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Charlotte Smith's Exilic Persona

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I mourn your sorrows; for I too have known
Involuntary exile; and while yet
England had charms for me, have felt how sad
It is to look across the dim cold sea,
That melancholy rolls its refluxing tides
Between us and the dear regretted land
We call our own —

Charlotte Smith, *The Emigrants*

William Wordsworth wrote that Charlotte Smith was “a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered, [for 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” (Wordsworth 1876: 151). These remarks are profoundly significant — and revealing — for two reasons. First, Wordsworth’s assessment of Smith’s critical and canonical staying power has proven to be eerily prophetic. A writer of eleven novels, three collections of poetry, four educational books for young people, a natural history of birds, and a history of England, Smith literally disappeared from both scholarship and anthologies, becoming only in the past twenty-five years the focus of scholarly attempts to reintroduce her into Romantic studies. Secondly, critics today have repeatedly used Wordsworth’s words as authorizing voices, legitimizing remarks from arguably the most famous Romantic poet giving us, 200 years later, the permission to reintroduce Smith into our scholarship and classrooms.

But is this how we should read Charlotte Smith? Should we read her as a poet with links to the ever popular Romantic nature poetry, as Wordsworth suggested? In part, the answer is yes. Smith did write in what we now would consider a traditional Romantic mode: lyrics depicting a melancholic individual subject drawing inspiration and education from the natural world. But to read her only in this manner risks marginalizing her, for Smith also writes with a significant political agenda, one that distinguishes her from her early Romantic contemporaries and, simultaneously, challenges what we understand to be the parameters of Romantic English nationalist discourse.

In *The Emigrants* (1793), Smith renders palpable her own experiences as both a literal exile in France and a type of perpetual exile in England, a woman wrongfully separated from the life that is rightfully hers by a rotten deal in the marriage market, inept estate management, and unfair laws governing inheritance, property ownership, and a woman's legal status.¹ *The Emigrants* builds on the exilic strain that Smith crafts in *Elegiac Sonnets* by toying with her previous self-construction as the melancholic subject but creating in its stead a much more direct and aggressive voice, one that employs an exilic experience to critique the body responsible for that exile: the modern European nation.

While *The Emigrants* is certainly Smith's most overtly exilic work, it is not her first. She begins developing this motif in *Elegiac Sonnets*, a volume concerned with her personal and private sufferings to the point that a *Gentleman's Magazine* reviewer for the 1786 third edition sincerely praises Smith's pathos but also hopes that the described afflictions are fictional²:

It has been suggested by a valuable correspondent that we cannot adopt a more elegant decoration than a few sonnets by this pathetic poetess. To the number of those originally published by her, she has now made up an addition of twenty new ones. We cannot, however, forbear expressing a hope that the misfortunes she so often hints at, are all imaginary. We must have perused her very tender and exquisite effusions with diminished pleasure, could we have supposed her sorrow to be real. — It would be hard indeed if a lady, who has so much contributed to the delight of others, should feel any want of happiness herself. (Anon.)

Unfortunately, while the reviewer may have hoped that Smith embellished her situation for emotional effect, it was not so. Her hardships

¹ On the subject of her marriage, see also Smith's critiques in her correspondence and her novels, *Eithelinde, or the Recluse of the Lake* (1789), *Celestina* (1791), *Marchmont* (1796), and perhaps most powerfully, *Montalbert* (1795). In a June 15, 1804, letter to Sarah Rose, the wife of Samuel Rose, editor to Goldsmith and legal advisor to Cowper and Blake, Smith describes, with deliberate and undisguised vehemence, her feelings about the circumstances of her marriage: Benjamin is "the monster (whose name it has been so long my misery to bear & to whom I was sold a legal prostitute in my early youth, or what the law calls *infancy*" (Stanton 2003: 625).

² Smith's focus on private distress is particularly clear in the early editions of the *Sonnets*; by the time Smith adds a second volume in 1797, however, four years after she published *The Emigrants*, more public verse will become part of the collection; see particularly "The Female Exile" (96), "Written for the benefit of a distressed player, detained at Brighthelmstone for debt, November 1792" (99), and "The Forest Boy" (111).

were genuine; the exilic strain she goes on to develop in the volume and in later editions was both personal and real. In Sonnet III she describes herself as the nightingale, Philomel, horribly violated and then rescued only by forever exiling her from her humankind; in Sonnet XII as a mariner “shipwreck'd by the storms of Fate” (10), “Cast on a rock” (11) vainly gazing toward “the distant land / From whence no succour comes — or comes too late” (11–12); in Sonnet LXX as envious of a madman for his lack of “*nice felicities* that shrink / From giant horrors” (11–12), coveting the fact that he “seems (uncursed with reason) not to know / The depth or duration of his woe” (13–14). Acutely aware of having been cut off from human contact — either through violence or abandonment — Smith's poetic persona, in all of these renderings, is one exiled from the world to which she craves to belong.

