particular – first

¹ See Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany*

published in *Conversations* and then *Beachy Head* – assumes a significant place in the body of botanical poetry (with scientific notes) by women writers of the time. The science had been popularised by the work of the Swedish botanist Carl von Linné, or Linnaeus (1707–1778), whose *Systema Naturae* (1735) supplied simplified binomial names for plants and founded the influential ‘sexual system’ of classification. The system was versified by Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802) in his popular *The Loves of Plants* (1789), from which Smith quotes in multiple sonnets of her second volume. While botany was an acceptable and encouraged female pursuit in the late eighteenth century, the discourse of sexuality to which Linnaean taxonomy exposed female readers was not without its perceived dangers, and Smith was one of the poets named by Richard Polwhele in his poem *The Unsex’d Females* (1798), which attacked botanising women. Here, I explore for the first time the relationship between Smith’s botany and natural history and the way she understands her place in literary tradition. I show how, as in her seascape sonnets, Smith is interested in ‘form’, and how natural and sonnet forms can coalesce. In an essay on Smith’s engagement with botany, Judith Pascoe argues that Darwin’s ‘minuteness’, his way of ‘holding a magnifying glass to the tiniest facets of natural world acted as a force for liberation’ for Smith in her later works.² Dispensing with the male prospect view and the sublime in favour of the close-up attention of the botanist, ‘Smith’s late poetry points to a different attitude toward nature from what we have come to expect of Romantic poets’, exchanging transcendence for a more intimate acquaintance and thus challenging prevailing aesthetic principles (p. 203). Thus, ‘Smith’s poetry seems in an odd way to break the bonds of containment by celebrating the infiniteness of particularity’, the ‘limitations of a female vantage point become a force of liberation’, and botany empowers the woman poet (pp. 203–4). Pascoe’s focus is not on the sonnet here, but her comments are pertinent to the form, considering its size. Indeed, while Smith’s seascape sonnets massively extend its scope, her botanical sonnets ‘break the bonds of containment’ in a different way. The literary texts on which Smith draws in her late sonnets are predominantly works of natural history and science by – in addition to Darwin – Martin Lister; Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon; Gilbert White; and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. I show that having moved from the male-dominated woodland and riverbank to the more female, autonomous seascape, and finally to the feminised, learned world of botany, Smith reworks her place in male literary tradition. Smith’s

in England, 1760–1860 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) and Sam George, *Botany, Sexuality & Women’s Writing 1760–1830: From Modest Shoot to Forward Plant* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

² Judith Pascoe, ‘Female Botanists and the Poetry of Charlotte Smith’, in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776–1837*, ed. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp. 202 and 203.

sonnets continue to be experimental, and are often split between a position of inheritance and the obscuration of it, as in 'Written at Bignor Park'. Her botanical sonnets present a more emboldened vision, yet one which is simultaneously subsumed. After the 1800 edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* Smith published no further poems in the form. However, other late poems illuminate Smith's sonnets, and I show that 'Flora' (published in *Conversations* in 1804 and then posthumously in *Beachy Head*), has a particularly close relationship with them. My final section looks to other poems in the *Beachy Head* volume, which were only published posthumously: while the volume does not contain sonnets, it looks back to and echoes images from Smith's sonnet oeuvre. I show how, in 'Beachy Head' and 'Saint Monica', Smith write her place in posterity as a *sonneteer*, and these posthumously published poems constitute a fitting final retrospective lens through which to consider *Elegiac Sonnets* and Smith's place in literary history.

Goddess of Botany

Although sonnets with a botanical emphasis precede it, sonnet LXXIX 'To the Goddess of Botany' (1797) heralds Smith's interest in the pursuit:

OF Folly weary, shrinking from the view
Of Violence and Fraud, allow'd to take
All peace from humble life; I would forsake
Their haunts for ever, and, sweet Nymph! with you
Find shelter; where my tired, and tear-swoln eyes,
Among your silent shades of soothing hue,
Your 'bells and florets of unnumber'd dyes'
Might rest – And learn the bright varieties
That from your lovely hands are fed with dew;
And every veined leaf, that trembling sighs
In mead or woodland; or in wilds remote,
Or lurk with mosses in the humid caves,
Mantle the cliffs, on dimpling rivers float,
Or stream from coral rocks beneath the Ocean waves. (p. 82)

Sonnet LXXIX grounds Smith's engagement with botany explicitly in the context of her suffering, and in the sonnet's massive note, the largest in *Elegiac Sonnets*, Smith places herself in the company of Milton and Rousseau as writers who also turned to botany for respite. She quotes from the end of Milton's 'Il Penseroso', in which the melancholy poet imagines a solitary, peaceful existence engaged in the study of nature in later life, and for whom the ability to 'spell of every herb that sips the dew', Smith writes, 'seems to be a resource for

the sick at heart' (p. 82). Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) also turned to botany at the end of his life, and spent two years botanising in Switzerland before his death, where he found peace and solace after a lifetime of exile and unhappiness. Smith quotes from his *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1782) more widely in her work and draws on the persona of the solitary, botanising wanderer of *Rêveries* in her late works.

Smith's wild seascapes may correspond with her suffering 'soul', yet they offer no relief: botany's 'silent shades' offer shelter and alleviation. Indeed, there has been a clear shift from the earlier impassioned sea sonnet XXXV 'To Fortitude' (1786), in which Smith bids a different 'nymph' to 'come! – and shew' how to withstand adversity; here the 'sweet nymph' soothes. As in her seascape sonnets, Smith's botanical sonnets are concerned with form and structure, albeit on a much smaller, more closely observed, scale: Smith's interest is in learning about 'every veined leaf' in sonnet LXXIX. Formal and thematic space again converge, yet whereas Smith's seascape sonnets opened up the form, the sonnet is here reduced back in size, in a more fitting spatial correspondence.

In 'To the Goddess of Botany' an initial correspondence can be identified in the 'variety' Smith's sonnet celebrates. In a key passage in *Minor Morals*, Mrs Belmour – again the Smithian character – celebrates how

plants and flowers [...] offer themselves in millions of different forms, all equally beautiful and curious, in the woods, under the shelter of hedge rows and copses, on the high downy hills, or the luxurious meadows among the grass. They clothe the rocks that bound the hollow ways, and some slightly tapestry even the rugged chalk or gravelly cliffs that are washed by the spray of the sea. Others float on the surface of the river, or bend over the streams among the reeds; while some species cover, with purple bells or golden papilionaceous blossoms, the stony or sandy heath; and not a few find nourishment among the intersices of the decayed wall, or on the roof of the cottage. (XII: p. 221)

Attention is drawn not only to how plants and flowers take 'millions of different forms' but also to how they can be found in myriad locations. The emphasis on multiplicity is echoed in a letter from Smith to her publishers Cadell and Davies concerning the 1797 volume of *Elegiac Sonnets*, in which sonnet LXXIX first appeared. She writes: 'I wish to make as much variety of verse in this book as possible – & have studiously varied the measure of the quatrains &c' (p. 269). Indeed, the sonnets and other poems of the volume vary considerably in form: fifteen non-sonnet poems are included, while twelve out of the twenty-five sonnets take a variety of irregular forms. The 'variety of verse' named by Smith in the letter matches the 'bright varieties' of nature

her sonnet's speaker seeks to learn, while the study that botany entails is suggested in the way Smith has 'studiously varied the measure' of her poems in a scientific way. Elizabeth Dolan has shown how Smith's *Conversations*, as much a textbook on poetry as on nature, 'posits an analogy between the structure of poems and the structure of plants' (*Seeing Suffering*, p. 118), as the autobiographical Mrs Talbot teaches how to distinguish between species of plants and various poetic forms.

