

# CHARLOTTE SMITH

## *Selected Poems*

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JUDITH WILLSON



## SELECTED POEMS

CHARLOTTE SMITH was born in 1749 in London, and spent much of her childhood at the family's estate at Bignor Park in Sussex. Her mother died when she was three, and the family's fortunes changed as a result of her father's gambling debts. At the age of fifteen Charlotte Smith married the twenty-three-year-old son of an East India Company merchant. The marriage proved to be a disaster; her husband's profligacy led to seven months' imprisonment in debtors' prison, during which Charlotte Smith accompanied him. The family lived in France for a time following his release, so as to be safe from creditors, but in 1784 Charlotte Smith left her husband. From that point she supported herself and her nine children by her writing. Her *Elegiac Sonnets* were immensely popular and influential, eventually reaching eight editions, but she was also a prolific writer of gothic novels and works for children, a translator and the author of a play. Charlotte Smith died in 1806. Her greatest poem, *Beachy Head*, was published posthumously in 1807.

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*Roam on! The light we sought is shining still.  
Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill,  
Our Scholar travels yet the loved hill-side*

from 'Thyrsis'

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## INTRODUCTION

A woman is kidnapped and imprisoned. Her newborn baby dies. She escapes, attempts suicide, finds shelter in a cave:

The holly, (1) whose shining thorny and spiny head so much shadowed the whole eminence, had found amidst the roof place for three or four young plants mingling with the larger growth above them; the common bramble (2) crept over another part of it... My walls, which were only partially damp, were tapestried with rock-lichen (7) the tessellated lichen, and the silver bryum (8) ...

(1) The holly (*ilex aquifolium*). The beautiful plant with which Burns composed the chaplet of his Scottish muse, (2) *Rubus pratincola*. There is something particularly elegant in the alternate triple leaves and long weak branches of this plant... (7) *Lichen scruposus*, (8) *Bryum argenteum*<sup>1</sup> ...

At this crisis in which a character is poised between life and death, Charlotte Smith gives her readers notes on botany. Smith was a successful novelist: the educational commentary seems an unlikely element in a work characterised by adventures and heightened emotions. But Smith, who knew what made a good story, also knew that the world was not simply scenery against which women's emotional lives were played out. A writer who had experienced a fair number of the traumas an eighteenth-century woman could suffer, and who was tough enough to spend her life keeping one step ahead of them, Smith offers her readers a double narrative. Women who read the novel might identify with the emotional terrain through which the suffering heroine is propelled by plots and cruelties; but they were also being shown that the world has an intricate, objective reality, and that to name and understand its structure is to find a survival strategy.

It is worth approaching Smith through a novel, because to do so shifts the emphasis away from reading her through the diminishing perspective of the later Romantic poets. In the context

of the genre that gave her her status as a professional, working writer, she appears not so much as a lesser precursor, but as a poet arriving at a Romantic understanding of the world from a different direction: from a tradition of women's writing that ranges from childrearing and household management to polemic and pedagogy – and the moral discourse of the novel itself. Charlotte Smith's awkward, accurate cataloguing of the specifics of nature is not only the mark of an imaginative response to nature less fully developed than Wordsworth's: she was interested in knowing, and naming, nature, because to do so was to possess a language for the complex structures by which the world functioned.

This is not a rhetorical point: Smith's own life, and the wider conditions under which women lived, are inextricable from her writing, which was at the simplest level undertaken to pay the rent and to feed her children. Her prefaces to the different editions of her *Elegiac Sonnets* are concerned not with poetic intention, language and imagination, but with increasingly querulous complaints about the odds against her functioning as a writer at all:

I am compelled to complain of those who have crushed the poor abilities of the *author*, and by the most unheard of acts of injustice (*for twice seven years*) have added the painful sensations of *indignation* to the inconveniences and deprivations of indigence; and aggravating by future dread, the present suffering, have frequently doubled the toil necessary for tomorrow, by palsying the hand and distracting the head, that were struggling against the evils of today!<sup>2</sup>

And yet without those pressures she might never have written anything: having an education set her apart from the class of women who worked; having an inescapable financial need to work set her apart from women of her own class, and forced upon her the realities that underpinned conventional moralities. Looking back on the early years of her marriage, she wrote to a friend:

...the more my mind expanded, the more I became sensible of personal slavery; the more I improved and cultivated my understanding, the farther I was removed from those with whom I was condemned to pass my life; and the more clearly I

saw by these newly-acquired lights the horror of the abyss into which I had unconsciously plunged.<sup>3</sup>

With even more bitter insight, she wrote that she had been 'sold, a legal prostitute'.<sup>4</sup> Commercial transactions, and the struggle to take control of them, were the continuing themes of a life whose course was determined by her father's and husband's use of the money they controlled or squandered. (Some ten years after she had left her husband – when she was in her forties, experienced in handling her own affairs, a successful writer – it was he who signed the contract for her novel *Desmond* and demanded money from her publishers.) The failure of her marriage reduced her and her children to poverty and social isolation. She worked constantly to keep one step ahead of her creditors, haggled with her publishers, exhausted herself and those around her with the endless legal quarrels with the trust fund that denied her children access to the money they should have inherited. This life had an extraordinarily emblematic quality, bringing her into confrontation with the three great centres of eighteenth-century male power: commerce, property ownership and, overarching both, the law. A passage from *The Hardships of the English Laws in Relation to Wives*, published in 1735 to educate women about their legal position, might have been written for the young Charlotte Smith, and for the more naïve readers of her novels:

If we reflect how extremely ignorant all young Women are as to points in Law, and how their Education and Way of Life, shuts them out from the Knowledge of their true Interest in almost all things, we shall find that their Trust and Confidence in the Man they love, and Inability to make use of the proper Means to guard against his Falsehood, leave few in a Condition to make use of that Precaution.<sup>5</sup>

Only her intelligence, her ability to deal with the institutions ranged against her, enabled her and the family to survive, barely. The hard reality that set her apart from the later Romantic poets was the understanding that for women to elevate the private world of feeling could be a dangerous trap, leaving them ill-equipped for survival. Her passionate exactitude both recognises and celebrates the complexity of the external world.

Charlotte Smith was born on 4 May 1749 in her father's London