**“Breaking the silent Sabbath of the grave”: Charlotte Smith’s Sonnet XLIV and Her Place in Literary History**Bethan Roberts\*  
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**Abstract**

This essay re-assesses the much-discussed place of Charlotte Smith (1784-1806) in literary history, through her most widely read and anthologized Sonnet XLIV “Written in the Churchyard at Middleton in Sussex” (1789). Smith is often credited with reviving the sonnet in the late eighteenth century, yet when she first published her *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784), the revival was already underway. This essay argues that Smith’s engagement with her predecessors and contemporaries needs to be excavated and analyzed in order to understand her role and significance in the sonnet revival. It shows that Smith’s negotiations with eighteenth-century sonnet tradition are manifested in Sonnet XLIV and played out upon its churchyard setting. The second part of the essay considers the many responses to Middleton church in the years following the sonnet’s publication. These shed new light on Smith’s literary reputation and posthumous fate, as well as the processes underpinning it. The essay thus clarifies Smith’s paradoxical “place” both in the sonnet revival and in posterity. It shows how appropriation of place itself was an important way in which aspects of literary tradition and reputation were negotiated and understood in the late eighteenth century, and beyond.

In 1792, John Thelwall wrote of Charlotte Smith’s Sonnet XLIV “Written in the Churchyard at Middleton in Sussex”: “Perhaps it is not saying too much to declare, that in the narrow compass of these fourteen lines, are included all the requisites of good poetry: vivid painting, numerous harmony, sublimity of thought and expression, and pathos of sentiment. What, in particular, can surpass the thought of breaking the silent sabbath of the grave?” (414). Published in the fifth edition of her *Elegiac Sonnets* (1789), Smith’s sonnet has continued to attract the attention of critics and commentators ever since.[[1]](#endnote-1) It is her most widely anthologized and discussed sonnet. The poem describes a tempestuous night, in which the sea overrides the land, breaking up the graves in the churchyard where the sonnet is written:

Press’d by the Moon, mute arbitress of tides,

While the loud equinox its power combines,

The sea no more its swelling surge confines,

But o’er the shrinking land sublimely rides.

The wild blast, rising from the Western cave,

Drives the huge billows from their heaving bed;

Tears from their grassy tombs the village dead,

And breaks the silent sabbath of the grave!

With shells and sea-weed mingled, on the shore

Lo! Their bones whiten in the frequent wave;

But vain to them the winds and waters rave;

They hear the warring elements no more:

While I am doom’d—by life’s long storm opprest,

To gaze with envy on their gloomy rest. (*Works* 14: 43)[[2]](#endnote-2)

As Smith’s own note to the sonnet informs us, Middleton church was located right on the “margin” of the Sussex coast. High and tempestuous tides in the 1780s had encroached upon the churchyard, “the graves broken up,” Smith writes, “and the remains of bodies interred washed into the sea, whence human bones are found among the sand and shingles on the shore” (14: 43). The site of Middleton church, which gradually succumbed to the waves, gained some celebrity in the late eighteenth century because of its perilous location, attracting to the site artists and commentators, who frequently associate it with Smith and her “beautiful” sonnet (“Letter,” *Gentleman’s Magazine* [1797] 729). As Thelwall’s comments suggest, Sonnet XLIV has also been invested with much literary significance. Sonnet XLIV is at the heart of Thelwall’s “Essay on the English Sonnet” in which he defends Smith’s “illegitimate,” irregular sonnet forms and celebrates the way she prevails over the “pedantic prejudices” of critics “by which the wings of aspiring genius are shackled, and the efforts of modern invention censured and restrained” (408). He ends the essay by designating Smith a prominent place in literary tradition: “every province has its separate competitors. Over the epic field, Milton[,] . . . Shakespeare in the dramatic, and in the sonnet, Charlotte Smith” (414). More recent critics have also used Smith’s influential Sonnet XLIV to place her in a literary sense, chiefly in relation to the “graveyard” school of poetry, established by poems such as Thomas Parnell’s “A Night Piece on Death” (1721), Robert Blair’s *The Grave* (1743), and Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* (1742-46). Jacqueline Labbe has drawn attention to the generic quality of Smith’s sonnet: “its details of decomposed bodies [are] more conventional than is usually acknowledged,” she writes, evincing a “generic continuity” which should be more remarked (115); and Michael Hansen has argued that, while Smith is often defined as a “Romantic” poet, “she is also very much still in the company of the eighteenth-century graveyard school” (312). Other critics, however, argue that the innovation Smith brings to the genre also needs to be acknowledged. Stella Brooks writes that, while it may draw on its conventions, Smith’s sonnet, “[f]ar from belonging to the ‘Graveyard School’ . . . is not a wistful vignette in the late Augustan mode, but a turbulent Romantic fantasy” (14). Brooks points to how Smith’s sonnet is poised between different modes, at the crux of a literary shift, and hints—as does Thelwall—at how Smith’s “turbulent” landscape may suggest something of her own literary force. Adela Pinch similarly observes that Smith’s sonnet “dramatically revises the topos of the tranquil country churchyard”: “[t]his graveyard poem indeed suffers a sea change” (59). Smith’s revisions of topoi, genres, and modes are played out upon the poetic space of the graveyard poem.

Smith is often credited with reviving the sonnet in the eighteenth century, yet she was preceded in her use of the form by Thomas Edwards, Thomas Gray, and Thomas Warton (among others) who all had associations with the “graveyard” school. This essay argues that Smith’s engagement with such writers needs to be excavated and analyzed in order to understand her contribution to the sonnet revival. The essay then considers the multiple responses to the site of Middleton church in the years following the publication of Smith’s sonnet, including several illustrations. Together these reveal a curious fascination with the disintegrating church and its morbid associations that has concerned not only initial readers but also critics of the present day. The discourse surrounding Middleton churchyard has not hitherto been fully discussed in relation to Smith’s sonnet, and it sheds new light on Smith’s popular literary reputation during her lifetime as well as her posthumous obscurity. The essay thus clarifies Smith’s paradoxical “place” both in the sonnet revival and in posterity—in a wide historical context—through a discussion of the landscape of Sonnet XLIV, its antecedents, and the responses it inspired. It shows how the appropriation and presentation of place and landscape played an important part in the ways in which aspects of literary tradition and reputation were negotiated and understood in the late eighteenth century, and beyond.