The last four lines of sonnet LXXIX, offering a series of alternative locations for the 'veined leaf', again emphasise diversity, reminiscent of the passage quoted above, which similarly celebrates the 'different forms' of plants located in woods, on the riverbank, and on sea cliffs. The sonnet is irregular, and one of Smith's more formally interesting and experimental sonnets: rhyming *abbacaccadede*, no recognisable sonnet form dominates as it opens with a closed Italian quatrain and closes with an English elegiac one, while a sestet or double tercet intervenes. The run-over lines of the sonnet and the continuation of the *a*-rhyme further complicate structure, and the sonnet eludes both Italian and English forms in equal measure. The rhyme suggests the variety, the innumerability even, of forms the sonnet is interested in. The way it is able to move between different forms reflects the way in which it is concerned with different locations and types of leaf; the way it splits itself between mead, woodland, river, and sea. Attention is drawn to this by the repetition of 'or', as in sonnet LXXXVI 'Written near a Port', similarly pulled between different forms and locations. The final line of the sonnet also offers a different mode of congruence between form and content: 'Or stream from coral rocks beneath the Ocean wave' is an alexandrine and mimes the marine leaf in the way it streams out from beneath the sonnet – conspicuously long on the printed page.

The correspondences inferred between leaf and poetic forms in 'To the Goddess of Botany' have interesting implications in terms of Smith's conception of the sonnet. Like the natural spring rising from the earth, the streaming leaf suggests originality and spontaneity. In *Conjectures on Original Composition*, Young appropriates an organic metaphor to his exposition of originality: an 'Original may be said to be of a *vegetable* nature; it rises *spontaneously* from the root of Genius; it *grows*, it is not *made*', echoed by Coleridge in his translation of Schlegel on *organische* form in 1811: in contrast to the 'mechanic form', characterised by 'when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, [...] The organic form [...] is innate; it develops itself from within.'³ The leaf analogy is also invoked by Keats in his later 'Romantic' axiom that 'if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at

³ Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, p. 12; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor, 2 vols. (London: Constable and Co., 1930), I: p. 224.

all' (letter to John Taylor, *Oxford Authors*, p. 380). However, there is also an emphasis on botanical study and learning in Smith's sonnets, and she has 'studiously varied the measures' of her poems, in addition to their botanical content. Smith's sonnets deny or refuse any hierarchisation of poetic approaches. Indeed, contrary to sonnet LXXIX, Smith's sonnets that display an interest in botanical drawing imply a less naturalised approach to form, and emphasise imitation. In these sonnets, the pictorial context surrounding her land and seascape sonnets is exchanged for a different mode of *ut pictura poesis*. Florence Hilbish's 1941 dissertation on Smith reproduces a watercolour painting of some flowers by Smith from her childhood. The monochrome reproduction is poor in quality, yet Hilbish describes 'skill in tinting and shading', 'color and fine pen lines', and names 'blue bells and pink and blue anemones' among the flowers.⁴ Mrs Belmour's celebration of myriad plant forms in *Minor Morals* comes about as part of a discussion about botanical drawing, an activity she promotes among her wards, 'gathering these beautiful productions of nature, flowers, and dissecting them with a view to imitate them, either with the pencil or the scissars [*sic*]' (p. 221).⁵ Sonnet LXV 'To Dr. Parry of Bath, with some botanic drawings which had been made some years' (1797) refers to 'The slight botanic pencil's mimic powers' (line 8) and sonnet XXXVII 'Sent to the Honorable Mrs. O'Neill, with painted Flowers' to the 'mimic pencil' (line 9). Sonnet XCI, 'Reflections on some drawings of plants', also emphasises mimicry:

I CAN in groups these mimic flowers compose,
These bells and golden eyes, embathed in dew;
Catch the soft blush that warms the early Rose,
Or the pale Iris cloud with veins of blue;
Copy the scallop'd leaves, and downy stems,
And bid the pencil's varied shades arrest
Spring's humid buds, and Summer's musky gems[.] (lines 1–7)

Like 'To the Goddess of Botany', sonnet XCI takes a close-up view of plants and flowers, befitting the size of the sonnet, as the lines that make up the sea scene are replaced with the 'veins' of the iris, the shape of the sonnet more akin to a 'scallop'd lea[f]', rather than the formation of the seascape. Unlike sonnet LXXIX, however, with its suggestion of spontaneity, sonnet XCI emphasises the mimicry and copying of forms through drawing: these are 'mimic flowers',

⁴ Florence May Anna Hilbish, *Charlotte Smith, Poet and Novelist (1749–1806)* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1941), pp. 14 and 15. I have been unable to trace the current whereabouts of the watercolour.

⁵ The reference to scissors, 'assisted by wire, paper and silk, which may be called the sculpture of flowers' (p. 221), recalls the 'paper mosaics' of Mary Delany (1700–1780), who recreated flowers by assembling hundreds of finely cut pieces of coloured paper.

the leaves and stems a 'copy'. Typically, formally, the sonnet is not quite a copy, rhyming *ababcdcdeffegg*; the irregular or legitimate sonnet is ambivalently poised between a 'mechanic' and 'organic' approach.⁶

Sonnets XCI and LXV also have other formal implications. In sonnet LXV 'form' is used to refer to the specimens Smith has drawn: 'Luxuriant Summer's evanescent forms, | And Spring's soft blooms with pencil light I drew' (line 4). References to 'evanescent forms', the 'light', and 'slight' all evoke a sense of Smith's use of the sonnet, imbued with transience and insubstantiality. The sonnet is one of five in the second volume that lament the death of Smith's daughter Anna Augusta, who had died in 1795 at the age of twenty-one. This context frames the volume, and Smith finds some reprieve from her grief in botany, celebrated for its therapeutic qualities.⁷ Notwithstanding, in sonnet LXV:

as the lovely family of flowers
Shrink from the bleakness of the Northern blast
So fail from present care and sorrows past
The slight botanic pencil's mimic powers. (lines 5–8)

The poem is coloured throughout by a failure in which Smith's sonnet, another 'evanescent form' also becomes implicated. In sonnet XCI the 'form' is that of Anna Augusta herself: 'I have no semblance of that form adored, | That form, expressive of a soul divine, | So early blighted' (lines 9–11), with the suggestion of plant-life in 'blight' (also present in sonnet LXV). The sonnet is defined by a discrepancy between Smith's ability to 'compose', 'catch', 'copy', and 'arrest' the plants through drawing, however tentatively, and the absence of a 'semblance of that form adored', an image or presence of her daughter. Smith's sonnet is about an absence or failure of form and representation. In addition to the 'angel form' of Laura in her translations from Petrarch, the only references Smith makes to 'form' are in the Anna Augusta sonnet LXXXIX, 'for never more the form | I loved' (line 11) and the graveside sonnet XLIX, originating in *Celestina*, which also refers to the 'form' (line 14) of the deceased young woman. The second volume of Smith's sonnets takes an epigraph from Petrarch's *The Rime Sparse*, from the *in morte* canzone 268 in which Petrarch implores his 'song' to find an audience among the grieving rather than cheerful, as Smith, like Petrarch, mourns the loss of a young female 'form'.

⁶ Labbe has explored *ut pictura poesis* in this sonnet: see 'Every Poet Her Own Drawing Master: Charlotte Smith, Anna Seward and *Ut Pictura Poesis*', in *Early Romantics*, in *Early Romantics: Perspectives in British Poetry from Pope to Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Woodman (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1998), pp. 200–15.

⁷ See Dolan, *Seeing Suffering*.