In Sonnet XLIII Smith compares herself to a fictional exile, the only person capable of understanding her pain; by this same token, her sufferings allow her to understand his misfortune. The exiled man in this sonnet is “confine[d] / To the bleak coast of some unfriendly isle, / Cold, barren, desert, where no harvests smile, / But thirst and hunger on the rocks repine” (1–4). He stands “hopeless” watching “Sun after sun . . . decline / In the broad shipless sea” (6–7) — the figure standing at the shoreline's edge, looking back toward his or her lost homeland, becomes a potent emblem of exilic suffering for Smith, one she will come back to in *The Emigrants*. In this sonnet the sea becomes an ever-changing canvas that shifts from promise and hope to despondency and despair:

if a flattering cloud appears to show
The fancied semblance of a distant sail,
Then melts away — anew his spirits fail,
While the lost hope but aggravates his woe! (9–12)

Smith reconfigures the poem's initial male figure into one aligned with her exilic poetic persona, for “perhaps [he] may know / Such heartless pain, such blank despair as mine” (7–8). The figure in Sonnet XLIII transitions between possibility and rejection, excitement and melancholy, and so too does Smith's persona.

Just as with *Elegiac Sonnets*, in many ways Smith's *The Emigrants* grew out of two intensely personal experiences: her exile in France and her daughter's marriage to an exiled man.³ In *Elegiac Sonnets*, Smith

³In 1793, while France and England were formally at war, Smith's middle daughter, Anna Augusta, planned her marriage to exiled French chevalier Alexandre Marc-Constant de Foville. De Foville met the Smith family in December 1792 when Charlotte's sympathy

uses exile to underscore the pathos of her personal situation; however, in *The Emigrants* she crafts the exilic persona by meditating on the effects of separation from the homeland in the context of the rapidly escalating French Revolution. Whereas in *Elegiac Sonnets* she is the one “shipwreck’d by the storms of Fate” (Sonnet XII), by the time she writes *The Emigrants* her persona’s gaze has turned. No longer solely focused inward, she looks away from herself, now

beholding the unhappy lot
Of the lorn Exiles; who, amid the storms
Of wild disastrous Anarchy, are thrown,
Like shipwreck’d sufferers, on England’s coast,
To see, perhaps, no more their native land,
Where Desolation riots: They, like me,
From fairer hopes and happier prospects driven,
Shrink from the future, and regret the past. (2.9–16)

In this more public verse, Smith once again assumes her well-developed exilic persona from *Elegiac Sonnets* in order to expose “exile” as what strips away previous public identity and replaces it with an almost meaningless intermediary identity: “the exile” is no longer British or French, no longer landed gentry or a churchman, no longer an aristocrat. Para-

for the exiles led her to open the family home to them. From Smith’s letter to Joseph Cooper Walker, dated February 12, 1793: “Will you forgive me, Dear Sir, for this short and incoherent letter, but I am writing in company & in embarrassments inconceivable of new & strange natures, out of which Heaven knows how I shall escape” (Stanton 2003: 60). The “company” with her were emigrants living in her home, and the “embarrassments were almost certainly the seizure of her books and furniture for failure to pay her rent” (ibid., 61). There is no indication, however, that Smith charged her boarders any fee to cover the expense of housing them, despite her obviously desperate situation. By all accounts, the courtship was a quick and passionate one, leading Smith to agree to her daughter’s marriage by the summer of 1793, despite the seemingly insurmountable obstacle before the couple — the difficulty of arranging both Protestant and Catholic ceremonies in England without the consent of the groom’s mother. (See Fletcher 198–99 for the various impediments to Augusta’s marriage, including the need for episcopal dispensation, double ceremonies, and parental permission.) Madame de Foville was still in France and beyond the reach of English *communiqués* because of the civil and political unrest, yet this did not prevent Alexandre’s marriage to Anna Augusta. After an eight-months acquaintance, the young lovers were married in a Church of England ceremony without the blessing of the de Foville matriarch, without a corresponding Catholic service, and without Charlotte Smith obtaining any absolute guarantee of Alexandre’s family acknowledging the legitimacy of the marriage, a detail which caused Charlotte substantial distress. After spending the entirety of her own married life wrangling with a wastrel husband and an intractable legal system, Smith had an acute anxiety about a bride’s place in her new family.

doxically, stripping away social category via exilic experience makes it possible to discern the personal and the ways in which the personal underlies the public. Thus Smith's personal exilic positioning is crucial to her social and political thought, for as she reminds us in her poetry, she can understand the impact of national policies and actions on individual lives in a way that others cannot. Her actual expatriation in France, as well as what she characterizes as a kind of continual financial and social estrangement within Britain, allows her the freedom to use the private to comment on varieties of exilic experience and the ways in which separation shapes the public and political. Ultimately, then, Smith's persona in *The Emigrants* is created to show general and specific abuses committed by both England and France, their mistreatment both of entire social categories and the very real individuals within those categories.