In 1802, the *Critical Review* announced that the “sonnet has been revived by Charlotte Smith” (“Art. V.” 393), yet a less widely quoted commentator had observed in *The New Annual Register* in January 1785 that “[n]o one can be insensible how much the sonnet hath of late years become a favourite mode of writing” (“Domestic Literature” 269). Indeed, the sonnet’s initial revival predates Smith’s sonnets by some years. Smith read and knew of the sonnets of Gray, Edwards, and Warton, yet the relationship between Smith’s sonnets and those of her forbears has largely been overlooked. Smith’s sonnets are deeply engaged with literary tradition, and her innovative poetic voice and form emerge out of myriad engagements and negotiations with male forbears and contemporaries, realized through place and setting. The churchyard space was most strongly associated with Gray following his “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751). Smith’s title echoes that of Gray’s poem, yet Smith’s churchyard presents rather a different scene from Gray’s quiet, pastoral space, in which those interred are “for ever laid”:

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree’s shade,

Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,

Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,

The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep. (13-16)

Daniel Robinson describes Smith’s sonnet as an “answer” to Gray’s “Elegy,” rendering “Gray’s ‘rude forefathers’ superfluous and inconsequential by casting them out of their rustic cemetery only to be pulverized by the ocean” (“Formal Paradoxy” 194). To Esther H. Schor, Smith’s sea “violates the sanctity” of Gray’s churchyard, which “yields up its bones to the wild fate of Milton’s Lycidas” (65). Moreover, at the end of the “Elegy,” as the death of the speaker is envisaged and the epitaph which would mark their grave imagined, Gray appears to place himself among the dead interred in the churchyard. Thus, as the sea “tears from the grassy tombs the village dead,” Gray, “forefather” of the sonnet as such, is uprooted by the literary forces of Smith’s sonnet. Gray’s own, sole, “elegiac” sonnet “on the Death of Mr. Richard West” had been published posthumously in 1775. Critics have attached much significance to Gray’s sonnet: “the motive force underlying the entire Romantic revival of the sonnet,” writes Stuart Curran, “a model for hundreds of poets” (*Poetic Form* 30). Gray’s sonnet is brought into dialogue with the churchyard setting of Smith’s Sonnet XLIV through her “Elegy,” also included in the fifth edition of *Elegiac Sonnets*,accompanied by an illustration. The poem, Smith establishes in a note, is set in the same churchyard as Sonnet XLIV, the scene of which is re-imagined, as the speaker is swept away by the encroaching tide. Elegy and sonnet collide as the *abab* form of Gray’s “Elegy” is matched, yet it is in this poem that the explicit reference to his sonnet is made:

Forth to the world, a widow’d wanderer driven,

I pour to the winds and waves the unheeded tear,

Try with vain effort to submit to Heaven,

And fruitless call on him—“who cannot hear.” (29-32)

The note makes the acknowledgement: “‘I fruitless mourn to him who [that] cannot hear, / And weep the more because I weep in vain.’ Gray’s exquisite Sonnet; in reading which it is impossible not to regret that he wrote only one” (52). There is something elegiac about the observation, acknowledging with “regret” the isolation of Gray’s sad, solitary, “fruitless” sonnet.

Indeed, the influence and significance of Gray’s sonnet is somewhat at odds with the spirit of the sonnet itself, which is characterized by a hidden, repressed, unheard aspect: “fruitless” and “in vain.” Gray himself disliked the poem and it was not published until after his death. Like much of his poetry, the sonnet is self-consciously poetic and is steeped in the poetry of the past, indebted to Petrarch’s “Zephiro torna” sonnet and Miltonic in expression and style. In Wordsworth’s well-known critique of Gray’s sonnet in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), Gray—“more than any other man curiously elaborate in the structure of his own poetic diction” (252)—is placed at the head of an outmoded poetic school, against which Wordsworth’s own poetic project is defined. His comments about Gray contrast with his identification of Smith in a letter as the “first *Modern* distinguished” in the sonnet (3: 159-60). Smith’s own sonnet and elegy bring challenges to Gray before Wordsworth. What is variously antiquated, suppressed, and unheard in Gray’s sonnet is dramatically uprooted. The sonnet revival is brought into the present through Smith’s intertextual play.

Smith also associated sonnet forbear Thomas Edwards (1699–1757) with the churchyard space. In her novel *Celestina* (1791), the eponymous heroine composes a sonnet in a country churchyard inspired by the grave of a young woman, “not without some recollection of Edwards’ thirty seventh and forty fourth sonnets” (4: 121). The sonnets Celestina recollects are both elegiac: Edwards’s sonnet thirty-seven is “On the Death of Miss J. M.,” and in forty-four, addressed “To Matthew Barnard,” the parish sexton, Edwards imagines his own death and burial. In Smith’s sonnet, later transposed to the sixth edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* (1792), the graves of the two sonnets upon which she draws are conflated, as nineteen-year-old Celestina identifies with the young “Miss J. M.” of Sonnet XXXVII, while she imagines her own death through the paradigm of Sonnet XLIV: “I would, sweet maid! thy humble bed were mine, / And mine thy calm and enviable rest” (3-4). There are echoes here of Smith’s own earlier Sonnet XLIV.

The majority of Edwards’s sonnets were collected posthumously in the sixth edition of his *The Canons of Criticism* (1765), an attack on William Warburton’s editing of Shakespeare. Like Gray’s, Edwards’s poems looks to the literary past. His sonnets frequently invoke and celebrate a native tradition of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, and he first turned to the form after reading Spenser. Three of Edwards’s own sonnets are Spenserian, and the remainder Italian in form, “drawing from the same fountains as Milton drew,” as he wrote to Samuel Richardson (91). A sense of loss and isolation imbues several sonnets, and Edwards often presents himself as part of something outmoded and defunct: he appears in Sonnet V as “The tottering remnant of some splendid Fane,” “Single, unpropp’d, and nodding to my fall” (10 and 14). Edwards’s personal isolation—he is the last surviving member of his family—matches his literary position as almost the sole writer to appropriate the sonnet at this time, a “remnant” of a lost literary age. Having nodded to his “fall” in Sonnet V, Sonnet XLIV looks to his burial, where “The cowslip, violet or the pale primrose / Perhaps may chance to deck the verdant sweard” (9-10), lines which recall Gray’s “Elegy” (it is not certain which poem was written first). The effect of the sonnet is heightened by its posthumous publication in *Canons*. Moreover, the epitaph to Edwards’s grave is reproduced in the “Advertisement” of the edition—“under this stone are deposited the Remains of Thomas Edwards, Esq”—which affirms the elegiac tone of his sonnets; they appear as “remains” or relics of an already expired age (sig. \*A2v). Together with his Sonnet XLIV, Edwards can be interred, like Gray, within the space of his own poetic landscape, the churchyard space which Smith’s storm dramatically uproots.

Smith also engages with Thomas Warton (1728-90) through a churchyard scene in her novel, *Montalbert* (1795). The character Walsingham composes a sonnet in the grounds of a ruined chapel, indulging in a “melancholy species of pleasure” and “cherishing the same spirit with which Young says in his Night Thoughts, ‘Throughout the vast globe’s wide circumference / No being wakes but me’” (8: 244). The quotation is not from Young, however, but a different “graveyard” poem, Warton’s *The Pleasures of Melancholy* (1747), with which the sonnet engages more than this misremembrance would suggest. The “melancholy . . . pleasure” Walsingham experiences echoes Warton’s title and the sonnet itself draws on the poem, not least in setting. Warton’s early poem sets up the importance of and connections between place and the past which would inform much of his poetic output. Indeed, his poems frequently explore places and artifacts of historical interest, as the titles of his sonnets would suggest: “Written at Stonehenge,” “On King Arthur’s Round Table,” and “Written in a Blank Leaf of Dugdale’s Monasticon.” As David Fairer has shown, this dramatizes the ways Warton takes inspiration from the literary past. In his poems, “hidden entries into the past regularly open, as ruined and empty spaces are peopled and filled with light and music” (103). Warton’s *History of English Poetry* was published in three volumes between 1774 and 1781, and as Fairer writes, dovetailed with his poetry to express his interest in:

