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Alive To All That Breathed: Charlotte Turner Smith (1749 - 1806)

After some two centuries of neglect, the poetry of Charlotte Turner Smith is at last receiving due recognition. Indeed, she is now often referred to as the first notable Romantic poet in English Literature. Her poetry had a considerable influence on William Wordsworth and he acknowledged his debt to her, describing her as: *a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely either to be acknowledged or remembered.*



Charlotte was born into a wealthy family in London but her mother died shortly after giving birth to her. Later, her father, due to reckless spending, lost nearly all his money and this no doubt influenced his decision to get married to a wealthy lady in 1765. Her father was inclined to put money well before love and he then arranged for his daughter to marry the wealthy Benjamin Smith whose father's riches, like many respectable, upstanding members of British society in the 18th century, was derived from working Africans to their early deaths in slave plantations in the West Indies. Charlotte was just fifteen when she was forced to marry and she came to regard all arranged marriages as essentially legalized prostitution. By today's Western legal standards, her husband would be accused of paedophilia and her father as her pimp. Although Charlotte came to

speak out against slavery, she herself benefited from the proceeds.

Her arranged marriage turned out to be even worse than she had feared. Although husbands were legally entitled to beat their wives throughout the 18th century and even as late as the middle of the 19th century, beating a dog or a donkey was regarded a more serious offence than beating your wife, Benjamin indulged in excessive violence. Not only was he violent but a drunk, a spendthrift and a lecher. For year after year, Charlotte tried to act the dutiful wife and conceal her many bruises as best she could and she endured the risk and agony of bearing him twelve children. Only six of her children outlived their mother. Benjamin had not the slightest interest in literature and used to mock his wife's passion for reading and writing.

In 1783, her husband was sent to debtor's prison and, as was expected of the wife, she joined him there. As in many Third World countries today, the British prison system was run along the lines of bribery and corruption and if you had friends who could lend you some money to bribe the guards, your life behind bars could be tolerably comfortable; if not, you were left to rot and many poor people died in prison for even the most minor crimes. Charlotte and her husband were among the fortunate prisoners and it was in prison that Charlotte wrote her *Elegiac Sonnets* which was published in 1784 and this volume achieved an astonishing and instant success. Like Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte

wrote sonnets in the Petrarchan as opposed to the Shakespearian form, perhaps because the latter form with its clinching, closing couplet was viewed as a male form of expression. The money earned from sales of this volume enabled her and her husband to buy their release from prison.

The personal sorrows she expresses in her sonnets seem to find an echo in the minds and hearts of strangers and although many of her sonnets can seem rather self-pitying, the finer ones are moving and enhanced by her close observations of the natural world, such as the following.

The Night Flood Rakes

Swift fleet the billowy clouds
along the sky,
Earth seems to shudder at the
storm aghast;
While only beings as forlorn as I,
Court the chill horrors of the
howling blast.
Even round yon crumbling walls,
in search of food,
The ravenous Owl foregoes his
evening flight,
And in his cave, within the deepest
wood,
The Fox eludes the tempest of the
night.
But to my heart congenial is the
gloom
Which hides me from a World I
wish to shun;
That scene where Ruin saps the
mouldering tomb,
Suits with the sadness of a wretch
undone.
Nor is the deepest shade, the
keenest air,
Black as my fate, or cold as my
despair.

As Coleridge, among other critics pointed out, *Elegiac Sonnets* helped bring about a revival of the sonnet form in English Literature.

After twenty-two years of marital misery and physical and psychological abuse, Charlotte left her husband as she came to fear for her life during his frequent drunken rages. In order to support herself and her surviving children, she turned to writing novels although, rather like Thomas Hardy, writing poetry was her first love. She wrote Gothic romances which incorporated the disturbing experiences of her own life and in her fiction she put forward the case of women and the legal injustices which they suffered. The very fact that she published under her own name and did not hide behind a male pseudonym was itself an act of defiance against male dominance. Charlotte's father-in-law, knowing his son's weaknesses only too well, had left the bulk of his estate to his grandchildren. However, he had drawn the will up himself without legal advice and the flaws in the document led to legal disputes which lasted for almost forty years and may well have inspired the interminable legal dispute in Dicken's *Bleak House* in the case of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*.

Charlotte became to some extent the victim of her success and the public grew tired of her all too frequent publications and her support of the French Revolution made her many enemies. Charlotte suffered considerable poverty during the last years of her life and had barely enough income to feed herself. She had to sell her beloved library in order to settle her debts and came close to being sent to debtor's prison. Her poverty was somewhat relieved by the death of her husband who had again ended up in prison and she finally received some of the money he owed her but, in many respects, this money came too late. She probably suffered from what nowadays would be diagnosed as rheumatoid arthritis and became

No longer able to hold a pen. Years before she died, her novels and her poetry, in particular, were largely forgotten and remained so until the twenty-first century.

Rather like Hardy, her turning aside from writing novels, gave her more time to devote to writing poetry. It wasn't until a year after her death that her finest poem was published, a long narrative poem entitled *Beachy Head*. At the end of the poem, Charlotte, like Wordsworth after her, introduces a hermit who, sickened by human corruption and greed, seeks solace and inspiration in the grand dramas of the natural world in order to feel more alive and to see more deeply into the mysterious nature of creation,

from *Beachy Head*



Just beneath the rock
Where Beachy overpeers the channel wave,
Within a cavern mined by wintry tides
Dwelt one, who long disgusted with the world
And all its ways, appear'd to suffer life

Rather than live; the soul-reviving gale,
Fanning the bean-field, or the thymy heath,
Had not for many summers breathed on him;
And nothing mark's to him the season's change,
Save that more gently rose the placid sea,
And that the birds which winter on the coast
Gave place to other migrants; save that the fog,
Hovering no more above the beetling cliffs
Betray'd not then the little careless sheep
On the brink grazing, while their headlong fall
Near the lone Hermit's flint-surrounded home,
Claim's unavailing pity; for his heart
Was feelingly alive to all that breath'd;
And outraged as he was, in sanguine youth,
By human crimes, he still acutely felt
For human misery.

Wandering on the beach,
He learn'd to augur from the clouds of heaven,
And from the changing colours of the sea,
And sullen murmurs of the hollow cliffs,
Or the dark porpoises, that near the shore
Gambol'd and sported on the level brine
When tempests were approaching: then at night
He listen'd to the wind; and as it drove
The billows with o'erwhelming vehemence
He, starting from his rugged couch, went forth
And hazarding a life, too valueless,
He waded thro' the waves, with plank or pole
Towards where the mariner in conflict dread
Was buffeting for life the roaring surge;
And now just seen, now lost in foaming gulphs,
The dismal gleaming of the clouded moon . . .