Written in tandem with *The Old Manor House* during the years that Florence Hilbish calls Smith's "French Period,"⁴ *The Emigrants* marks a turning point in Smith's relationship to French Revolutionary ideals. In 1792 Smith was firmly dedicated to Girondist principles, decidedly more libertarian and radical than Feuillant but more moderate than Jacobin, going so far as to sign a letter to Joel Barstow, "Permettes, Citoyen, qu'en ecartent les formules de l'ancien esclavage, je me borne à vous assurer de mon respectueuse attachement — Charlotte Smith."⁵ Smith thus avoided the standard "your humble and obedient servant," offering instead her "attachment" or affection (Stanton 2003: 52n4), thereby observing social niceties without debasing herself or, in her mind, her addressee.

Smith wrote her first pro-revolution text, *Desmond*, in early 1792.⁶ The novel's stance on democratic reform, however, was so potentially explosive that Thomas Cadell, Smith's longtime publisher, would not touch it. George Robinson published it instead in the summer of 1792.⁷ An epistolary novel set in England, France, and other European locations, the novel combines marriage scenes reminiscent of Smith's own

⁴Florence Hilbish characterizes the years 1791–1793 as a time when Smith wrote out of "sympathy for those oppressed, whether politically, socially, or economically" (151). Hilbish goes on to call *The Emigrants* Smith's "longest and most inferior poem," crediting its "moral and patriotic teachings" with satisfying "the taste of the times" and leading to "its being frequently listed among Mrs. Smith's works to the exclusion of better productions" (151–52).

⁵"Allow me, Citizen, while eschewing expressions of former oppression, I content myself with assuring you of my respectful attachment" (Stanton 2003: 52n4).

⁶See letter to Robinson dated July 4, 1792 (Stanton 2003: 46–47).

⁷This was the only volume of Smith's that Robinson ever published. See Stanton 2003: 21n1.

tortured union with thwarted romance and restrained passion between would-be lovers; foolish, pseudo-intellectual aristocrats with wise and noble peasants; and stilted Burkean discourse with enthusiastic pro-Jacobin sentiment, all in an attempt to proclaim the righteousness of the French revolution and to underscore the futility of English resistance to reform.⁸ The novel embraces the idea of a bloodless revolution, primarily for its potential to incite similar change across the Channel.

But once the revolution turned bloody, Smith found staunch support for it not only morally and ethically questionable, but also personally dangerous, as did many of her fellow writers with similar political sympathies. In the dedication of *The Emigrants*, she acknowledges the pressures that she and other English writers labored under, primarily the duty, as she characterizes it, to rehabilitate the name of “Liberty” (133). Given the “dreadful scenes” which “have been acted in France during the last summer,” the 1792 attack on the Tuileries and the September Massacres, Smith acknowledges that it is “unfortunat[e] but too true” that the “body of the English” has “acquired new force” for its “national aversion” to all things French — an aversion she finds “unworthy of great and enlightened nations” (133).⁹ Ultimately, however, Smith claims neither greatness nor enlightenment for Britain. Because of the inability or unwillingness of most English men and women to see any part of the Revolution as productive or good, “the very name of Liberty has not only lost the charm it used to have in British ears, but many, who have written, or spoken, in its defense, have been stigmatized as promoters of Anarchy, and enemies to the prosperity of their country” (134). Democratic reform is no longer “the glory of Englishmen to avow and defend” (134).¹⁰

⁸ For the political tensions in *Desmond*, see Bowstead, Bray, Conway, Flanders, and Wikborg.

⁹ Note that in the dedication Smith characterizes both France and England as great and worthy nations.

¹⁰ In her correspondence with Thomas Cadell, her previous publisher to whom she returned with *The Emigrants*, Smith carefully downplays the political content of the poem, hoping to prevent it from seeming to be a repeat *Desmond*. She claims that the poem is “quite unlike in its nature any I have printed & is, tho not on politics, on a very popular & interesting subject mingled with descriptive and characteristic excursions in the way of the Task, only of course inferior to it” (Stanton 2003: 55). As Stanton notes, the poem is “surely political in painting a sympathetic picture of women, children, priests, nobility, and military men who were exiled from France during the Revolution” (2003: 55); but since “Cadell published it in the end, he must not have found it as politically offensive as *Desmond*, which he refused to publish” (2003: 55).