Smith's elegiac Anna Augusta sonnets appear to be in dialogue with the sonnets of Sir Brooke Boothby (1744–1824), a baronet, poet, amateur botanist, and member of the literary Lichfield circle. The sonnet prior to XCI in *Elegiac Sonnets*, XC 'To Oblivion', refers to sonnet XIII of Boothby's *Sorrows. Sacred to the Memory of Penelope* (1796), the only eighteenth-century sonnet published after 1784 that Smith refers to in *Elegiac Sonnets*. The sequence of twenty-four sonnets – and other poems – in Boothby's *Sorrows* lament the death of his daughter, who had died in 1791 in her sixth year, and his 'elegiac' sonnets clearly resonate with Smith's own, connecting through sonnet, botany, and parental grief.⁸ In sonnet XC 'To Oblivion' she clearly identifies with Boothby and his 'misery living, hope and pleasure dead' (line 12) – the quotation she appropriates. The influence of Petrarch colours Boothby's volume: all but three sonnets are Italian in form, while five are translations from Petrarch. A portrait of Penelope Boothby had been made during her lifetime by Joshua Reynolds in 1788, while after her death Boothby commissioned a marble monument in 1793 from the sculptor Thomas Banks and a painting by Henry Fuseli, *The Apotheosis of Penelope Boothby* (1792). All three of these pieces are reproduced in stipple engravings in Boothby's *Sorrows* and two are the subject of sonnets (XII and XVI). When impoverished, isolated Smith – writing in circumstances entirely different from those of Boothby, the wealthy and well-connected baronet – bemoans that 'save the portrait on my bleeding breast, | I have no semblance of that form adored' in sonnet XCI (lines 8–9), she could be thinking of Boothby's multiple semblances of Penelope. His use of the Italian form also contrasts with Smith's more insubstantial sonnet forms, steeped in an absence and inability to represent. Her earlier sonnets having challenged the ability of the sonnet form to immortalise, as Smith herself finds herself elegising a female subject, her sonnet is 'heartless, helpless, hopeless' (line 11).

Economies of Vegetation

As well as occupying different sonnet spaces, Smith's sonnet LXXIX overrides another formal divide. Her poem addresses the speaker of Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* (1792, dated 1791), consisting of two long didactic poems in rhyming couplets, which Smith names as 'one of my favourite books' (*Letters*, p. 332). Darwin – a physician, natural philosopher, and poet – was based for most of his life in Lichfield. The second of the two poems, 'The Loves of Plants', had already been published in 1789, meeting with popular and critical acclaim. Based on Linnaeus's sexual system, in 'The Loves of Plants' male and female anthropomorphised flowers attract each other, marry, and reproduce in

⁸ Sir Brooke Boothby, *Sorrows. Sacred to the Memory of Penelope* (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1796).

light-hearted mode, offset by Darwin's extensive scientific notes to the poem. The more serious first part of *The Botanic Garden*, 'The Economy of Vegetation', massive in its scope, celebrates nature in all its forms – from the creation of the universe to plants rising from the earth – as well as contemporary natural philosophy, industrial advancement, chemistry, and technological innovation; roving through history, myth, and religion. As Smith herself writes in a note to her sonnet LXXVII, Darwin's imagination 'happily applies every object of Natural History to the purposes of Poetry' (p. 81), and it is from this poem that she quotes in footnotes to sonnets in the second volume of *Elegiac Sonnets*.

'The Economy of Vegetation' opens with an explicit invocation to the goddess of botany by the genius of the place: 'Hither, emerging from yon orient skies, | Botanic Goddess!' and then 'She comes! – the Goddess! – through the whispering air, | Bright as the morn' and speaks the poem – four cantos each on one of the four elements – to an audience of gnomes, sylphs, nymphs, and fiery forms.⁹ Smith's sonnet LXXIX may draw on a section in 'The Loves of Plants' that invokes the 'Botanic Muse!'

who in this latter age
Led by your airy hand the Swedish sage,
Bad his keen eye your secret haunts explore
On dewy dell, high wood, and winding shore;
Say on each leaf how tiny Graces dwell[.] (canto I: lines 31–5)

Darwin presents Linnaeus as led by the botanic muse to 'each leaf' in a variety of different landscapes, echoed in Smith's sonnet as the speaker hopes to explore the 'silent shades' of the botanic goddess and learn the 'bright varieties' of 'every veined leaf' in different locations. Darwin's ventriloquism characterises botany as a female enterprise and offers a voice for the woman writer in his presentation of the goddess of botany as a – highly knowledgeable and empowered – woman poet, which Smith thus reappropriates. The goddess is the subject of Smith's later botanical poem 'Flora', which is in a sense a realisation of Smith's sonnet LXXIX, in which she proposes to learn the goddess's 'bright varieties': 'Flora' evidences this learning, naming the plants that bear the leaves of sonnet LXXIX. Those that 'mantle the cliffs' are described and named, for example:

And half way up the clift, whose rugged brow
Hangs o'er the ever toiling Surge below,
Springs the light Tamarisk. (lines 171–3)

⁹ Erasmus Darwin, *The Economy of Vegetation*, in *The Botanic Garden; A Poem, in Two Parts. Part I containing The Economy of Vegetation, Part II The Loves of Plants, with Philosophic Notes* (London: J. Johnson, 1791), canto I: lines 43–4 and 59–60; canto II: line 78.

A note gives further details and the Latin name. The streaming leaf also appears: 'From depths where Corals spring from crystal caves, | And break with scarlet branch the eddying waves, Where Algæ stream' (lines 179–81). 'Flora' also opens with a therapeutic supplication similar to Smith's sonnet LXXIX – 'Remote from scenes, where the o'erwearied mind | Shrinks from the crimes and follies of mankind' (lines 1–2) – and can be read as a reworking of that sonnet. This contrasts with the earlier couplet poem 'The Origin of Flattery', which bears little resemblance to Smith's sonnets or other poems, and indeed was removed from editions of *Elegiac Sonnets* owing to the departure in tone.

Through the botanical goddess, then, different poetic forms coalesce. In her *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin* (1804) Anna Seward records Darwin's dislike of the sonnet form: 'Our botanic Poet had in general no taste for Sonnets' and instead was 'Absorbed in the resolve of bringing the couplet-measure to a degree of sonorous perfection, which should transcend the numbers of Dryden and Pope, he sought to confine poetic excellence exclusively to that style'.¹⁰ She quotes from Hayley: 'desiring much the letter'd world might own | The countless forms of beauty only one'; Darwin's exclusivity of poetic form is at odds with the 'countless forms of beauty' in the natural world his poems celebrate, and in contrast with the variety of forms, poetic and botanical, Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* appropriates.¹¹ Like Seward, more recent critics have aligned Darwin with Pope and the 'Augustan' age. Desmond King-Hele, for examples, argues that the poetic project of Wordsworth and thus 'Romanticism', was based on a repulsion from Darwin's Popean versification.¹² Again, Smith overrides such disjunctions; like her appropriation of Pope to her sonnets, she draws on Darwin as couplets evolve in to the sonnet form, and 'Flora' – a rewriting of sonnet LXXIX – is in heroic couplets after Darwin. Her invocation of the 'Goddess of Botany' is particularly apt in this respect, as Darwin's poem *The Economy of Vegetation*, voiced by the goddess, is much concerned with the transformation and transmutation of 'forms' in a dizzying range of modes, from the way water shifts between steam, clouds, rain, snow,

¹⁰ Anna Seward, *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin, Chiefly During his Residence at Lichfield, with Anecdotes of His Friends and Criticisms of His Writings* (London: J. Johnson, 1804), pp. 386–7.

¹¹ The lines seem to be slightly misquoted and appear to come from Hayley's *An Essay on Epic Poetry*: 'Beauty's countless forms are only one' (I: line 394).

