

# Order of experience in charlotte smith's sonnets



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Through her series of celebrated published sonnets, Charlotte Smith has provided readers and critics with useful insights into the life and experiences of an 18th century woman whose life events met her with a great number of detriments. Her self-described melancholic state through which she mourns a lost happiness often stands as a focus of her writing. Literary critic and professor Adela Pinch closely observes Smith's sonnets in her piece *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen*. She takes an in depth look at Smith's references to other poets, and poses the notion that the acts of reading and writing precede Smith's feelings - essentially causing them. While this idea is original and thought provoking, it is not wholly the case. Through close reading of Smith's Sonnet I and Sonnet XII, we see that the acts of literary reading and writing influence, rather than plainly precede, Smith's feelings and emotions.

Sonnet I presents itself as a great starting point for observing Smith's understanding of her own melancholy in relation to poetry. She is quick to point to the idea that her sympathetic abilities, essential to reading and writing poetry, leave her less happy than those who go without. She writes "But far, far happier is the lot of those / Who never learn'd her dear delusive art" (5-6). She refers to the art form as "delusive" - something that has deceived her, and yet still holds it dear. Poetry is nonetheless vital to her experience. Smith spends this sonnet setting the reader up for the final couplet, through which she reaffirms the idea that her experience of sorrow and melancholy is deepened by her ability to write it. "Ah! then," she writes, "how dear the Muse's favours cost, / If those paint sorrow best - who feel it most!" (13-14). Smith is among those who paint sorrow best, and in these

final lines she delivers a clear reference to another poetic great. The footnote she provides tells us that her closing line is a rewording from a work of English poet Alexander Pope. The nature of her influences is revealed here. The footnote reads “ The well sung woes shall soothe my pensive ghost; / He best can paint them, who shall feel them most” (l, n1). Her woes are just that - well sung. Though, it is hard to say that they would not be felt and understood in the present if not for her literary disposition.

Here, we are led to Adela Pinch's take on the topic. She says that this passage asserts the notion that, for Smith, writing precedes feeling. In *Strange Fits of Passion*, Pinch writes “ But if feeling precedes writing in Pope's couplet, Smith's sonnet leads precisely to a reversal of that claim” (63). It is difficult to definitively put this forward in the manner that Pinch does. The critic seems to say that the prior poet (Pope's) writing of his experience overtakes Smith's mental state and consciousness in the present. Smith's “ well sung woes”, so to say, are indeed similar to the notion that Pope and other poets have put forward, and her poetic awareness deepens her emotion. It is a stretch to say, though, that her melancholic state comes as a result of her having read these poems. Smith undergoes similar experiences and so refers to the prior works, as she cannot help but be reminded of them. They therefore influence her emotions, rather than precede them. The thoughts and experiences are still hers - they are simply affected by her awareness of where they stand among the literary canon. She sees a painting within her mind that may feature another artist's brushstrokes, but the painting is nonetheless hers. It is just that life is richer for the writer, they are highly aware of themselves and of the world.

Heading further into Smith's collection of sonnets to Sonnet XII, we find the poet reflecting on her misfortune by the sea, crafting images of herself as a character who has been shipwrecked deep within the waters. In a similar manner, a key line from the sonnet refers to a past poet's work, rewording their phrase. Staring into the sublime in front of raging waves and winds, Smith writes " But the wild gloomy scene has charms for me, / And suits the mournful temper of my soul" (7-8). She sees a resemblance between the wild and gloomy nature that is out of control, and her mind that she seems lost within. The chaos is almost comforting for her, as she feels it suits a person in her state. Drawing us back to the footnotes, we see that Smith rephrased poet Edward Young through this, who wrote " Rage on, ye winds, burst clouds, and waters roar! / You bear a just resemblance of my fortune, / And suit the gloomy habit of my soul" (XII, n1). It is clear then that Smith has been influenced by the previous poem, but this does not take away from her own melancholic experience that she goes through first hand, then relaying it to the reader. The literary image of the mariner, which she brings about in the following lines, is an original notion that she transcends into, perfectly relaying her hopeless state. Smith writes " Already shipwreck'd by the storms of Fate, / Like the poor mariner, methinks, I stand, / Cast on a rock; who sees the distant land / From whence no succour comes - or comes too late" (9-12). The poet sits in front of the raging sea and feels akin with a fictitious mariner who awaits his death in the rising tides. The land, salvation for the mariner, is within sight, but only there to tease him into thinking he stands a chance. The " succour", or assistance, comes either too late or not at all. Thus, he is left to drown, just as Smith becomes swallowed up by her overwhelming melancholy and distress.

Of melancholy specifically, Adela Pinch says that it "...has the magic power to make one imagine other poets' misery in the landscape, and hence allows an imagined relation to other poets" (66). It is clear in these sonnets that Charlotte Smith does imagine herself related in experience to these previous poets, but it is a stretch to say that their works are the root cause of her melancholy. Smith's strong sense of empathy helps her connect with other writers - those with well sung woes - though she does not become them, or them her. Pinch does point out that the "order" of these conscious experiences is ultimately arbitrary in nature, as the need for valid or appropriate emotions should not be required. She writes "Hence, we could see what I'm calling sentimentality as that which reveals the arbitrariness of the distinctions with which we... discriminate inauthentic from 'appropriate' emotional expressions" (70). The idea that one of these emotional orders of experience is more appropriate than the other does not exactly further our arguments; it just asserts one as proper and one as improper. Viewed either way, Smith's sonnets have earned their respect and deserve their spot within the canon.

The fact that we continue to find new meanings in Smith's work all of these years later makes them timeless. In referencing and rephrasing prior poems, she breathed new life into them and brought about new readers. Pinch's take on the sonnets is but one of many among those who have attempted to pin down the writer's inner turmoil. Thanks to the original work's lasting value and the critic's thought provoking statements, the discussion is bound to continue well into the future.