Yet despite the danger of embracing revolutionary ideologies, Smith cannot quite relinquish the dream of reform. As a woman neglected by her family,¹¹ disenfranchised by her nation, and strangled by Chancery, she had much to gain from the potential upheaval of English social mores and civil procedures promised by revolution. On the other hand, she also had much to lose by not conceding to anti-Jacobin pressures — most importantly, her ability to sell works and provide the sole financial support for her children, a very real need of which she regularly reminds her readers. But while Smith does not shrink from detailing her personal woes in the prefaces to *Elegiac Sonnets*, in the dedication to *The Emigrants* she does not specify what her troubles are. She alludes to them only briefly, by praising Cowper's poetry for providing her "infinite consolation" while "amid the heavy pressure of many sorrows" (132). This absence of specific detail in the introductory remarks underscores the idea that while *The Emigrants* mingles the personal and the public, it does not depend on the personal in the same way that *Elegiac Sonnets* does, either in concept or in execution.¹² Until this moment in her career, Smith's success as a poet has been predicated on her image as a melancholic, long-suffering victim, the good mother entering the morally questionable literary world only as a last resort. In contrast, through the absence of personal contextualization, *The Emigrants* positions Smith as an active participant in political debate, a socially conscious woman with a contribution to make to the debates about the direction of the modern British nation.

Had Smith written only for money, as she claims in *Elegiac Sonnets*, abandoning dangerous political sympathies would have been easy, even inconsequential. Such abandonment, however, was not just difficult but impossible for her, particularly in *The Emigrants*. Nor was it easy in her novels: these two volumes of poetry mirror the gap between Smith's propaganda for revolutionary ideals in *Desmond* and her renunciation of them in *The Banished Man*, a novel unrelenting in its condemnation of democracy as "that fallacious, that pernicious philosophy that has undone us all" (224). Though it was composed only months after *The Emigrants* and published in August 1794, barely fifteen months after *The Emigrants* appeared in print, *The Banished Man* has none of the ideal-

¹¹ In her letters, Smith tells of her father's decision to marry her off to Benjamin to make way for Miss Meriton, a 40 year old woman with £20,000 and "a strong dislike of her future stepdaughter" (Stanton 2003: 81n10); see also Stanton 2003: 3 and 80.

¹² Wolfson addresses Smith's use of a Miltonic republican discourse via blank verse in "Charlotte Smith's *Emigrants*: Forging Connections at the Borders of a Female Tradition"; see 102–105 in particular.

istic, egalitarian sentiment of her earlier works, while still retaining a critique of corrupt political and social life in England. So while Smith does stop writing fiction that promotes social change via revolution, she never quite accomplishes the same in her poetry. In *The Emigrants*, indeed, Smith unites personal experience with political criticism; she need not renounce either for this long poem centers precisely on the dialectic between the two.

Book One of *The Emigrants* opens with an epigraph that sets the stage, locating her poetic persona and subjects in a particular time and place:

SCENE, on the Cliffs to the Eastward of the Town of Brighthelmstone in Sussex.

TIME, a Morning in November, 1792. (135)

Smith's decision to begin the poem so deliberately during this particular month and year is intriguing. She consciously separates these details from the verse itself, making it clear that this information comes not from the persona but from the poet. She offers no explanation for the time frame other than to express her revulsion at the August 1792 storming of the Tuileries and her distress over the ways in which "those who are the victims of the Revolution, have not escaped the odium, which the undistinguishing multitude annex to all the natives of a country where such horrors have been acted" (133). Smith's penchant for conversing within her own text, for qualifying, revising, expanding, and sometimes contradicting her own statements via prefaces and footnotes, makes this moment even more puzzling in its lack of specific authorial contextualization.¹³ Critics have read the date in various ways, all situating it in a general time of Revolutionary escalation.¹⁴ Yet it is crucial to remember

¹³ For Smith's strategy in endnoting her creative works, see Labbe 2000b. Wolfson provides a valuable caution to the modern editorial practice (in Curran's edition of Smith's *Poems*, Wu's *Romantic Women Poets*, and Mellor and Matlak's *British Literature, 1780–1830*) of printing Smith's endnotes as footnotes: "Smith's use of endnotes (with very faint signaling in the poem text) makes their content ancillary, even negligible. To print them as same-page footnotes [as modern editors have largely chosen to do] effects a semiotic reformatting" (96).

¹⁴ For example, Labbe reads the reference to November 1792 as a "contextualizing date that allows her readers to understand the 'lawless Anarchy' does not necessarily characterize the Revolution itself, but rather its turn to Terror" (2000a: 42). Wolfson reads the November date as "six months after priests who refused to support the Constitutional Church were declared traitors, three months after the decree for their expulsion and the arrest of the royal family at the Tuileries, two months after the September massacres (3 bishops and 220 priests among the slaughtered) and the confiscation of emigrants' property, and one month after the

that Smith sets *The Emigrants* not in a general time but rather in a very particular one — a moment of very real, impending threat to British sovereignty and safety.