. . . authentic lost voices, however “minor”; . . . revived not as something dead, but as a resource that can feed into the work of the modern poet. If his *History* [*of English Poetry*] gave the British reading public of the 1780s and 1790s a sense of the capaciousness of the literary past, his *Poems* (1777) offered a model for its infusion into the poetry of the present. (99)

Warton’s appropriation of the forms and modes of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton—among others—is dramatized through the historical settings and subject matter of his poems; their ruins and “secret places” often contain springs, “literally sources from which the poet can draw” (104).[[3]](#endnote-3)

Although Smith often quotes from the poetry of the past (and present) in her sonnets, she is not interested in engaging with and recovering it in the same way, as indicated by Sonnet XLIV, which felicitously embraces the disintegration of the Wartonian secret place. Through her invocation of Milton, Pope, and Thomson, Smith boldly places herself in a canon of male poets, yet her appropriations are often playful and disruptive. In her very first sonnet in *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784), she quotes from the end of “Eloisa to Abelard,” which “testifies to her continuing the main line of English poetic tradition” (Curran, “Intertextualities” 179), yet, re-appropriating the female voice from the male, she recasts Pope’s future bard as a female—herself. Sonnet VII “On the departure on the nightingale” quotes from Milton’s Sonnet I, yet the sonnet itself “departs” from Milton, the forefather of her eighteenth-century sonnet contemporaries, through both content and form.

Thus, in the hands of Smith’s eighteenth-century predecessors, the sonnet revival was steeped in retrospection, a mode from which her sonnets depart. Accordingly, she is frequently identified with a new impulse in the history of the sonnet, and, despite the sonnets of Edwards, Warton, and Gray (and others), Smith is usually credited with reviving the form (“Art. V.”. *Critical Review*). As previously noted, Wordsworth describes Smith as the first “modern” poet to use the sonnet, and Coleridge based his conception of the form—in an essay of 1796—on the sonnets of Smith and William Lisle Bowles: “they who first made the Sonnet popular among the present English” (2: 1139). Contrary to her eighteenth-century predecessors, Smith (with two exceptions) adopts the English sonnet form and a range of irregular variations on it. While the Italian form had an established poetic past, at a time when Shakespeare’s sonnets were little known and widely disliked, the English sonnet form was disconnected from literary tradition. It was known as the “illegitimate” sonnet, or not even recognized as a sonnet form by some, but following Smith’s appropriation became increasingly popular throughout the 1780s and 1790s, as did her more immediate, naturalized mode. Thelwall’s essay of 1792 is a rebuttal to conservative critics who refused to acknowledge Smith’s English and irregular, “illegitimate” sonnet forms. He concludes that the “design” of his essay has been “to vindicate the freedom of English verse from the pedantic chains of the Italian sonnet” (414). Again the landscape of Smith’s Sonnet XLIV is suggestive in this context. Immediate, huge in scope, and innovative in form; the uprooting, transforming forces at work within the seascape of the sonnet become emblematic of the re-visioning force Smith brings to the sonnet, and of her departure from and disruption of her predecessors, the quiet spaces of their sonnets, and their antiquated form and mode. Deborah Kennedy has written of the “liberating quality” of the sonnet, of how Smith “seeks an identification with the apparently free forces of nature” in the sea scene, “contained in the rigid form of the sonnet” (47). The sonnet’s power lies largely in this identification and paradox. Moreover, Smith was aware of the novelty she brought through her subject matter. In her work for children, *Rural Walks* (1795), the autobiographical character Mrs. Woodfield observes that a “tempest at sea, though one of the most awful and sublime spectacles the world can shew, has, I think, been less frequently described in poetry than any other phenomenon of Nature” (12: 81). Sonnet XLIV is one of several sonnets by Smith which describes this phenomenon of nature, through which she brings an original and sublime subject to poetry, and to the sonnet in particular. Apposite to a poem about transcending and transgressing boundaries—the sea “o’er the shrinking land sublimely rides”—this huge and unbounded natural force is brought to one of the smallest and most circumscribed of literary forms.[[4]](#endnote-4)

While it may dramatize Smith’s innovation, Sonnet XLIV is also—like many of her sonnets—characterized by marginality and fragility. As a note informs us, the speaker is located on the “margin of the sea,” a headland which is disintegrating as the poem is being written. Smith’s “elegiac” sonnets frequently take fragile subject matter and are colored by loss, transience, and ephemerality, undoing the traditional close relationship between the sonnet and immortality, most famously enunciated in the couplet of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18: “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee” (13-14).[[5]](#endnote-5) In the eighteenth century, the English sonnet—and irregular variations on it—favored by Smith had become associated with ephemera and insubstantiality by critics, a “facile form” as Anna Seward described them (162), and in her preface Smith states that her sonnets “have . . . no very just claim to that title,” describing them as “simple effusions” (14: 9). Other poems by Smith are also concerned with the eroding south coast, most notably her substantial prospect poem “Beachy Head,” which ends with the fragmentation of place, as in Sonnet XLIV, as the result of an “equinoctial” storm:

One dark night

The equinoctial wind blew south by west,

Fierce on the shore;—the bellowing cliffs were shook

Even to their stony base, and fragments fell

Flashing and thundering on the angry flood. (716-20)

The crumbling headland is matched by the fragility of the gossamer, the subject of two late sonnets by Smith (LXIII “The Gossamer” and LXXVII “To the insect of the Gossamer”): a delicate frame, “fragile as the fleeting dews of morn” in Sonnet LXIII (13). In Sonnet LXXVII, the poet is likened to the gossamer spider, precariously “by the line / Of Gossamer suspended” (2), and at the mercy of the swift which ends its “fairy sail” (8). Jennifer Keith has argued that the “precariousness of the poet represented in many late-eighteenth-century works” such as Smith’s gossamer sonnets “unfortunately mirrors their disappearance from literary history” (284). Indeed, Smith’s fading, disintegrating sonnet subjects pre-echo the way she fades from literary histories and canons following her popularity and influence in the early Romantic period. For their anguished speakers, Smith’s late sonnets also increasingly invoke states of “Forgetfulness!” and “Oblivion!” (Sonnet XC, 1, 6), which similarly become intertwined with the fate of the sonnets themselves. Keith’s observation is particularly pertinent to and evocative of Smith’s Sonnet XLIV and the peculiar precariousness of its geographical setting.[[6]](#endnote-6) The sonnet dramatizes Smith’s literary force and seems to anticipate the fragility of her poetic legacy: from a contemporary critical perspective the sonnet presents a fitting metaphor for Smith’s place in literary history.

