

CLAIRE KNOWLES AND INGRID HORROCKS (eds.), *Charlotte Smith: Major Poetic Works* (Ontario: Broadview, 2017), 280pp. £16.50 paperback. 978-1-55481-284-4

This new paperback edition of Charlotte Smith's poetry, edited by Claire Knowles and Ingrid Horrocks, has a great deal to recommend it. It is a well-presented and reasonably priced volume which makes a timely contribution to Broadview's growing selection of editions of poetry by Romantic-era figures such as Barbauld, Robinson, Landon and Hemans, and which helps to reinforce and consolidate Smith's prominent place in the canon of significant women poets of the period. Alongside a small selection of minor poems, the volume contains Smith's three major poetic works – *Elegiac Sonnets*, *The Emigrants* and *Beachy Head* – in their entirety, with textual annotations. All three texts are also tackled within the introductory essay, with Knowles and Horrocks offering, in each case, insightful critical commentary that draws on a range of relevant Smith scholarship.

The editors introduce the volume with a brief and accessible overview of Smith's output and critical reception, followed by closer engagement with the three main texts, rightly described here as 'major works of Romanticism' (p. 22). In relation to *Elegiac Sonnets*, there is an account of Smith's important contribution to the development of the sonnet form in the period, and the section goes on to persuasively distinguish between the constructed 'autobiographical poetic persona' of the sonnets, defined by a voice of suffering and 'melancholy musing' (p. 17), and the rather more forcefully 'challenging and intelligent' (p. 28) voice which can be heard in Smith's private writings. The essay moves on to offer a carefully contextualised discussion of *The Emigrants*, drawing attention to the relevance of 'Smith's call for compassion' in relation to our own 'humanitarian crisis,' and identifying the poem as 'perhaps the first sustained literary attempt to think through the affective complexity of a refugee crisis of any sort' (p. 35). In the subsequent section on *Beachy Head*, described here as 'Arguably her most Romantic poem' (p. 35), Knowles and Horrocks point to the ways in which the poem turns from contemporary events to the 'longer, deeper histories of the earth, of peoples, and of human memory' (p. 36). Their reading presents a poetic vision shaped by an awareness of the interconnectedness of human existence, in which it is 'impossible to imagine a locale that is simply local – and impossible to imagine a nation, place, or human subject in isolation, either in space or time' (p. 37).

This edition includes eight illustrations, taken from the various editions of *Elegiac Sonnets*, which also help to attune the reader to the cultural framework in which the poems were published. Another notable feature of the volume is the inclusion of six appendices, featuring a wide range of contextual material. Included here are important 'precursory and contemporary texts,' which effectively situate her poetry within a wider 'conversation' (p. 41), as well as selections from Smith's letters, and contemporary perspectives on her work. A great deal of valuable and interesting material is included but, given that readers of this volume are likely to include those unfamiliar with Smith's work, it would have been worthwhile to have made mention of Wordsworth's much quoted but important acknowledgement, that Smith was 'a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered,' perhaps in relation to a brief

account of recent critical discussion regarding her role in the development of a Wordsworthian poetics.¹

While this volume is a significant addition to Broadview's growing collection of major poetic works by women poets of the Romantic era, it should perhaps be acknowledged that Smith's editors did have a rather hard act to follow, since Smith's complete poems were brought out in an affordable paperback volume by Oxford University Press back in 1993 – an edition which is still in print and readily available. *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, scrupulously and insightfully edited by Stuart Curran, remains not only a milestone in the recovery of Smith's poetic voice, but also the measure against which all subsequent editions will be read. While Knowles and Horrocks acknowledge Curran's 'ground-breaking work on Smith' at the outset, noting that 'all subsequent Smith scholars owe an enormous debt of gratitude to him' (p. 15), and while they do much to distinguish their new volume – for example through the judicious addition of plates and appendices material – there are limits to the new insights which can be brought about here via textual notes and annotations, given the impressively detailed and informed collection of footnotes previously put together by Curran. It is perhaps inevitable therefore that, for the most part, notes on the poems tend to reiterate editorial explanations offered in that earlier volume and at times actually refer the reader back to editorial observations made by Curran (in *The Emigrants* alone, the reader is referred to Curran's 1993 notes no less than ten times).

Nonetheless, this edition of Charlotte Smith's poetry makes an important contribution to current scholarship – offering, as it does, a compact edition of Smith's major poetic works, an accessible critical introduction in which the poems are discussed in relation to what now amounts to three decades of Smith scholarship, as well as important new contextual material. The volume helps to provide a consolidated picture of this significant poet and works to affirm what the editors describe as the 'central position' which her poetry has 'come to hold in accounts of the literature of the Romantic era' (p. 41). Perhaps most importantly, Knowles and Horrocks offer a timely and compelling reminder of the relevance of Smith's poetics of sympathy and compassion in relation to a range of twenty-first-century ethical concerns.

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¹ *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 724.