During 1789–1792, the years of the French Constitutional Monarchy, the revolution seemed to bring about relatively peaceful change (Stone 109). During the summer of 1792, however, the political climate intensified considerably. Between the August 1792 attack on the Tuileries and the January 1793 execution of Louis XVI two significant events occurred in France, both with substantial ramifications for England. The first was the September Massacres, “the most grisly single incident in the Revolution, an example of lynch law and of a crowd baying for blood” (Forrest 53–54), during which over 1,100 political prisoners, mostly aristocracy and clergy, were murdered during a five-day period after the news of the fall of Verdun reached Paris. The second, and more immediately threatening to British interests, was a public proclamation issued by the French National Convention on November 19, less than two months after the monarchy was abolished and France declared itself a Republic. The new republican French government formally called for European revolution, pledging its assistance, loyalty, and fraternity to other revolutionary nations. T. C. W. Blanning argues that this decree marks the revolution’s “progress[ion] from a war of prudence to a war of propaganda to a war of imperial expansion” (136), a progression clearly indicated when one juxtaposes the 1792 decree with one issued only two years earlier. In the 1790 declaration, the National Assembly promised that “the French nation renounces the undertaking of any war with a view to making conquests, and will never use its power against the liberty of any other people” (Blanning 59). The 1792 decree, publicly rationalized by a desire for liberating all from their oppressors, clearly indicated that “propaganda-as-policy would give way to territorial annexation-as-policy” (Stone 169). This declaration signaled at the very least a hardening of Anglo-French relations and at most that the French were looking for an excuse to invade.

death penalty was established for any returnees. By November, Robespierre, the Terror’s architect, had risen to power and Saint-Just was demanding judgment of Louis XVI as ‘a foreign enemy’ of the Republic’s ‘independence and unity’; in the same month, Smith was sheltering some emigrants in her own home” (83). Neither reads the date as directly related to a specific threat from the revolutionary French government to the English state. Curran alone characterizes the date as a time of specific threat to England in a footnote in his edition of Smith’s verse (135n. “November 1792”).

In response, the rhetoric of the English press, which previously had been worried and interested but not frantic, now became histrionic, panicky, and jingoistic. Just as the upheaval across the Channel had been seeping into the currents of English revolutionary discord since the June 1789 formation of the French National Assembly, it officially made its way to England through the French government's November 1792 call for revolt, thereby setting in motion events leading to England's declaration of war against France on February 11, 1793. By beginning *The Emigrants* in November 1792, Smith therefore deliberately sets her own work within a precise time of specific threat to and anxiety about the security of the English nation.¹⁵

Ultimately though, Smith is more concerned with illustrating the state's impact on the individual than with didactic pronouncements on the state of the nation. She is especially concerned with the person who has been cut off from the nation, exiled from the place that shapes his or her identity. For though she mourns the terrible turn of the Revolution in France, laments that xenophobia has found dangerous new fervor in England, and seeks to "humanize both countries" (133) through her verse, she aims to do so through a focus on the individual, a "delineation of those interesting objects which happened to excite my attention, and which even pressed upon a heart, that has learned, perhaps from its own sufferings, to feel with acute, though unavailing compassion, the calamity of others" (132). Smith uses the individual to shed light on the nation by paralleling her suffering with that of the French exiles.

The speaker's first characterization of self is one of suffering: she is a "weary soul" (1.35), one victimized by "proud oppression" and "legal crimes" (1.36) that cause her to long for solitude. In the face of the injustices she has suffered at the hands of the English Chancery, she longs for self-exile — the freedom to fully reject the system that harms her.¹⁶ But in the face of these injustices, the speaker only "half-abjure[s] Society" (1.42). Her rejection, her repudiation of community is incomplete and extends only to a figurative withdrawal. Instead of actually removing herself physically, emotionally, or artistically, she enacts an only partial resistance to sorrow and circumstance, one mirrored by the only partially protected and obscured natural world. She "sigh[s]" for some

¹⁵For more on the panic engendered in Britain by the French Revolution, specifically as this relates to Smith's poetry, see Labbe 2003: 125.

¹⁶These injustices are railed against in an autobiographical, parenthetical aside: "(For such are in this Land, where the vain boast / Of equal Law is mockery, while the cost / Of seeking redress is sure to plunge / Th' already injur'd to more certain ruin / And the wretch starves, before his Counsel pleads)" (1.37–41).

lone Cottage, deep embower'd
 In the green woods, that these steep chalky Hills
 Guard from the strong South West; where round their base
 The Beach wide flourishes, and the light Ash
 With slender leaf half hides the thymy turf!—
 There do I wish to hide me; well content
 If on the short grass, strewn with fairy flowers,
 I might repose thus shelter'd (1.43–50)

In 1784, financial difficulties forced Smith into literal exile with her husband, an experience that was painful and scarring. In the wake of continued hardships, including the wrangling with the lingering Chancery suit, securing suitable education and position for her sons, and making marriages for her penniless daughters, Smith creates a poetic persona who longs for exile. But in this instance, Smith's speaker dreams of self-exile, not enforced banishment — a voluntary, autonomous movement, one of personal protection that will lead her to private sanctuary and growth. She dreams of retreating into a pastoral setting, thinking that while immersed in the “beauteous works of God” (1.56), safe from “human woes” (1.57), she might “better learn to bear / Those that injustice, and duplicity / And faithlessness and folly, fix on me” (1.58–60).