Smith’s colorful literary fate has been tracked by Louise Duckling, who shows how Smith’s contemporary success “failed to secure her a position within the newly-emerging national canon” (203). However, despite Smith’s subsequent effacement from literary history, Duckling argues that Smith was not “entirely forgotten: her contribution was assessed in a variety of nineteenth-century anthologies, dictionaries and celebrations of ‘lost’ female talent” (203) in which her contribution was downgraded to that of a popular female poet. Indeed, in posthumous assessments, Smith is frequently marginalized or referred to in something of an “elegiac” way. In Alexander Dyce’s *Specimens of British Poetesses* (1825) —a response to the exclusion of women from great “Collections of the English Poets” (iii)— Smith seems poised between preservation and disappearance. Dyce writes that “Her *Sonnets*, once very popular, are not framed on the Italian model, and exhibit little of concentrated thought; but they are ‘most musical, most melancholy,’ and abound with touches of tenderness, grace and beauty” (254). Dyce is obliged to temper his praise of Smith with a nod to the inferiority, and perhaps ephemerality, of the English sonnet form. The alignment of her sonnets with Milton’s nightingale imbues Smith with a canonical voice, while simultaneously denying it to her through the identification with the bird—usually female, hidden, and dispossessed—and she was of course but “once very popular” (254). Dyce also included a sonnet by Smith in his 1833 collection *Specimens of English Sonnets*. In another of the “reclamation efforts” that Duckling identifies, George Bethune’s *The British Female Poets* (1848) observes how Smith’s sonnets have, elegiacally, “fallen into such undeserved neglect, that they are rarely found except in libraries of collectors” (89).[[7]](#endnote-7) In the most well-known assessment of Smith’s literary fate, made in 1833, between these anthologies, Wordsworth observed that Smith was “a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered,” accurately prophesizing and encoding Smith’s position in literary history (*Poetical Works* 403).

Wordsworth’s own indebtedness to Smith’s sonnets was never publicly acknowledged, and while his note bemoans that Smith’s influence on “English verse” will not be adequately acknowledged, Wordsworth was also somewhat complicit in obscuring it. It seems significant that in his copy of *Elegiac Sonnets* (1789), acquired as an undergraduate at Cambridge, the only poem which Wordsworth marks in any notable way is Sonnet XLIV. Christopher Nagle suggests that Wordsworth’s 1833 note is a final late acknowledgement of Smith’s importance to his poetic development embedded in this earlier “editing” of Smith’s sonnet (51). In his copy, Wordsworth rewrites the final line of Smith’s sonnet, amending the couplet from “While I am doom’d—by life’s long storm opprest, / To gaze with envy on their gloomy rest” to “While I am doom’d—by life’s long storm opprest, / To envy their insensible unrest.” Nagle suggests that Wordsworth thus alters the relationship between the poetic self and the natural scene; through losing the distance embedded in the original “gaze” out of the speaker, the “I” becomes more fully absorbed in the scene, “so much a hallmark of his mature poetry” (53). Like his later acknowledgement, Wordsworth here displays his poetic debt to Smith, while in a sense obscuring her. In editing, “improving” her lines, asserting his superiority, Wordsworth displaces Smith, curiously mirrored by the way in which he removes the speaking “I” from the scene of the sonnet, the celebrated churchyard landscape upon which Smith’s posthumous fate—so this essay argues—is played out. Robinson has identified a reference to Smith’s Sonnet XLIV in a sonnet of Wordsworth’s 1820 *The River Duddon* sequence (“Form and Function” 460). Sonnet XXX, centered upon a “wave-washed churchyard,” also “edits” Smith’s original:

How sweet were leisure! could it yield no more

Than mid that wave-washed Church-yard to recline,

From pastoral graves extracting thoughts divine;

Or there to pace, and mark the summits hoar

Of distant moon-lit mountains faintly shine,

Sooth’d by the unseen River’s gentle roar. (9-14)

While presenting a similarly moonlit scene, the “pastoral” churchyard of Wordsworth’s sonnet is “washed” by the river rather than the sea and the soothing, “gentle roar” of the river suggestively echoes yet iterates its dissimilarity from the raving and warring “winds and waters” of Smith’s sonnet. Wordsworth modifies Smith’s scene: the relationship between speaker and place and what the speaker “extracts” from it are somewhat different “thoughts” from those of Smith’s sonnet. Robinson’s argument about the literary significance of *The River Duddon* sequence and its relation to Wordsworth’s place in literary tradition is also pertinent. Robinson argues that the way Wordsworth claimed Milton as his sonnet predecessor, rather than Smith, was a “deliberate erasure of her influence” and that it is “only” in *The River Duddon* that he balances his debts, negotiated largely through his appropriation of the river trope, a popular subject in eighteenth-century sonnets, including Smith’s (449-50). The river also has a more weighty function, for through it—so Robinson argues—Wordsworth claims poetic immortality for himself and his sonnet sequence, invoked through the transcendent permanence of both the river and of the sonnet tradition (450-51, 461). Thus, the river becomes a complex trope through which Wordsworth finally acknowledges “how profoundly” he felt Smith’s influence (462), yet through it Wordsworth also disestablishes himself from the ephemeral and transient mode of Smith and other eighteenth-century predecessors. In his own churchyard sonnet, Wordsworth’s poet gleans “thoughts divine,” and is successful in securing the poetic fame and longevity Smith is denied and appears to resist in her sonnets through their fading, fragile subject matter (although the way she quotes from and draws on established male poets may suggest otherwise).[[8]](#endnote-8)

**Middleton Church**

Like Wordsworth’s sonnet, set in the churchyard of the Kirk of Ulpha in Cumbria, Smith’s Sonnet XLIV is place specific, one of many poems in *Elegiac Sonnets* that is written in or set in the West Sussex country of her childhood (and much of her adult life). Smith was known as a West Sussex poet, and she was closely associated with Middleton church in particular, which, as this essay will demonstrate, illuminates her literary reputation and fate. The village of Middleton––Middleton-on-Sea since 1934—is located on the south coast of England, to the east of Bognor Regis and approximately thirteen miles south of Bignor Park, Smith’s childhood home.[[9]](#endnote-9) The manor of Middleton features in the Domesday Book and there was a church there as early as 1086. Although it may have incorporated some of the original church, the church of St. Nicholas depicted in eighteenth-century illustrations is thirteenth century. Erosion of the coast had begun by at least 1341, when the loss of sixty acres of arable land was recorded. Sea banks were first installed in 1570. A survey of the manor of Middleton, made by John Norden in 1606 depicts the church at approximately 170 yards from high tide mark, while Richard Bugden’s map of 1724 shows the extent to which the land had been eroded in the intervening years, as an annotation next to the church on the map confirms: “The South Wall of Middleton Church stands about 60 feet from ye Full.” In 1779 wooden groynes were installed, to little avail (groynes remain erected on the beach to this day, where coastal erosion continues to be a problem). When Smith visited the site in 1789, the sea was perilously close to the church, and the churchyard had been largely swept away:

There were formerly several acres of ground between its small church and the sea, which now, by its continual encroachments, approaches within a few feet of this half-ruined and humble edifice. The wall, which once surrounded the church-yard, is entirely swept away, many of the graves broken up, and the remains of bodies interred washed into the sea. (14: 43)

Following very high tides the bulk of the church itself fell in 1838. In 1840 a tourist recorded in *The British Magazine* “total ruin . . . On the extreme verge of the cliff, a fragment of the corner, about two feet high, was all that remained of it” (E., S. I. 272), while the exhumation of bodies Smith describes continued. By 1847, all vestiges of the church had vanished and a new church was consecrated on a nearby site in 1849. In between the publication of Smith’s sonnet and the church’s fall, the gradual erosion of the churchyard can be tracked in periodical correspondence and guidebooks, in which several references are made to Smith’s sonnet.