¹² Desmond King-Hele, *Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), p. 68. Smith does not feature in King-Hele's book. Donald H. Reiman locates Darwin 'at the end of the tradition of didactic poetry in the closed heroic couplet that had flourished from the time of Pope's *Essay on Criticism* and *Essay on Man*', while M. M. Mahood suggests that *The Loves of Plants* 'out-Popes Pope' (Reiman, 'Introduction', *The Botanic Garden* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1978), p. v; Mahood, *The Poet as Botanist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 55.

dew, springs, rills, rivers, and the sea to how a leaf bud can change into a flower bud. Like natural forms, literary forms transform, as heroic couplets morph into sonnets. It seems significant, then, that Darwin's 'economy', and indeed the whole natural world, is overseen and directed by a female entity. The goddess of botany governs the connections between all living things in their various forms and Smith's *Flora* takes a similar role in the poem. This can be related to the literary economy Smith oversees, which departs from the anxieties and deliberate elisions that characterise some of the relationships between her male contemporaries. In her sonnets Smith naturalises genealogical links, revealing lines of influence – the poetic river genealogy, for example – that are elsewhere suppressed. Fairer argues that there is an 'organic' relationship between texts among poets of the Warton school, yet while this may fit for the relationship between Warton and the chosen poets of his native tradition, for example, his poetic relationship with Pope is notably 'unorganic', which Smith brings to light in her own verse.¹³

Moreover, Smith's later works are also able to locate her own poems within this literary economy. Rather than just adding a note to a sonnet acknowledging the source of a quotation, in footnotes to some of her final sonnets Smith situates her own work within a textual framework. In the large footnote to 'To the Goddess of Botany', Smith places herself as following Milton and Rousseau in her poetic approach, and the footnote to another botanical sonnet, LXXVII 'To the Insect of the Gossamer', names works by Lister, Darwin, Shakespeare, and – when it appeared in *Conversations* – Gilbert White: works that she has not borrowed from, but which take the same subject. Other late works realise a literary economy in a different way. In a section on rivers in *Rural Walks* (1795), as noted, one of her own sonnets is printed alongside one of Bowles's, published after her own. And, in her novel *Marchmont*, a chapter epigraph is taken from one of her own sonnets (sonnet XLVI 'Written at Penshurst'), while the preceding epigraphs in the volume are taken from Smith's usual range of sources, including Oliver Goldsmith, Pope, Shakespeare, and Thomson. 'Letter X' of *A Natural History of Birds* (1807) lists poems that feature nightingales and includes two of her own sonnets (III and VII) as well as poems by Darwin, Milton, Thomson, Petrarch, and Coleridge. Smith's return to the nightingale here demonstrates the shift from her initial sonnets that feature the bird, where it encodes a deferential aspect. Despite her modesty and continued avowals of her poems' inferiority, Smith's acknowledgment of what comes after her

¹³ Fairer's *Organising Poetry* is informed by a very different version of the term 'organic' from that espoused by Young, Schlegel, and Coleridge: it 'carries a sense and set of associations at odds with those traditionally exploited in criticism of Coleridge and his associates. [...] what is relevant to my purposes is a home-grown eighteenth-century organic of markedly different character, an empirical concept with very different critical implications' (p. 2), focused on process, inheritance, and continuity rather than new beginnings.

Charlotte Smith and the Sonnet

own sonnets – Coleridge and Bowles, for example – suggests a more assertive awareness of her own influence and place within a literary economy.

Thus, her later poems rework previous presentations of the river and sea. In 'Flora', the speaker of the poem wishes to 'trace her power along the mountain stream' (p. 140), and follows a river from source to sea:

See! from its rude and rocky source, o'erhung
With female Fern, and glossy Adder's-tongue,
Slowly it wells, in pure and crystal drops,
And steals soft-gliding thro' the upland copse[.] (lines 141–4)

The landscape is feminised from the start. Eventually, the naiad leads the goddess 'Down to the Sea; where even the briny sands | Their product offer to her flowing hands' (lines 165–6). Like sonnet LXXIX and the passage from *Minor Morals*, botanical engagement is steeped in movements between river and sea. In sonnet LXXIX the leaf appears 'in mead or woodland', on 'dimpling rivers', and streams 'beneath the ocean waves', and in *Minor Morals* forms are 'washed by the spray of the sea' while 'Others float on the surface of the river'. The presentation of the river in 'Flora' is overtly different from that of the Arun in Smith's sonnets, wherein it represents an overpowering male lineage of which the sonnet's speaker is not part. Indeed, the naiad in 'Flora' follows a similar course to that of the earlier sonnet XXXIII 'To the Naiad of the Arun': 'Go, rural Naiad! wind thy stream along | Thro' woods and wilds: then seek the ocean caves' the speaker instructs, yet it is a landscape 'where 'mid British bards thy natives shine!' The female naiad, subordinate to the river's male literary tradition, is reworked in the fully feminised 'Flora'. As well as Smith's earlier river poems, 'Flora' also departs from previous presentations of the female seascape, which, although liberating, is also a barren, desolate space. Empowering in a different way, 'Flora' reconnects source, river, and sea: a fecund, feminised, and naturalised connectivity.

Smith's 'Flora' also invokes a feminised landscape in a different way in naming the speaker's childhood river as the River Wey, rather than the Arun, the only time in which she does so. Fancy is implored:

To lend thy magic pencil, and to bring
Such lovely forms, as in life's happier Spring
On the green margin of my native Wey,
Before mine infant eyes were wont to play (lines 7–12)

Smith's early childhood was spent between two other family homes aside from Bignor Park – the London townhouse where she was born and the country estate Stoke Park (or Place), near Guildford in Surrey, that was sold in 1761;

Smith was also baptised at Stoke Church. Thus, although Smith most strongly associates the South Downs and the River Arun with her childhood throughout her oeuvre, the River Wey was also ‘native’ to Smith at Stoke. She returned to this Surrey landscape at the end of her life: in October 1805 she moved to live in Tilford – a village near Stoke – which was her final residence before her death. The two branches of the Wey flow through Tilford before converging nearby. This childhood landscape was a more maternal space to Smith: her mother Anna, who died when Smith was three (probably in childbirth with Smith’s sister, Catherine), was buried at Stoke and Smith desired to be – and was – buried there ‘with my Mother’ (*Letters*, p. 471). A contrast is suggested between the ‘paternal’ landscape of Bignor Park (sonnet XCII) and the more maternal environs of Surrey to which Smith returned. Smith persistently presents botany and natural history as an activity connected with motherhood and her works for children mainly take the form of a mother or mother-figure walking with and teaching her wards about natural history and poetry. Botany is central in the mother–daughter relationship between Mrs Glenmorris and her daughter in *The Young Philosopher*, for example, and in *Minor Morals*, the suggestion of Mrs Belmour that Mary should study botanical drawing is contrasted with the intention of her father:

As for you, my dear Mary, you know, that when your father proposed cultivating the talent he thought he perceived you had for drawing, by having masters attend you at great expence to teach you to draw figures and landscapes, I desired you might, at least for the present, decline his intended kindness, and that you might learn to draw flowers (XII: p. 221)

Smith’s own life appears to be echoed here, in its recollection of her tutelage in landscape art by George Smith. After her mother’s death, Smith and her sister were in-part raised by her maternal aunt Lucy Towers, who is also suggested in the Mrs Belmour character. In ‘Flora’, Smith’s maternal Wey is presented in a much less complicated way than the Arun, and although ‘native Wey’ may recall Warton its banks are notably free of literary precursors.¹⁴ Smith does not necessarily revisit the river, yet seeks to recall ‘life’s happier Spring’ through the ‘lovely forms’ of plants and flowers she knew on the riverbanks as a child.

Turning again to ‘To the Goddess of Botany’, the ‘streaming leaf’ in that sonnet suggests an element of literary continuation or influence not present

¹⁴ Aside from Smith’s ‘Flora’, the River Wey features in Pope’s *Windsor-Forest* as one of several tributaries of the Thames invoked: ‘And chalky Wey, that rolls a milky wave’ (*Major Works*, line 342); it is not involved in the literary aspect of rivers Pope heralds, which Smith draws on in her Arun sonnets.

in Smith's desolate seascapes. In an interesting essay on sonnet LXXIX 'To the Goddess of Botany', Judith Hawley contrasts this sonnet with Smith's signature sonnets, which 'situate the speaker on the sea shore on a perilous rocky cliff, contemplating the destructive forces of the sea.'¹⁵ She draws on Peter Sacks's conception of the elegy, and the significance of life-giving springs and continuing rivers – as opposed to the desolate sea – within the genre. She writes that at the end of sonnet LXXIX, 'the subject of the elegy which is, I would argue, Smith's own life, both streams with natural renewal and drowns' (p. 193). Although I do not necessarily agree that the sonnet must have an elegiac 'subject' (or that it must be Smith), there is indeed a movement at the end of this sonnet in the form of the streaming leaf that is absent in Smith's seascape sonnets. Many of Smith's late poems enact a similar simultaneous loss and continuation. The quotation from elegy 'Lycidas' – the poem that provides the material for Sacks's reading – in sonnet LXXIX is rather apt in this context. In Milton's poem, Lycidas moves from death, 'under the whelming tide' (*Shorter Poems*, line 157), like Smith's leaf, to renewal; Lycidas is 'sunk low, but mounted high' (line 172). Both poems are able to occupy two places or states at once. As noted, Smith's wild seascapes correspond with her suffering 'soul' and form, yet there is nowhere to go, as such, aside from imploring fortitude (sonnet XXXV); botany's 'silent shades of soothing hue' offer not only alleviation but also renewal.