Smith makes three crucial points in these lines. First, through her speaker, she yearns to be free from the emotional burden of watching the exiles around her suffer, principally because it is a kind of suffering with which she so clearly identifies. Secondly, she wants to be able to draw strength from a peaceful, meditative, natural landscape unsullied by human tragedy. And finally, she wants this strength so she can better bear her own tragedy and perhaps get back to the private, melancholic poetry of *Elegiac Sonnets* as well as to her sentimental, romantic novels, both of which have been stopped in their tracks by the effects of the Revolution.¹⁷ Smith longs for a place that will allow her the emotional and ethical freedom to meditate on the personal, not the public, in her verse. She wants to be able to write the poetry of *Elegiac Sonnets* rather than feel compelled to write *The Emigrants*, a sort of intermediary form, a verse dedicated to the intersections between public and private that she typically separates by genre: poetry for the private, novel for the public.

¹⁷ Before 1792, Smith wrote and published *Emmeline* (1788), *Ethelinde* (1789), *Celestina* (1791), and numerous editions of *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784, 1786, 1789, 1790, 1792). Yet between 1792 and 1794 her works centered on the French Revolution and the state of the English nation: *Desmond* (1792), *The Old Manor House* (1793), *The Emigrants* (1793), *The Wanderings of Warwick* (1794), and *The Banished Man* (1794). Significantly, there are no new editions of *Elegiac Sonnets* during these years.

Smith makes clear in *The Emigrants* that her empathy for others leaves her incapable of ever fully escaping sorrow, and in a moment decidedly different from those found in *Elegiac Sonnets*, she aligns her persona with real people enduring real distress during the very moments she writes: “For never yet could I derive relief, / When my swol’n heart was bursting with its sorrows, / From the sad thought, that others like myself / Live but to swell affliction’s countless tribes!” (1.61–64). Like the fictional and real-life sufferers of *Elegiac Sonnets*, Smith’s exiled poetic persona in *The Emigrants* cannot find peace. The lyrical solitude and melancholic separation she both craves and laments in *Elegiac Sonnets* are both gone, for Smith’s speaker has now been thrust into the company of those who feel comparable pain: “Tranquil seclusion I have vainly sought; / Peace, who delights in solitary shade, / No more will spread for me her downy wings” (1.65–67).¹⁸ The company of fellow exiles is no comfort, for at its core, Smith recognizes, exilic experience is a solitary one. She may feel their pain, sympathize with their suffering, but ultimately, she recognizes that it belongs to them.

The speaker addresses herself as “Mourner” not only to underscore her private suffering, however, but also to establish herself as someone whose unwilling engagement with private sorrows proves ironically beneficial: she is now a capable and appropriate mourner for sorrows, both public and private, outside her own personal experience. Whereas in *Elegiac Sonnets* the speaker laments private sorrows, in *The Emigrants* the speaker’s elegiac stance opens up a possibility for serious, politicized commentary on public events. Unlike others who encounter the emigrants, this speaker can see “Discriminated anguish” (1.113) in “each expressive face” (1.112), establishing two significant points. First, not everyone suffers the pains of exile in the same way, a distinction she makes clear in Book One through her depiction of individual exiles and in Book Two through her depiction of the captured French royal family. More importantly, she makes clear that her persona possesses the ability to know and distinguish between these different sufferings. She recognizes the inhumanity of the emigrants’ position, regardless of any personal, religious, or national differences that she may have with them or that her nation may have with theirs, and her vision is shrewd enough

¹⁸This separation and then immersion is mirrored by the form: melancholy detailed in the separate, distinct sonnets which, as sonnets, are limited in scope and length, in contrast to melancholy immersed in a long work of blank verse, a revolutionary form of limitless scope. See also Wolfson.

to distinguish the individual burdens borne by each of these figures, burdens in addition to exile and in some sense independent of their public losses. Her vision stems from her privileged position: a position made privileged not by station or nation, but by shared experience. She too has "known / Involuntary exile" (1.155–56), the despair, indignities, and confusion that the emigrants now face, and she uses this knowledge to stage her response, to delineate the individual and the private beneath the seemingly homogenous, public exterior.¹⁹

The public condition of exile is a complicated phenomenon. On the one hand, the emigrants gain a new social persona: they are members of the public group called "exiles." This new social role is predicated upon the stripping away of all other roles, all other public group identifications and memberships — in the case of Smith's exiles, membership in the First or Second Estates. In this way, one's public identity as exile constitutes a lack of public identity, since the "exile" is by definition rooted to no place and to no characteristic other than that of being place-less, homeless. When the priest is no longer a clergyman, the aristocrat no longer the nobleman, and so on, then the distinct identities of these fellow sufferers become unclear, for these identities were constituted by the very roles that have been taken from them. As walking negations, they are not French but not British, neither aristocrat nor serf, part of neither church nor state.