The ascendency of the aesthetics of the “picturesque” and the tourism it promoted frames the popularity of the interest in Middleton Church, which seems to have found itself an unlikely place on the tourist map in the late eighteenth century. It also informs the mode of the eighteenth-century sonnet; many of Smith’s sonnets, including Sonnet XLIV, are “written” on location, and the sonnets of William Lisle Bowles, *Fourteen Sonnets, Elegiac and Descriptive. Written During a Tour* (1789), indebted to Smith’s example, were initially published anonymously and purportedly found in a traveler’s notebook. The West Sussex Record Office holds an unpublished sketchbook of 1795 attributed to Sussex antiquary Thomas Smith, which contains three views of Middleton Church in the form of vignettes recalling those popularized by William Gilpin. In a recent article, Dale Townshend has delineated the rise of a specifically “Gothic” tourism, which developed out of—but also came to “exceed”—Gilpin’s “peripatetic picturesque” in the late eighteenth century (377). Smith’s Sonnet XLIV and the discourse surrounding its setting display some interesting links with this brand of tourism and the text-place relationship which informs it. Townshend shows how Gothic structures in various states of disrepair and ruin visited by the picturesque traveler were foundational to the establishment of the Gothic imagination as a “distinctive and recognisable literary mode” (378). Townshend’s focus is on Netley Abbey, which inspired several poems in the late eighteenth century, including sonnets. Indeed, two prominent examples discussed by Townshend are by Bowles and Edward Hamley, which—like Smith’s Sonnet XLIV—were both first published in sonnet collections in 1789. They demonstrate the way in which the sonnet, inspired by Warton, had become a popular form in which to explore old and ruined sites. As shown in this essay, Smith’s interest in such sites is different from that of the antiquarian poet, signified in Sonnet XLIV by her lack of interest in the church itself in favor of the sublime forces at work in the seascape which undermine it (and the literary mode of her predecessors and contemporaries).

The church of St. Nicholas also differs from the tourist sites of Townsend’s study: abbeys which fell into ruination following the dissolution of the monasteries. Although the—notably small—church (rather than abbey) suffered from some neglect, it was not actually a “ruin,” and was in use right up until its collapse in 1838. While the “Gothic” of Netley Abbey is steeped in the supernatural, the ghosts of a medieval past, the Gothic element of Smith’s sonnet—to which critics have often drawn attention—arises from the curiously macabre reality of bodies being disinterred from the ground, inspiring meditations on the processes of ruination and erosion, transience, the powers of the sea and of time in a non-religious context.

Much of the material on Middleton Church appeared in *The* *Gentleman’s Magazine*. The May edition of 1796 printed the first engraving of the church (Figure 1), together with a letter which describes its location; the church stands on a “low earthy clift against the sea,” the correspondent writes:

which on this coast gains on the land in a rapid manner: it has devoured the church-yard, with great part of the chancel, and threatens the whole fabrick, which, from the ruinous and desolate situation it is in, appears to be irreparably hastening to its . . . total dissolution. (“Letter” 369)

He also notes how the building displays other signs of ruin and neglect established “long before the sea’s encroachments,” and how the spreading foliage of “a remarkably large ivy stem . . . nearly covers the South and West sides of the roof” (369), the building blighted and claimed by natural processes in different guises. The accompanying illustration is made from the perspective of the beach from the south east looking up to the church, showing the groynes in the foreground. The ivy stem can be seen, while what remained of the southern churchyard and graves in Smith’s sonnet have now been “devoured.”

**[Insert Figure 1 here. Caption:** Figure 1. “Middleton Church Sussex,” *Gentleman's Magazine* 66 (May 1796), 268. By courtesy of The University of Liverpool. Y73.3.278.**]**

A respondent to the engraving in the next volume of the magazinein 1796 is the first commentator to make the connection with Smith’s sonnet: “This ruinated church, and sea-washed cemetery, have been retrieved from obscure oblivion by the poetical painting of Charlotte Smith” (“Leviter Eruditus” 489). Smith’s sonnet becomes bound up with retrieving and somehow preserving the site of her sonnet, even as it describes and heralds its destruction. The observation echoes Thelwall’s description of Smith’s sonnet as a “painting,” invoking a literary pictorialism—“ut pictura poesis”—which had received new impulse by Charles du Fresnoy’s *De Arte Graphica* (1637), translated into English by Dryden in 1695 and annotated in a new edition by Joseph Reynolds in 1783. Smith was tutored in art as a child by the eminent landscape painter George Smith “of Chichester,” and the pictorial element of her sonnets is promoted by the illustrations of her poems—including the churchyard “Elegy”—in the fifth edition.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The next response to the church, again in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (1797), includes an illustration of the church engraved from “a port-folio of drawings, taken during a summers’ ramble on the coast of Sussex in the year 1796,” as the traveler writes:

the inclosed poor remains of Middleton church struck me as worthy of preservation in your Magazine; not from any beauty that it can boast, but from its remarkable situation, then half swallowed up, and perhaps now entirely so, by the devouring ocean. Small and insignificant as the church appears, yet, as the site of it has been immortalized by the elegant pen of that poetess of the county, Mrs. Smith, in her volume of Sonnets, those who have read her pensive strain (Sonnet 44), written in the above church-yard, will perhaps be pleased to see the same scene humbly attempted by a sister-art. (“Letter” 729)

The perspective of the engraving (Figure 2) is from the north east—showing further groynes and a porch—which imbues the church with a more isolated and desolate aspect. In the letter, Smith’s sonnet is credited with not only retrieving the site from oblivion, but also with “immortalising” it, and the correspondent is concerned with its “preservation” through their own art (729). Again a literary pictorialism is implied through the reference to a “sister-art.” While the site itself seems to suggest impermanence and precariousness, poetry and art are invested with longevity, somewhat at odds with the impulse of Smith’s sonnet, which rejects the immortality imbued in the sonnet form by her predecessors.

**[Insert Figure 2 here. Caption:** Figure 2. “Middleton Church, Sussex N.E.,” *Gentleman's Magazine* 67 (Mar 1797), opp. p. 729. By courtesy of The University of Liverpool. Y73.3.281.**]**

In 1805, the next *The Gentleman’s Magazine* commentator similarly records that while the church “has no claim to celebrity from its architectural properties,” its

singular situation has, however, attracted the attention of Mrs. Charlotte Smith, who has honoured it as the scene of one of her beautiful elegies . . . It affords a flagrant example of the depredations made in that part of our Southern coast by the daily encroachments of the sea; . . . [the church] is at present situate so near the verge as scarcely to admit the safe passage of an individual . . . Its insertion in your Magazine will perpetuate the representation of an original, which a few months may be reduced to ruins. (B., G. I. 801)

A less desolate scene is depicted in the illustration (Figure 3), in which the church is depicted from the north side, showing people as well as boats; it displays the spreading ivy prominently. The artist continues the theme of preserving the site through art by joining Smith and others who “perpetuate the representation of an original” destined for ruin, here poised between celebrity and “elegy.”