Gossamer

Smith's interest in the intertwining of natural history, form, and literary tradition is evident in two sonnets of the 1797 second volume of *Elegiac Sonnets* that both take the same subject, LXIII 'The Gossamer' and LXXVII 'To the Insect of the Gossamer'. Rather than the vast landscape, these sonnets are again concerned with the close-up view of intricate natural structures, here spread upon the land, 'the web, charged with innumerable globules of bright dew, that is frequently on heaths and commons in autumnal mornings' as stated in the note to sonnet LXIII (p. 72); and, as the sonnet itself presents it:

O'ER faded heath-flowers spun, or thorny furze,
The filmy Gossamer is lightly spread;
Waving in every sighing air that stirs,
As Fairy fingers had entwined the thread:
A thousand trembling orbs of lucid dew

¹⁵ Judith Hawley, 'Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*: Losses and Gains', in *Women's Poetry in the Enlightenment: The Making of a Canon, 1730–1820*, ed. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 193.

Spangle the texture of the fairy loom,
As if soft Sylphs, lamenting as they flew,
Had wept departed Summer's transient bloom:
But the wind rises, and the turf receives
The glittering web: –So, evanescent, fade
Bright views that Youth with sanguine heart believes:
So vanish schemes of bliss, by Fancy made;
Which, fragile as the fleeting dews of morn,
Leave but the wither'd heath, and barren thorn! (pp. 72–3)

The delicate structure of the gossamer presents a fitting subject for Smith's sonnet form, an alternative to the crumbling cliffs of her seascape poems. Like many other 'elegiac' sonnets, sonnet LXIII is concerned in a different way with transience, insubstantiality, loss, and disintegration. The sonnet presents an aerial world of fairies and sylphs redolent of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, in which the sylph's garments are made from gossamer:

Thin glittering textures of the filmy dew
Dipped in the richest tincture of the skies,
Where light disports in ever-mingling dyes. (*Major Works*,
canto II: lines 65–6)

Smith's emphasis in sonnet LXIII is on minuteness and intricacy; this is form on a very small, fragile scale. The allusions to weaving connect the gossamer with the workings of fancy and the imagination, associated with weaving elsewhere in *Elegiac Sonnets* and in other poetry of the period. The 'fairy loom' of line six appears in Smith's earlier sonnet XLVIII 'To Mrs. ****', in which it is observed how

Imagination now has lost her powers,
Nor will her fairy loom again assay
To dress Affliction in a robe of flowers. (lines 6–8)

The product of imagination's fairy loom has – or has lost – a similar covering, transformative power to that of the gossamer, which transforms, albeit temporarily, the 'wither'd heath and barren thorn'. In sonnet LXIII, 'fancy', gossamer and the sonnet form are all aligned in their impermanence, 'fragile as the fleeting dews of morn'. As seen, the 'illegitimate' sonnet form was associated by critics with insubstantiality, a 'facile form' as Seward describes it.

Webs and weaving spiders have long-standing associations with creativity, particularly female creativity – and indeed its suppression – through the Arachne myth. Although Smith describes the lines of gossamer as a 'web',

Charlotte Smith and the Sonnet

there is something of a difference between gossamer and the intricate structures of more elaborate spider's webs, however. Seward's sonnet on the legitimate form describes how 'Our greater Milton, hath by many a lay, | Wov'n on this arduous model', suggesting the woven textile-text metaphor. Seward's sonnet form is an arduously woven complex structure to Smith's network of flimsy gossamer lines, with no set, preformed pattern. In this way, Smith's sonnets are poised between careful craft and something much freer. Although the sonnet here is regularly Shakespearean, in many of Smith's irregular sonnets the form appears 'lightly spread', 'Waving in every sighing air that stirs'. As in her botany sonnets discussed above, Smith's attitude to form appears unfixed: in sonnet LXIII the threads are all at once carefully 'entwined', produced by a more mechanical 'loom', and likened to the production of weeping sylphs in flight.

Sonnet LXXVII suggests further correspondences between poetic subject and form:

SMALL, viewless Æronaut, that by the line
Of Gossamer suspended, in mid air
Float'st on a sun-beam – Living Atom, where
Ends thy breeze-guided voyage; with what design
In Æther dost thou launch thy form minute,
Mocking the eye? – Alas! before the veil
Of denser clouds shall hide thee, the pursuit
Of the keen Swift may end thy fairy sail! –
Thus on the golden thread that Fancy weaves
Buoyant, as Hope's illusive flattery breathes,
The young and visionary Poet leaves
Life's dull realities, while sevenfold wreaths
Of rainbow-light around his head revolve.
Ah! soon at Sorrow's touch the radiant dreams dissolve. (pp. 80–1)

The 'line of | Gossamer' of the sonnet's opening suggests the verse lines of the sonnet itself, redolent of the 'lucid line' and 'bright sea-line' of Smith's seascape sonnets. The sonnet also makes explicit, in line nine, the connection between threads of fancy and of gossamer implied in sonnet LXIII. In this sonnet, form is slightly less regular; it is English except for the first closed Italian quatrain. As it often is in Smith's sonnets, however, form is complicated through syntactical and grammatical sense, which – aside from the clear octave–sestet divide – mainly transcends line-endings and structural divides, with other breaks and pauses within the lines. Again, this gives the effect of occupying different formal spaces simultaneously, which the sonnet floats between in an unfixed, shifting, gossamer-like way. The alexandrine, cut off syntactically from the rest of the sonnet, gives the impression of the dissolution it describes.

The sonnet presents another aerial world of winds, fairies, and flight, which the footnote places under the direction of the goddess of botany through the reference to ‘The Economy of Vegetation’, in which ‘the Goddess of Botany thus direct her Sylphs – “Thin clouds of Gossamer in air display, | And hide the vales’ chaste lily from the ray”’, bringing the sonnet into the remit of the feminised botanical world, and also of the couplet, again recalling Pope in both subject and form. Smith’s focus in this sonnet is specifically on the ‘insect’ – as the spider was still known in 1797 – of the gossamer, and in the sestet the correlation between poet and spider is made explicit. Smith also quotes from the naturalist Martin Lister in her note, the second longest of *Elegiac Sonnets*, which bears interestingly on the poet–spider analogy in relation to form. Lister (1639–1712), a physician and naturalist, was the first natural historian to study spiders and to make the discovery of ‘ballooning’ spiders with which Smith’s sonnet is concerned. Before Lister’s discoveries, gossamer had remained a great mystery, commonly thought to be formed from dew. His *Historiae Animalium* (1678) provided the first systematic description of the structure and habits of the spiders. As Smith observes of the gossamer in her note:

The almost imperceptible threads floating in the air, towards the end of Summer or Autumn, in a still evening, [...] It is on these that a minute species of spider conveys themselves from place to place; some-times rising with the wind to a great height in the air. Dr. Lister among other naturalists, remarked these insects, ‘to fly they cannot strictly be said, they being carried into the air by external force; but they can, in case the wind suffer them, steer their course [...] and to the purpose of rowing themselves along in the air, it is observable that they ever take their flight backwards, that is, their head looking a contrary way like a sculler on the Thames[?]. (p. 80)

Thus, through this context a rather interesting conception of the ‘visionary’ poet is forged in Smith’s sonnet, likened to the ballooning spider, transcending life’s ‘dull realities’. Typically of Smith, however, this flight or transcendence is temporary and limited, dependent on external forces that also bring about its end. Smith quotes Lister from French naturalist Buffon’s *Natural History of Birds, Fish, Insects and Reptiles* (1793), and other attributes of the gossamer spider detailed in the same section further illuminate Smith’s ‘poet’. Lister relates how gossamer shoots out from a small hole in the stomach of the spider:¹⁶

¹⁶ As Jacqueline Labbe points out, Smith mistakenly references this to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, rather than Buffon’s *Natural History*, in the note to her sonnet (Smith, *Works*, XLIV: p. 231).