In the face of this indiscriminate mass, though, Smith nonetheless distinguishes particular suffering. Citing her own personal experience, Smith suggests that she can fathom the experience of each particular exile.²⁰ But what sense does this make, given that the exiles have been stripped of their identities? Surely, the sufferings of each particular one remain hidden, whereas the poet, perhaps at most, can point to the public persona that has been lost. Certainly Smith can publicize the latter, for these roles are by their very nature public. Given that these have been lost, however, how can she describe them as individuals with their own unique sorrows and singular experiences?

¹⁹On the ways in which Smith establishes a parallel between herself and the exiles, see Curran 1988: 201.

²⁰Labbe characterizes Smith's depictions of the exiles as "metaphors for Smith's own sense of marginality, personal and cultural" (2003: 122). Her argument seeks to stage "a reading sympathetic to Smith's self-presentation as exiled," maintaining that Smith "stage-manages an image of subjectivity able to converse with equal authority on the political and the personal" (117).

Smith can describe the particular personal experiences of those she observes because first, unlike her fellow Englishmen and women, she claims to possess the requisite experience, and second, she is willing and able to see beyond the new, impersonal public identity of “exile” and recognize both the specific social constructions and the individual experiences underlying these particulars. When Smith was exiled to France, she completely lost the public identity which was important to her and which she would reclaim in *Elegiac Sonnets*: Charlotte Smith of Bignor Park, Sussex. Upon her return to England, however, she would never really regain that public persona. This loss permeates her poetry, and it directs her depiction of the exiled French men and women who populate *The Emigrants*.

The first emigrant the speaker presents is a poor monk.²¹ As the lowliest of the Catholic clergy, he possessed no accoutrements of worldly success for exile to strip away. Instead, his most significant losses are mental and emotional; his sense of truth and falsity, orthodoxy and heresy, is on the verge of collapse. The horrors of exile have led him to abandon his absolute belief in the Roman Catholic Church as the true Church as well as the security he found in dogma. Exile transgresses his spiritual and doctrinal boundaries in a way that his pious religious training and lowly cloister life leave him woefully unprepared to manage. The second exiled clergyman, a man of “more haughty port” (1.125), can barely contain his disgust over “all he lost” (1.128): “the Gothic dome / that vied with splendid palaces; the beds / Of silk and down, the silver chalices, / Vestments with gold enwrought for blazing altars” (1.128–31). Still, his unhappiness does not end with his material losses, for he mourns his loss of personal power just as much (1.135–38). As a man of “daring soul and high ambition” (1.139), this loss of power leaves him as disheartened as the poor monk is with his loss of faith. As someone whose sense of self was based on being a particular kind of priest in a particular time and place, having these temporal and physical anchors stripped away leaves him angry and bereft. Smith distinguishes the third exile, an Abbé who

²¹ Carol Fry reads *The Emigrants* as a “plea for tolerance of those who fled the troubles in France, albeit a rather cool one” (81). Of Smith’s depiction of the exiled clergy in particular she claims that “Smith’s republican principles do not permit her to describe them with much sympathy” and her “description of them strikes a decidedly negative tone” (82). Fry’s criticism of *The Emigrants*, however, is compromised by the way she wants to read the poem; she wants to see it as “one that can in some respects . . . be read as another entry in the pamphlet war” (81). In the end, this predisposition leads her to interpret the verse as didactic and emotionally controlled rather than sympathetic and emotionally charged.

travels with the second priest, from his companion by his "less contracted brow" (1.149) and somewhat less unsettled countenance. Though he is "[l]ighter of heart" (1.147) than his companions, the speaker sees that his heart is nonetheless "heavier far / Than he was wont" (1.147–48). And though Smith's speaker remains unconvinced by his confident manner, the hopefulness which, "sanguine as he is, he does not feel" (1.151), she nevertheless grants that he can momentarily cheat "the sad and weighty pressure / Of evils present" (1.152–53). Despite the transparency of the Abbé's façade, the effect nonetheless prevails; the misery of exile temporarily recedes, on the surface at least.

In the case of each clergyman, Smith can see the personal through the surface of an otherwise faceless "exile," ultimately underscoring the democratic reality of this experience: it can happen to anyone, regardless of whether or not the individual might be said to deserve it. The exile of the haughty Catholic priest, certainly not a sympathetic figure in Francophobic, Protestant England, could easily have been dismissed by Smith's less sensitive readers as a just punishment for an ungodly man. A central argument in *The Emigrants*, however, is that even an ordinary good person cannot escape exilic suffering. To contrast with the other Catholic clergy, Smith next presents a parish priest, a "simple shepherd in a rustic scene" (1.170). Even this "poor and pious priest" (1.186), a "humbled" man (1.180) whose "lowly undistinguish'd" (1.181) home was the site of a "life of purest piety" (1.182), a man scorned by nobility for his station (1.185–86) — "even such a Man / Becomes an exile" (1.190–91).