**[Insert Figure 3 here. Caption:** Figure 3. “Middleton Church, Sussex,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine* 5 (Sept. 1805), opp. p. 801. By courtesy of The University of Liverpool. Y73.3.295.**]**

Significantly, while they may purport to depict the “same” scene in a “sister-art,” the illustrations of the church and churchyard by all three artists in *The* *Gentleman’s Magazine* depart from the scene presented by Smith’s sonnet and its emphasis. The peaceful scenes which focus on the church contrast with Smith’s moonlit sublime and Gothic seascape. While Smith’s sonnet may be written in the churchyard, the church itself is not mentioned in the sonnet: the speaker’s gaze is fixed firmly outward to the sea and on the elements. The sonnet’s note does look inland, yet only to mention in passing the “small church,” the “half-ruined and humble edifice.” The engraving accompanying Smith’s own “Elegy” also privileges the church, although a female figure dominates, and through her, the illustration points to what is off the page, directed away from the church and towards what the poem is interested in: the tempestuous sea described by the “I” in the poem she represents.[[11]](#endnote-11) The illustrations and accompanying letters in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*,fully concerned with the church, thus curiously misread Smith’s sonnet in implying that it features and preserves it. As a result, Smith becomes associated with the church—obscure and neglected, precariously poised—rather than the forces of the seascape which suggest her own poetic power and influence, and, as the church becomes increasingly close to “oblivion” and disappearance, Smith’s literary prominence and reputation appear to be exposed to a similar fate. As noted, following her popularity and literary celebrity in the 1780s and 1790s, Smith’s eminence had begun to wane as she neared the end of her life, concomitant with the erosion of the ground from which she had written her best-known sonnet. In 1802 she wrote in a letter of her belief that she was falling into literary obscurity––“I . . . see that the ci devant celebrated Charlotte Smith may sink . . . quietly into the gulph of oblivion” (451)––which anticipates the observation in 1805 that Smith’s Sonnet XLIV has brought “celebrity” in an elegy to a church which will soon “be reduced to ruins.”[[12]](#endnote-12) The misreading of Smith’s sonnet also shows the way in which her literary status gets “downgraded” to that of popular poetess, a gentle and genteel woman-writer. The reference in 1797 to the “beautiful sonnet” by the “elegant pen of that poetess of the county Mrs. Smith” (729) and in 1805 to the “beautiful elegies of Mrs. Charlotte Smith” (B., G. I. 801) contrast with Thelwall’s celebration of the sonnet’s “vivid painting, numerous harmony, sublimity of thought and expression” (414), Smith’s innovation and daring as a poet, and her place in a literary canon alongside Shakespeare and Milton.

The next account in which Smith is connected with the site is in *The Origin and Description of Bognor or Hothampton*—as the discourse shifts from periodicals to guidebooks—published in 1807, the year of Smith’s death. Its author, J. B. Davis, is much concerned with the encroaching sea and “assaults” of Neptune (75). Interestingly, the scene is now governed by this male deity, succeeding Smith’s Diana-like “moon, mute arbitress of tides” who presides over several of her sonnets, but who in Sonnet XLIV has been dispossessed of her powers: “no more the swelling surge confines.” Davis writes:

I have related that the merciless deity has swallowed up fields and edifices; I must now add, that not content with this havoc, and with continually making war against the living, he has invaded the habitations of the dead . . . in order to remind us of our frailty and his power . . . Middleton Church has obtained some celebrity from having furnished the scene of one of the poetical compositions of the late ingenious and unfortunate Mrs. Charlotte Smith. The reader will not perhaps be displeased if I conclude my observations on this relic, which will soon lose every vestige of existence, with the lines which the ruinous aspect of it inspired. (100)

The relationship between Smith’s representation of the site and the original has shifted in a posthumous context and Davis’s description reflects how—as Duckling has shown (203)—Smith was eulogized in light of her troubled life story life, depicted as an unfortunate figure of sensibility.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The reference to the church’s “celebrity” again suggests Smith’s literary fame and reputation, yet she is now presented in an elegiac way: “late” and “unfortunate.” While similarly pointing to the precariousness of the church’s position, soon to “lose every vestige of existence,” Davis does not invoke the immortalizing or perpetuating qualities earlier commentators attached to Smith’s sonnet, which is here rooted in and tied to the “ruinous aspect” of the church. The church of Smith’s scene is described as a “relic,” with a suggestion not only of Smith’s sonnet, but now, posthumously, of Smith herself.

Following Davis’s Bognor guide, several years elapse before Middleton is again mentioned in connection with Smith’s sonnet, and the revival of interest in the church at this time coincides with the nineteenth-century publications in which Smith is “recovered”—by Dyce in 1825 and 1833 and Bethune in 1848. Both discourses show how Smith was not entirely forgotten in the nineteenth century, yet was perilously close to slipping from view. In 1828, Richard Dally’s *The Bognor, Arundel and Littlehampton Guide* includes an illustration of the church, a “sketch of the remains of Middleton Church, Sussex. Taken from the North East, July 30, 1826.”[[14]](#endnote-14) The church again dominates the scene, and still appears to be intact, somewhat at odds with the title and description. Dally observes how the tide “has not spared the sacred depositories of the dead, ‘whose bones have whitened in the frequent wave’” (67-68), slightly misquoting Smith’s sonnet, which is still the textual lens through which he views the landscape. Indeed, Dally refers to the “celebrated Charlotte Smith” (70), who visited this strand, at the time of composing the following sonnet, her “genius” catching the images before it, portraying them “on its literary canvas” (70). In 1835, John Constable visited the site, and produced a watercolor sketch of the churchyard made from the perspective of the southwest with the note: “Middleton Church Coast of Sussex-in part washed away by the Sea see Charlotte Smith’s Sonnet 10 July” (qtd. in Reynolds 2: 1010). Of all the Middleton artists, Constable most starkly depicts the marginality of the church, the extent to which it has been undermined and is perilously close to falling into the sea, which it did only three years later (Figure 4). The note to “see” Charlotte Smith’s sonnet brings poem and sketch into dialogue: while Smith’s sonnet describes the sea’s process of washing away the coast, Constable’s sketch depicts the results. A second sketch by Constable shows a skeleton partly exhumed from the chalky bank, the first visual representation of the human remains in which Smith’s sonnet takes particular interest. Constable owned a copy of the fifth edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* and had also visited Sussex in 1834. It was perhaps the connection with Smith which prompted him to make two sketches of Bignor Park at this time (although the original house of Smith’s lifetime had been rebuilt). There is also a contemporaneous quotation made in Constable’s hand of Smith’s Sonnet XLV “On Leaving a Part of Sussex” in the family collection.[[15]](#endnote-15) Constable’s 1835 sketch and note typify the way in which while Smith was widely read and known in these decades, her influence was recorded in ways which have remained largely hidden, and only partially or tenuously captured.[[16]](#endnote-16)