[I]t darted out a thread with the violence and stream we see water spout out of a jet: this thread, taken up by the wind, was immediately carried to some fathoms long, still issuing out of the belly of the animal. Presently after the spider leaped into the air, and the thread mounted her up swiftly.¹⁷

This recalls the liquidity of the streaming leaf of ‘To the Goddess of Botany’, again suggesting spontaneity. Lister and Buffon both emphasise the innate ability of spiders to spin thread, an in-born faculty rather than a learned art. As well as flight, strongly redolent of the sublime, which is associated with flight, elevation, and transport from Longinus onwards, the appellation of the insect as an ‘aeronaut’ also suggests invention; the term was coined only in 1784 in response to the invention of the hot-air balloon in France the year before. The *OED* gives Smith’s usage as its first application to ballooning spiders. A non-spider-related precedent can also be found in Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* to describe the instigators of the revolution, suggestively enough – ‘Standing on the firm ground of the British constitution, let us be satisfied to admire, rather than attempt to follow in their desperate flights the aëronauts of France’ (p. 249) – befitting the revolutionary impulse with which Smith’s use of form had been aligned. Smith refers to the ‘poet’ in earlier Arun sonnets XXXIII, XXVI, and XXX, sonnet XIX addressed to Hayley, and nightingale sonnet VII; here she seems to be conjuring a different poet, ‘young and visionary’. Critics have suggested a similarity between Smith’s poet and that of Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’ (1816).¹⁸ Mary Robinson – who had read the poem in manuscript – presents Coleridge in the terms of his poem in her ode ‘To the Poet Coleridge’ (1801): ‘rapt in the visionary theme! | spirit divine!’ (*Works*, II: lines 1–2). Smith would thus appear to present something of a ‘Romantic’ poet in her sonnet: male, visionary, and young, and able to transcend ‘Life’s dull realities’ in a way that the female Smith, burdened and nearing the end of her career, is not. Yet her sonnet also looks back, here – in the note – to Shakespeare and Darwin, and through him to Pope and the world of the couplet. Thus, the sonnet is poised between two formal approaches, and facilitates the shift from one to the other through a

¹⁷ Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, *Natural History of Birds, Fish, Insects and Reptiles*, 5 vols. (London: J. S. Barr, 1793), V: p. 155.

¹⁸ Jennifer Keith compares Smith’s ‘young and visionary poet’, suspended with ‘sevenfold wreaths | Of rainbow-light around his head revolve’ with Coleridge’s: ‘Weave a circle round him thrice, | And close your eyes with hold dread, | For he on honey-dew hath fed, | And drunk the milk of Paradise’ (‘Kubla Khan’, lines 51–4; Jennifer Keith, ‘“Pre-Romanticism” and the Ends of Eighteenth-Century Poetry’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. John Sitter [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], p. 184). Labbe’s note to the sonnet in Smith’s *Works* also directs the reader to these lines (p. 231).

lineage that travels from Shakespeare, through to Pope, Darwin, Smith, and on to the young male 'Romantic' poet. The way the gossamer insect is looking backwards while moving forward – 'like a sculler on the Thames' – also gives the impression of moving in two different directions at once.

Lister and Buffon both gender the gossamer spider as female, yet in her sonnet Smith's poet is male, creating a pull between the female poet, creator of the sonnet, and the 'young and visionary' male poet within it, both associated with the insect of the gossamer implicitly and explicitly.¹⁹ Again, Smith writes herself out of the poem as 'poet'. In her Arun sonnets, unable to fit into literary tradition, Smith looks ahead to a future poet, yet here the future poet follows or is impelled by something the female poet has created: there is a sense of the male following the female. As shown in my reading of the Bignor Park sonnet, the innovation of the late poems also undercuts their elegiac aspect. Again, Smith's sonnet seems to split, occupying two different positions. Indeed, the whole sonnet is pulled between opposing states: male and female, transcendence and reality, flight and limitation, sky and earth, form and formlessness. These tensions enhance the instability of the gossamer-sonnet, which ends by falling apart, as Smith's authorial subject finds no suitable model and disappears. Smith's sonnet speaks to the contradictions, inconsistencies, and suppressions of influence inherent in the discourse surrounding the eighteenth-century and 'Romantic' sonnet, across issues of gender, form, and tradition. Despite its more positive ending with the streaming leaf, sonnet LXXIX 'To the Goddess of Botany', which follows two sonnets later, is similarly pulled between different meanings and forms, and enacts a process whereby the poetic 'I' is lost.²⁰

Beachy Head

Towards the end of her life, then, Smith reconceives her 'place' in literary history. Jennifer Keith argues that the 'precariousness of the poet represented in many late eighteenth-century works', such as Smith's gossamer sonnets, 'unfortunately mirrors their disappearance from literary history' (p. 284). Smith's fading, disintegrating sonnet subjects look forward to the way in which she fades from literary canons following her popularity, as discussed in relation to sonnet XLIV. Smith's late sonnets also increasingly invoke states of 'Forgetfulness!' for their anguished speaker, and 'Oblivion! Take me to thy

¹⁹ Also, in Darwin's poem the (female) goddess of botany directs (female) sylphs to produce gossamer clouds.

²⁰ As Judith Hawley points out of sonnet LXXIX, the subject of the sonnet's final lines is ambiguous: is it the 'veined leaf' which lurks, mantles, floats and streams, or the 'I' introduced in line 3?; 'the syntax is so fluid that the speaker becomes lost' ('Losses and Gains', p. 193).

quiet reign' (Sonnet XC, lines 1 and 6), which become intertwined with the fate of the sonnets themselves. Rather than 'mirroring', however, I suggest Smith's poems and outlook anticipate her place in literary history, showing an awareness of the processes underpinning it. While Smith's early sonnets absent herself from male literary tradition, her late works reconfigure this position, showing how her experiences as a woman poet are mimed by the processes of reception, as she is inherited by male poets. She cites Bowles's sonnets, for example, influenced by her own, yet her avowed inferiority as she does so looks forward to how Coleridge and Abrams write her out of sonnet history.

After the 1800 edition of *Elegiac Sonnets*, Smith published no further poems in the form. Her final volume of poems, *Beachy Head*, does not contain sonnets, yet it looks back to and contains echoes from Smith's sonnet oeuvre. Smith herself invested the volume with considerable importance. As she wrote to Cadell and Davies:

I confess it is my ambition, as the time cannot be far off when my literary career will close, to make the whole as perfect as it will admit of – As it is on the Poetry I have written that I trust for the little reputation I may hereafter have & know that it is not the least likely among the works of modern Poets to reach another period. (*Letters*, pp. 705–6)

As well as this work, Cadell and Davies declined Smith's proposal for a three-volume collection of her poems, and retained the copyright of her sonnets. Smith thus had to rely on the *Beachy Head* collection, which was eventually published by J. Johnson, for her reputation. Smith did not live to see its publication; she died in October 1806, and *Beachy Head* was published the following year. As the letter cited above implies, the volume was perceived by Smith to be bound up with her poetic legacy. Reviews of *Beachy Head* are elegiac, obituary-like: '[i]t is with a kind of melancholy pleasure that we prepare to pay a tribute of posthumous applause to the elegant genius of Mrs. Charlotte Smith', wrote a commentator in *The Annual Review*, and reviews commemorate Smith as *sonneteer*, specifically, despite the lack of sonnets in *Beachy Head*.²¹ Smith's final collection thus constitutes something of a

²¹ Anonymous, 'ART. V. Beachy Head: with other Poems', *The Annual Review*, 6 (1807), p. 536. In *The British Critic* it is noted that 'Most sincerely do we lament the death of Mrs. Charlotte Smith [...] a genuine child of genius [...] Her Sonnets in particular will remain models of that species of composition', and *The Universal Magazine*, while 'Not a Sonnet have we been able to discover, throughout the miscellaneous poetry. [...] We have always esteemed her as holding a very high rank among those who have in his country cultivated the composition of sonnets' (Anonymous, review of *Beachy Head*, *The Universal Magazine*, 7 [1807], p. 231; Anonymous, review of *Beachy Head*, *The British Critic*, 30 [1807], p. 170).

memorial of Smith's sonnet career. I consider two poems from the volume, the unfinished title-poem 'Beachy Head', which I argue constitutes an elegy of sorts for Smith's sonnets, and the finished 'Saint Monica', in which, I argue, Smith offers a final configuration of the place of her sonnets in literary history. Both of these poems in a sense rewrite sonnet XLIV, 'Sonnet Written in the Churchyard at Middleton in Sussex', Smith's most famous and influential sonnet.

