

**Bethan Roberts, *Charlotte Smith and the Sonnet: Form, Place, and Tradition in the Late Eighteenth Century*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019. Pp. x + 182. £19.99 (pb). ISBN 9781789620177.**

Bethan Roberts's monograph, *Charlotte Smith and the Sonnet: Form, Place, and Tradition in the Late Eighteenth Century*, is one of the latest studies to be published by Liverpool University Press's 'Romantic Reconfigurations: Studies in Literature and Culture 1780-1850' series. This wonderful text does a masterful job of elucidating on two overlooked subjects — Smith and the sonnet in the early Romantic period — by wedding them together in a clearly written, thoroughly engaging study that sheds light on Smith *and* the sonnet form as important subjects at the end of the eighteenth century. Roberts places Smith's sonnets in their structural, geographical, and traditional spaces whilst demonstrating the Petrarchan, Shakespearean, Spenserian, and Miltonic sonnet forms. This grounding affords Roberts the ability to frame her ideas within the contexts of time and place, and also allows her to demonstrate just how Smith is, arguably, the best sonneteer in several hundred years.

After an insightful introduction, which examines recent literature as well as Roberts's outline for the text, chapter one (called 'The Eighteenth-Century Sonnet') 'tells the story of the sonnet in the eighteenth century, and Smith's role in it' (11). Here, Roberts demonstrates the ways in which Spenser and Milton become Smith's 'poetic precursors' (to borrow Harold Bloom's phrasing) and how her sonnets would come to later influence Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Chapter two ('Tradition') 'focuses on the first (1784) and third editions (1786) of *Elegiac Sonnets*, which are steeped in the highly literary environs of the nightingale and the river' (29). In the nightingale section, Roberts asserts that Smith places herself within the pantheon of Romantic poets who use geographical location to situate the subject matter of their poems. A section on the River Arun takes up most of the chapter's analysis and provides the 'clearest sense of the topography of Smith's childhood' (43). Like Wordsworth, Smith draws upon familiar landscapes as a way to bring the reader into the spatial location of the sonnet and the subject. Roberts defends the notion that it is Wordsworth who, after reading Smith's poetry, championed her as a seminal figure at the time.

Chapter three ('Innovation') looks at the fifth edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* (1789), where 'the sea becomes the prevalent poetic figure, and its presence then increases with each subsequent edition' (71). Roberts believes that 'it is in her sea sonnets that Smith's distinctive voice and innovative use of the sonnet form really emerges' (71). In this chapter, Roberts argues that structurally Smith uses the alexandrine form coupled with the rhyming couplet of Alexander Pope in order to bring the sonnet to a close; then, she argues that Smith utilises the sublime as a means to emphasise 'the sheer size and apparent limitlessness of the sea' (82). Moving onto land, the second half of the chapter looks at the elegiac qualities of Smith's sonnets within the parameters of Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'. Roberts does a great job of continuing connections between Smith and her contemporaries. This not only situates Smith amongst her poetic peers, but it illustrates her importance and relevance.

Chapter four ('Wider Prospect') discusses contemporary biases against the sonnet as a 'legitimate' poetic form and then argues that it is primarily Smith's success with the sonnet that affords its reintroduction into the British poetic canon. Roberts goes on to say that the sonnet 'further illuminates and clarifies Smith's "place" in literary tradition' and will argue for the 'afterlives' of Smith sonnets (99). Roberts compares Smith to William Bowles as a fellow

sonneteer. She elucidates that Bowles ‘follows Smith formally’ and furthers the idea that Smith, being a legitimate poet, deserves the respect that has been bestowed upon her male counterparts.

Chapter five (‘Botany to Beachy Head’) is the culmination of the monograph, in which Roberts shows ‘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’ (133). Roberts then argues that this line of thinking aligns with Smith’s poetry that was intended for children. In what is, arguably, one of the most enjoyable sections of the book, Roberts argues that Sonnet LXXIX ‘grounds Smith’s engagement with botany explicitly in the context of suffering’ and places Smith with Milton and Rousseau ‘as writers who turned to botany for respite’ (135).

Roberts’s monograph is a lively, thoroughly engaging labour of love. It deserves its placement alongside Stuart Curran’s edition of Smith’s poetry and Jacqueline M. Labbe’s equally important Smithian studies, and it will be an important Smithian resource for years to come.

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