**[Insert Figure 4 here. Caption:** Figure 4. John Constable, Middleton Church, from a sketchbook of views, mainly of Sussex, by John Constable. England, 1835 museum number 316-888, image number 2010EH2627-01 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.**]**

Worthing Public Library holds two similar paintings of the last state of Middleton church, made in 1840 and 1841, from the north showing the remaining western fragment of the church on a much-narrowed headland.[[17]](#endnote-17) Few further references to Middleton church in connection with Smith are made. In 1838, the year in which the church fell into the sea, *The Bognor Guide*, published by John Phillips, includes Smith’s sonnet and Dally’s commentary, although it omits the picture (38). Mark Lower’s *A Compendious History of Sussex* (1870) notes that the church “has entirely disappeared” and also observes that “Charlotte Smith’s Sonnet has often been quoted” in connection with the site (50), although the sonnet itself is not included and has similarly dropped out of view. Again, Smith’s fame is tentatively captured, still well known among a local Sussex audience as a regional poet. Indeed, in 1897 Smith’s sonnet does appear in a section on Middleton in William Axon’s *Bygone Sussex* (118), which observes in the preface that “some of the thousands of visitors who throng the Sussex coast . . . may find in these pages suggestions of historic memories that may add to the interest of their stay” (n. pag.). Both Smith and Middleton church are, by this time, “bygone,” “historic memories” (n. pag.). In the decades following Smith most noticeably “sink[s] . . . quietly into the gulph of oblivion,” especially outside of her Sussex environs (Smith, *Collected Letters* 451). As Duckling notes, Smith had lost intellectual ground by the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, while seeing an interest in her novels, was a period “not yet ready to truly appreciate Charlotte Smith” (216). This was reversed in the 1980s and 1990s, when Smith—along with several other women writers—was reinstated in the literary landscape of the late eighteenth century by critics. It is entirely fitting that Smith’s Sonnet XLIV takes a prominent place in Curran’s important essay of 1988 to this effect, “Romantic Poetry: The I Altered,” in which the sonnet is shown to present a vision which impelled “[t]he entire sonnet revival of the Romantic period” into existence and a dynamic which informs “all the sonnets written in Smith’s wake” (200).

***Coda***

I wish to end this essay by considering a rather different “graveyard” poem by Smith, which re-writes, I suggest, her earlier Sonnet XLIV. “Saint Monica” was published in 1807 in the *Beachy Head* collection and suggestively evokes Smith’s place in the sonnet revival and in posterity, encoding it in a different way. As Kari Lokke has written, the poem “reveals Smith’s conceptualization of British literary history and her place, as a woman poet, in that history” (261-62). It can be read as her own posthumous contribution to the discourse surrounding her graveyard sonnet and in some ways seems to answer the commentators on Middleton church.

Suggestively, Wordsworth’s famous observation on Smith is made in the context of “Saint Monica,” in a note to his poem “Stanzas suggested in a Steamboat off St. Bees’ Head, on the coast of Cumberland” (1833). To quote the note more fully:

The form of stanza in this Poem, and something in the style of versification, are adopted from the ‘St. Monica’, a poem of much beauty on a monastic subject, by Charlotte Smith: a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered. 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. (*The Poetical Works* 403)

Wordsworth’s own poem follows Smith’s formally. Although he does not allude to the sonnet here, his comments in the note are particularly pertinent to Smith’s influence on the sonnet—and there is a suggestion of poetic form in the “English verse” under “great obligation” to her—while also prophesying the fragility of her position in posterity. This is dramatized in Smith’s own poem, which evokes both her influence and its obscuration, which she can now observe; a backlash against the “illegitimate” sonnet and return to the Miltonic form in the nineteenth century obscured the way Smith had “modernized” the sonnet in language and mode. Wordsworth “took fire” from Milton’s sonnets in 1802 (qtd. in Phelan 10), informing his first major sonnets in his *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807), yet Dorothy Wordsworth records how her brother was also “turning over the leaves of Charlotte Smith’s sonnets” in 1802 (135), an example of “deliberate erasure” of Smith’s influence recognized by Robinson.

“Saint Monica” takes a subject more typical of the “Gothic imagination” discussed by Townsend—“the dismantled scite / Of an old Abbey” (1-2)—and describes the different ways in which nature has taken over the ruined site: the graves “With docks and nettles now is overgrown; / And brambles trail above the dead unknown” (39-40). The setting is reminiscent of those favored by Smith’s sonnet predecessors and contemporaries—discussed in the first part of this essay—and in particular Warton. As I have argued, Smith resists Warton’s approach to these special places that offer a link with the past, which “Saint Monica” makes explicit. Indeed, Smith seems to empty the poem of a Wartonian poet: “The antiquary comes not to explore, / As once, the unrafter’d roof and pathless floor” (64). Yet a figure does visit, “a pensive stranger” (75), who does not seek items of antiquarian interest, but meditates on the nature which has claimed and transformed the graves:

*He* comes not here, from the sepulchral stone

To tear the oblivious pall that Time has thrown,

But meditating, marks the power proceed

From the mapped lichen, to the plumed weed,

From thready mosses to the veined flower,

The silent, slow, but ever active power

Of Vegetative Life, that o’er Decay

Weaves her green mantle, when returning May

Dresses the ruins of Saint Monica. (82-90)

The actions of the pensive stranger directly contrast with those of Warton, whose poet goes into the “inmost cell” “to pluck the grey moss from the mantled stone” (74-75). Rather than “plucking” the vegetation from the monuments it has claimed, uncovering the past, Smith invokes and celebrates its motions. She seems to replace the antiquarian poet with a different one, and the poem acts as a sort of fulcrum between their approach and her own, yet realized through a male figure. The way the nettles, brambles, mosses, weeds, and flowers claim the graves and ruins in the poem mimes Smith’s own rejuvenating influence on the sonnet form, replacing the nostalgic or antiquarian mode of Warton, Gray, and Edwards. Significantly, although the poet-figure who populates the scene is male (and as Lokke suggests is redolent of Wordsworth), the nature that has transformed the site is female. “Saint Monica” reworks Sonnet XLIV yet in a more positive, fertile, sustainable way, replacing the destructive storm with less violent transformative natural forces. Lokke argues that “Saint Monica” is a “Romantic re-writing of eighteenth-century graveyard poetry” (363), looking back to Gray’s “Elegy,” and forward to Smith’s “Romantic sons” to whom she bequeaths her poetic landscape and mode, asserting her importance as a link between them (268). Indeed, the first part of this essay showed how Smith’s Sonnet XLIV not only “re-writes” the graveyard poem, but also the eighteenth-century sonnet; in “Saint Monica,” her role in literary history is reconfigured as a less challenging and disruptive—and ultimately more powerful—force. While we do not know if Smith was aware of the periodical illustrations of and commentary on Middleton churchyard, she also seems here to re-assert her relation to the decaying building in “Saint Monica.” As shown, commentators—misreading her sonnet—associated Smith with the church, and in this poem Smith perhaps corrects them, again aligning herself not with the abbey and its environs, but with the vegetation which overtakes it, an alternative manifestation of the eroding waves (which previously suggested her literary influence).[[18]](#endnote-18) In “Saint Monica,” Smith’s poetic scene is once again governed, posthumously, by a female power, rather than the male Neptune, as the disempowered “mute arbitress of tides” of Sonnet XLIV becomes the similarly female and “silent” yet now “ever active” botanical powers of the later poem.