'Beachy Head' is Smith's longest poem, amounting to 731 lines of blank verse, which – unlike her sea sonnets – goes some way to match the scale of the seascape with which it is concerned. The poem opens 'On thy stupendous summit, rock sublime!' (line 1), and roves through a range of aspects pertaining to the headland. The poem is concerned with various histories, spanning the geological, personal, natural, European, and global. In particular, it takes a special interest in remains, and the way in which they have become embedded within the headland itself, such as the 'strange and foreign forms | Of sea-shells' (lines 373–4) and the

Neolithic
remains of men, of whom is left
No traces in the records of mankind,
Save what these half obliterated mounds
And half fill'd trenches doubtfully impart[,] (lines 401–5)

These coalesce with the 'enormous bones' of elephants (line 417) and the more recent bones of sailors drowned at sea, buried in the cliff-face by Hermit Darby, whose own bones eventually join them. The poem eulogises the various lifeforms that have roamed and inhabited Beachy Head, and the histories that have been played out upon it, speaking to how they can be 'traced' in the landscape. And, as Smith roams across and encounters these remains, she leaves her own traces upon Beachy Head; the headland becomes studded with echoes and images, fragments of her own sonnets.²² 'Ah! hills below'd! – where once a happy child' of sonnet V becomes 'Ah! hills so early loved!' (line 368) and sonnet XLV, 'My early vows were paid to Nature's shrine', is reworked as

²² See John M. Anderson, "'Beachy Head': The Romantic Fragment Poem As Mosaic', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 63 (2000), pp. 119–46. Anderson traces one single image from 'Beachy Head', the 'moonbright line', across a range of Smith's poems. He describes 'Beachy Head' as a 'rethinking, reforging, and assemblage of materials from the range of Charlotte Smith's reading and from her entire poetic career' (p. 146). To Kari Lokke, 'through the device of self-quotation and reference to her entire poetic works 'Smith creates in 'Beachy Head', a 'complex tribute to herself' (Lokke, 'The Figure of the Hermit in Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head*', in *Charlotte Smith in British Romanticism* [London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008], p. 48).

Charlotte Smith and the Sonnet

'An early worshipper at Nature's shrine' (line 346). The 'upland shepherd' of sonnet LXXXIII makes an appearance (line 322), and the way he 'marks the bright Sea-line' in that sonnet is an action repeated at the beginning of 'Beachy Head' by the speaker, who 'From thy projecting head-land [...] would mark' the seascape (line 12). The 'wandering fairy fires, that oft on land | Misdread the Pilgrim' of sonnet LXXXVI also reappear as the 'false fire, from marsh effluvia born | [which] Misdreads the wanderer' (lines 256–7). The poem also reconciles the prospect and close-up view of the natural world Smith takes in her sonnets, holding them in dialogue. The speaker is able to 'behold | Those widely spreading views' (lines 369–70), 'And still, observing objects more minute' (lines 372).

The poem ends with Smith's poetic signature, a reworking of sonnets LXVI and XLIV, as well as its corresponding 'Elegy', as the headland crumbles into the sea:

One dark night
The equinoctial wind blew south by west,
Fierce on the shore;— the bellowing cliffs were shook
Even to their stony base, and fragments fell
Flashing and thundering on the angry flood. (lines 716–20)

At the end of the 'Beachy Head' the attention of the poem turns to the hermit who lives within the headland itself. At the end of the poem, he becomes indistinguishable from Smith, and the poem indistinguishable from the headland. For, following the 'equinoctial' storm:

At day-break, anxious for the lonely man,
His cave the mountain shepherds visited,
Tho' sand and banks of weeds had choak'd their way —
He was not in it; but his drowned cor'se
By the waves wafted, near his former home
Receiv'd the rites of burial. Those who read
Chisel'd within the rock, these mournful lines,
Memorials of his sufferings[.] (lines 721–8)

The poem 'Beachy Head' (along with its sonnet references) appears to be 'chisel'd within the rock' of Beachy Head itself. The poem ends with the hermit's death, reflecting the posthumous publication of 'Beachy Head' and confirming its elegiac aspect. Curiously, at the end of the poem, Smith's sonnet memorial embedded in the majestic headland is mined by the very forces which once heralded her literary force. In the final years of her life, Smith was aware

that she would 'sink quietly into the gulph of oblivion', and she writes her fragile inheritance into Beachy Head/'Beachy Head'.

Significantly, Beachy Head is open to interpretation, which is nowhere more apparent than in the much-discussed section of 'Beachy Head' on fossils. As Smith's note to the poem records: 'Among the crumbling chalk I have often found shells, some quite in a fossil state and hardly distinguishable from chalk. Others appeared more recent; cockles, muscles, and periwinkles, I well remember, were among the number' (p. 165). She ponders different explanations for the fossils' destination, as she 'Wondering remark[s] the strange and foreign forms | Of sea-shells; with the pale calcareous soil | Mingled':

Tho' surely the blue Ocean (from the heights
Where the downs westward trend, but dimly seen)
Here never roll'd its surge. Does Nature then
Mimic, in wanton mood, fantastic shapes
Of bivalves, and inwreathed volutes, that cling
To the dark sea-rock of the wat'ry world?
Or did this range of chalky mountains, once
Form a vast bason, where the Ocean waves
Swell'd fathomless? (lines 376–84)

At the time of 'Beachy Head', geology was emerging and developing rapidly as a scientific discipline, and the Geological Society of London was founded in 1807, the same year in which the poem was published. Fossil discoveries drove developments in geology and changed understandings of time and histories. As Anne D. Wallace has shown, theories for explaining fossils, encompassing 'scripturalism and materialism, neptunism and vulcanism, and catrastrophism and graduationsm appear in many permutations in the ongoing debates among natural philosophers', including Jean Andre de Luc, Georges Cuvier, and Jean Baptiste Lamarck.²³ Explanations varied, from falling sea levels to biblical deluges, and hills emerging from the sea. As Smith turns her attention to these 'strange and foreign forms' she runs through the possibilities by turns, and as she does so the poem's sense of time expands and contracts. The poem remains ambivalent, for Smith deems accounts of fossils to be 'but conjecture, | Food for vague theories, or vain dispute' (lines 393–4), and faith is put instead in the peasant who 'goes | unheeding such inquiry; with no care | But that the kindly change of sun and shower' (lines 395–7). Notwithstanding the epistemological uncertainty of Smith's poem and of geological discourse surrounding fossils more widely, the appearances

²³ Anne D. Wallace, 'Picturesque Fossils, Sublime Geology? The Crisis of Authority in Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head*', *European Romantic Review*, 13 (2002), p. 86.

of fossils in the poem decidedly ‘deepen’ its sense of time, and, as Wallace writes, the ‘depth of chronological record’ fossils encode, the ‘history of earth, the histories of its species, human histories, [are] all brought into question’ (p. 87). Smith’s meditation on fossils opens up different ways of reading and understanding history through place, drawing attention to the indeterminacy of historiography. Her poem encourages us to read remains, legacies, and histories openly, and to be aware of how they are subject to change. As such, readers encountering Smith’s sonnets should be aware that literary history and a writer’s place within it are not fixed, as Smith’s own critical fortunes have shown. Taking its cue from Smith, this book has looked beyond received literary histories, from Warton’s positioning to more recent accounts of the Romantic sonnet revival.