In Book One, the speaker makes clear that "Tranquil seclusion [she has] vainly sought" (65), for peace is not to be hers. And while her own efforts to court serenity have failed, she does not stage this as a personal failure. Instead, she acknowledges that peace will not come to anyone who suffers this kind of loss, regardless of the sort of exile one endures. In Book Two, set five months after Book One in the midst of the Terror, the speaker again sees the "unhappy lot / Of the lorn Exiles; who amid the storms / Of wild disastrous Anarchy, are thrown, / Like shipwreck's sufferers, on England's coast, / To see, perhaps, no more their native land, / Where Desolation riots" (2.9–14). She laments that "They, like me, / From fairer hopes and happier prospects driven, / Shrink from the future, and regret the past" (2.14–16). These victims of the terrible power of the new French state remind her of her own exilic predicament and, in a moment to which Wordsworth must be indebted, pities them for their own sorrows as well as the universal sorrow they represent: "my soul is pained / By the variety of woes that Man / For Man creates" (2.412–14),

because “Man, misguided Man, / Mars the fair work that he was bid enjoy, / And makes himself the evil he deplores” (1.32–34).

This tone of melancholy builds across Book One, culminating in a simultaneously didactic and ominous ending. Smith constructs a not so subtle warning to her fellow English:

Study a lesson that concerns ye much;
And trembling, learn, that if oppress'd too long,
The raging multitude, to madness stung,
Will turn on their oppressors; and, no more
By sounding titles and parading forms
Bound like tame victims, will redress themselves! (1.332–37)

In perhaps one of the most overtly Burkean moments in the poem, her direct address continues, warning that if the English allow “Confusion” (1.343) to reign over “fair Order” (1.340), the “infernal passions” — “Vengeance” (1.347), “Avarice,” and “Envy” (1.348) — will “Pollute the immortal shrine of Liberty, / Dismay her votaries, and disgrace her name” (1.349–350). England has far more to lose by resisting change than by embracing it.

Just as Smith ends Book One with an invocation of British pride, so too does she end Book Two on a national note. In the first book, she concludes with anti-war rhetoric, implicitly identifying peacefulness with British nobility. She is clear that “bloodless laurels “ are “nobler far / Than those acquir'd at Cressy or Poictiers” (1.368–70) or of those “bestow'd / O him who stood on Calpe's blazing height / Amid the thunder of a warring world, / Illustrious rather from the crowds he sav'd / From flood and fire, than from the ranks who fell / Beneath his valour!” (1.372–76). Smith unambiguously links mercy with greatness:

Actions such as these,
Like incense rising to the Throne of Heaven,
Far better justify the ride, that swells
In British bosoms, than the deafening roar
Of Victory from a thousand brazen throats,
That tell with what success wide-wasting War
Has by our brave Compatriots thinned the world. (1.376–82)

By the end of Book Two, however, her wish has altered. Rather than pleading to what she hopes is the better nature of humanity, she calls on the “Power Omnipotent” (2.421), who with “mercy view[s] / This suffering globe” (2.421–22) and asks that it “cause thy creatures cease, / With savage fangs, to tear her bleeding breast” (2.423). In a tone of both rever-

ent petition and fervent demand, she pleads for mercy for her world; her emphasis on the imperative makes plain her desire: "Restrain that rage for power, that bids a Man, / Himself a worm, desire unbounded rule / O'er beings like himself" (2.424–25) and

Teach the hard hearts
Of rulers, that the poorest hind, who dies
For their unrighteous quarrels, in thy sight
Is equal to the imperious Lord, that leads
His disciplin'd destroyers to the field. (2.426–430)

No longer content in this book to ask nicely for what is right, now she insists upon it. Her ultimate wish is that "lovely Freedom, in her genuine charms, / Aided by stern but equal Justice" (2.431–32) will "drive / From the ensanguin'd earth the hell-born fiends / Of Pride, Oppression, Avarice, and Revenge" (2.432–35) — all so that the exiles can go home:

Then shall these ill-starr'd wanderers, whose sad fate
These desultory lines lament, regain
Their native country; private vengeance then
To public virtue yield; and the fierce feuds,
That long have torn their desolated land,
May (even as storms, that agitate the air,
Drive noxious vapours from the blighted earth)
Serve, all tremendous as they are, to fix
The reign of Reason, Liberty, and Peace. (436–44)

For Smith, restoring these "ill-starr'd wanderers" to their home is synonymous with a "reign of Reason, Liberty, and Peace," for as long as the exiles remain cut off from their home, their home will never truly be at peace.

Much the same claim can be made for Smith's predicament as well. In her conception of Britain as a modern, progressive land, for her to remain cut off from her life, to remain a type of "ill-starr'd wanderer" herself, compromises England as much as the treatment of French exiles compromises France. Her continued exile in her homeland, cut off from the life that is rightfully hers, diminishes Britain, making it as much a creator of exiles as it is a safe haven for them.

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