Smith’s poem also encodes her place in literary history in a different way. Her poetic persona is absent from the landscape of “Saint Monica,” a significant shift from her sonnets in which the melancholy “I” is very much in the foreground. Subjectivity is also obscured in other poems of the *Beachy Head* collection: in “Beachy Head” itself, the “I” drops out at line 374 (the poem runs on to 742 lines) as Smith appears to come to a new understanding of and thus reconfigures her “place” in the literary landscape at the end of her poetic career. The replacement of her poetic persona with the male, Wordsworthian “*He*”—Smith’s original italicization—is somewhat fitting considering her posthumous fate. As Wordsworth observes in his note, “English verse is under greater obligations [to Smith] than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered” (*Poetical Works* 403), an accurate prophesy as Smith has been obscured by the male poets to whom she “bequeaths” her poetic mode (Lokke 268).[[19]](#endnote-19) As noted, while the poet of “Saint Monica” is male, the transformative nature which he meditates upon is characterized as female, and Smith’s poetic presence takes the unusual form of this present-absent influence. It is at once dispossessing and empowering. The poem ends:

And while to dark Forgetfulness they go,

Man, and the works of man; immortal Youth,

Unfading Beauty, and eternal Truth,

Your Heaven-indited volume will display,

While Art’s elaborate monuments decay,

Even as these shatter’d aisles, deserted Monica! (94-99)

Smith once more invokes the temporal and fleeting, linking literary works and reputation, buildings and monuments in “dark Forgetfulness,” yet there is an alternative force at work here, unfading and eternal: the “Heaven-indited volume” of “Nature.” Having established the association between herself and the vegetative life earlier in the poem, Smith simultaneously effaces and empowers herself canonically. By absenting her poetic self from the scene, replaced by the italicized *He*,she both mimes and anticipates the way she has been, and will continue to be, displaced and misread in posterity. Investing instead in the female absent-presence of the vegetation, she paradoxically transcends both “Man, and the works of man,” aligning herself instead with Nature’s volume and “indicting” her own place in literary history.

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**Notes**

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1. Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* were first published in 1784 and expanded through numerous editions. New sonnets were added to the third (1786), fifth (1789) and sixth editions (1792). A second volume of *Elegiac Sonnets* was published in 1797, to which new sonnets were added in a second edition (1800). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Parenthetical numerals refer to page numbers in the case of quotations of entire sonnets and of paratextual material, and to line numbers of shorter quotations of poems. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Samuel Johnson gently chided Warton on this in his “Lines on Thomas Warton’s Poems”:

   Phrase that time hath flung away,

   Uncouth words in disarray,

   Trick’d in antique ruff and bonnet,

   Ode, and elegy, and sonnet. (5-8) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The sea is persistently associated with sublimity from Longinus onwards. For the incongruity of this genre, see Balfour. For the significance of the sea in Smith’s sonnets, see Roberts. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. While it is not certain if Smith was familiar with Shakespeare’s sonnets, she knew of the immortalising tradition from the sonnets of Michael Drayton and Petrarch. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Smith’s “Elegy,” set in the same churchyard as her sonnet, is voiced by an alternative, imagined substitute for Smith and the “I” of Sonnet XLIV. Here, the “margin” from which Smith writes her sonnet is claimed by the waves, along with the speaker herself. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See also Duckling (211). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See also her poem “To My Lyre,” discussed in note thirteen below, which speaks to the paradoxical nature of Smith’s sense of her own place in literary history. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This section draws on and is indebted to two accounts, which gather together much of the material on Middleton discussed here (see Baggs and Warne; and *Swallowed by the Sea*). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. George Smith (1713/14-1776) was one of the so-called “English Claudes”. He painted the local Sussex countryside, bathed in a golden Claudean light: one such painting won the Society of Arts first premium in 1760. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Although the poem is “supposed” to be set in Middleton churchyard, the accompanying engraving in *Elegiac Sonnets* bears little resemblance to contemporary depictions: it would appear to be an imagined scene, which shows a more substantial Gothic edifice. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. This sentiment is contradicted, however, by Smith’s poem “To My Lyre,” written shortly before her death, and in which Smith imagines her posthumous fate:

    And as the time ere long must come

    When I lie silent in the tomb,

    Thou wilt preserve these mournful pages;

    For gentle minds will love my verse,

    And Pity shall my strains rehearse,

    And tell my name to distant ages. (33-38)

    The stanza shows the way in which celebrity and elegy are inextricably linked in Smith’s poems and how her longevity relies upon the very qualities which threaten to efface it: her mournful, elegiac sonnets invoking oblivion and forgetfulness—for example—rely on pity, which in this poem will “tell my name to distant ages.” [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This tone was set largely by Egerton Brydges in his contemporaneous *Censura* *Literaria* (1807). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. This can be viewed at <https://archive.org/details/bognorarundelan00dallgoog> (opp. 66). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. There was also a personal connection: the father of Constable’s wife (whom he married in 1816 after a seven-year courtship) was Charles Bicknell, Smith’s lawyer throughout the complex legal processes regarding the inheritance of her father-in-law. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. In addition to Wordsworth, another significant example of Smith’s hidden influence is the way in which Coleridge records it. In his 1796 essay on the sonnet she is credited with re-popularizing the sonnet in the eighteenth century along with Bowles, yet in the widely read *Biographia Literaria* she does not feature (see Raycroft). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See PP/WSL/WA000370 and PP/WSL/WA000119. Both are available to view at <http://www.westsussexpast.org.uk> [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. One form that the vegetation takes is “the ivy green / Whose matted tods the arch and buttress” of Saint Monica “bind” (47-48), a form which is also present in Middleton churchyard: the “remarkably large ivy stem” which has taken over the church described by the first Middleton correspondent and visible in many of the illustrations. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. From Curran’s “The ‘I’ Altered” onwards, critics have of course rightly reinstated Smith into the literary landscape of the late-eighteenth century, clarifying her place within it, especially in relation to Wordsworth. There has been an important shift in emphasis within this discourse from the wish by critics such as Bishop C. Hunt Jr. “to understand why a great poet [Wordsworth] becomes very interested in a very minor one” (83), to Curran’s redressing of this relationship, and latterly to Labbe’s more nuanced reading of the relationship in which Smith and Wordsworth jointly co-found, and “write” Romanticism, reading and drawing upon each other’s poetry, characterized by “cross-fertilizations,” a “conversation,” and “shared poetic project” (*Writing Romanticism* 4, 14, 18). At the end of her life Smith herself is curiously perceptive about the processes that will encode her own position in the years following her death: as Judith Hawley observes, the role Smith has been assigned in literary history is “that of midwife to the Romantic sonnet, or even mother of Romanticism,” which “assumes that she laid herself down so that she could be transcended” (188). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)