While Smith may teach us to be open as readers of history in ‘Beachy Head’, she herself most conspicuously writes her own place within it in her poem ‘Saint Monica’. As Kari Lokke has written, the poem ‘reveals Smith’s conceptualization of British literary history and her place, as a woman poet, in that history’.²⁴ It can also in a sense be read as her own posthumous contribution to the discourse surrounding her sonnet XLIV and in some ways seems to answer the commentators on Middleton church discussed in chapter four. Suggestively, Wordsworth’s famous observation on Smith is made in the context of ‘Saint Monica’. To quote the note more fully:

The form of stanza in this Poem [‘Stanzas suggested in a Steamboat off St. Bees’ Head, on the coast of Cumberland’], and something in the style of versification, are adopted from the ‘St. Monica’, a poem of much beauty on a monastic subject, by Charlotte Smith: a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered. She wrote little, and that little unambitiously, but with true feeling for rural nature, at a time when nature was not much regarded by English poets. (*Poetical Works*, p. 403)

Wordsworth’s own poem follows Smith’s formally. Although he does not allude to the sonnet here, Wordsworth’s comments in the note are particularly pertinent to Smith’s influence on the sonnet – and there is a suggestion of poetic form in the ‘English verse’ under ‘great obligation’ to her – while also prophesying the fragility of her position in posterity. This is dramatised in Smith’s own poem, which evokes both her influence and its obscuration, which she can now observe; a backlash against the ‘illegitimate’ sonnet and

²⁴ Kari Lokke, ‘Charlotte Smith and Literary History: “Dark Forgetfulness” and the “Intercession of Saint Monica”’, *Women’s Studies*, 27 (1998), pp. 261–2.

return to the Miltonic form, which obscured the way Smith had ‘modernised’ the sonnet in language and mode.

‘Saint Monica’ takes a ruined abbey as its subject:²⁵

AMONG deep woods is the dismantled scite
Of an old Abbey, where the chaunted rite,
By twice ten brethren of the monkish cowl,
Was duly sung. (lines 1–4)

The poem’s setting is reminiscent of those favoured by Smith’s sonnet predecessors and contemporaries, in particular Warton and his followers, and it also recalls her own earlier churchyard and ruin poems. As I have argued, Smith resists Warton’s approach to these special places that offer a link with the past, which ‘Saint Monica’ makes explicit. Rather than fostering connectivity or inspiration, in her poem ‘the rill, | Just trickling thro’ a deep and hollow gill’ is ‘Choak’d and impeded’ by reeds and rushes (lines 28–9 and 32). Indeed, Smith seems to empty the site of a Warntonian poet: ‘The antiquary comes not to explore, | As once, the unrafter’d roof and pathless floor’ (line 64). Yet a figure does visit, ‘a pensive stranger’ (line 75) who does not seek items of antiquarian interest but meditates on the nature that has claimed and transformed the graves:

He comes not here, from the sepulchral stone
To tear the oblivious pall that Time has thrown,
But meditating, marks the power proceed
From the mapped lichen, to the plumed weed,
From thready mosses to the veined flower,
The silent, slow, but ever active power
Of Vegetative Life, that o’er Decay
Weaves her green mantle, when returning May
Dresses the ruins of Saint Monica. (lines 85–93; original emphasis)

The actions of the pensive stranger directly contrast with those of Warton, whose poet goes into the ‘inmost cell’ ‘to pluck the grey moss from the mantled stone’ (lines 74–5). Rather than ‘plucking’ the vegetation from the monuments it has claimed, uncovering the past, Smith invokes its motions. She seems to replace the antiquarian poet with a different one, and the poem acts as a sort of fulcrum between their approach and her own, yet realised through a male figure. The way the nettles, brambles, mosses, weeds, and

²⁵ Smith is not explicit as to the location of the abbey: it is probably St Monica’s Priory, Spetisbury, Dorset.

flowers claim the graves mimes Smith's own rejuvenating influence on the sonnet form, replacing the antiquarian mode of Warton, Gray, and Edwards. Significantly, although the poet-figure who populates the scene is male, the nature that has transformed the site is female. 'Saint Monica' reworks Sonnet XLIV yet in a more positive, fertile, sustainable way. Lokke argues that 'Saint Monica' is a 'Romantic re-writing of eighteenth-century graveyard poetry', looking back to Gray's 'Elegy' and forward to Smith's 'Romantic sons', to whom she bequeaths her poetic landscape and mode, asserting her importance as a link between them (pp. 363 and 268). My chapter three showed how Smith's sonnet XLIV 'rewrites' not only the graveyard poem but also the eighteenth-century sonnet; in 'Saint Monica', her role in literary history is reconfigured as a less disruptive – and ultimately more powerful – force. While we do not know if Smith was aware of the periodical illustrations of and commentary on Middleton churchyard, she also seems here to reassert her relation to the decaying building in 'Saint Monica'. As shown, commentators – misreading her sonnet – associated Smith with the church, and in this poem Smith perhaps corrects them, again aligning herself not with the abbey and its environs but with the vegetation that overtakes it, an alternative manifestation of the eroding waves (which previously suggested her literary force). In 'Saint Monica', Smith's poetic scene is once again governed, posthumously, by a female power, rather than the male Neptune (as claimed by writers such as J. B. Davis), as the disempowered 'mute arbitress of tides' of sonnet XLIV becomes the similarly female and 'silent' yet now 'ever active' botanical powers of the later poem.

Somewhat typically, Smith absents herself as poet and replaces herself with a male, Wordsworthian '*he*' in the landscape of 'Saint Monica', yet her identification with the feminine flora influence more accurately inscribes her literary position. To return to Wordsworth's note on the poem, Smith's influence is unlikely to 'be either acknowledged or remembered' adequately, and indeed Smith was obscured by the male poets to whom she 'bequeathed' her poetic mode. Invested in the vegetative life, Smith's poetic presence takes the unusual form of a present-absent influence, which is at once dispossessing and empowering. This echoes Smith's other late sonnets and poems, such as sonnet LXXVII 'To the Insect of the Gossamer', in which the gossamer is woven and disintegrates; the sonnet also sets up a similar male-female relationship through the gendering of the 'young and visionary Poet'. Sonnet LXXIX 'To the Goddess of Botany' is concerned with the motion of the subsumed, streaming leaf and in the simultaneous drowning and renewal of the 'I'. Indeed, in her article centred upon sonnet LXXIX, Hawley observes that 'the role she [Smith] been assigned in literary history – that of midwife to the Romantic sonnet, or even mother of Romanticism – assumes that she laid herself down so that she could be transcended' (p. 188). Hawley quotes from

Wordsworth's 'St. Bees' note and, identifying Smith as the 'elegiac' subject of the sonnet in a literary sense, argues that she is 'the love-object whose literary death can be said to bring about a renewal of nature and the re-energizing of other poets' powers. Her loss is Romanticism's gain' (p. 188). Hawley does not refer to 'Saint Monica', yet her argument is particularly pertinent in the light of this poem, which does appear to enact the process she outlines. And as the poem ends:

And while to dark Forgetfulness they go,
Man, and the works of man; immortal Youth,
Unfading Beauty, and eternal Truth,
Your Heaven-indited volume will display,
While Art's elaborate monuments decay,
Even as these shatter'd aisles, deserted Monica! (lines 94–9)

Smith once more invokes the temporal and fleeting, linking literary works and reputation, buildings, and monuments in 'dark Forgetfulness'; yet there is an alternative force at work here, unfading and eternal: the 'Heaven-indited volume' of 'Nature'. Having established the association between herself and the vegetative life earlier in the poem, Smith simultaneously effaces and empowers herself canonically. By absenting her poetic self from the scene, replaced by the italicised *He*, she both mimes the way she has been – and anticipates the way she will continue to be – displaced and misread in posterity. Investing instead in the female absent-presence of the vegetation, she paradoxically transcends both 'Man, and the works of man', aligning herself instead with Nature's volume and 'indicting' her own, unfading, place in literary history.

