

The performative femininity of Charlotte Smith, pre-Romantic poet and novelist

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INTRODUCTION

“For gentle minds will love my verse, / And Pity shall my strains rehearse, / And tell my name to distant ages”. These lines are taken from Charlotte Smith’s (1749-1806) literary testament “To my Lyre” (*Poems* 310, v. 46-48) about her life and recognition. Although for almost two centuries her name has been virtually unknown to the “distant ages”, in her day Charlotte Smith, née Turner, was a celebrated poet, admired by famous writers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William

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Wordsworth. In *Sheet of Sonnets*, Coleridge admitted deducing the “laws” of his sonnets from the “compositions” of the poets who made the genre “popular among the present English”: Smith and William Lisle Bowle (Coleridge 543). Similarly, in a note to “Stanzas Suggested in a Steamboat Off St. Bees' Head” Wordsworth acknowledged Smith’s pioneering efforts in Romantic poetry, stating that she wrote “unambitiously, but with true feeling for rural nature, at a time when nature was not much regarded by English Poets”; nonetheless, he feared she would remain “a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be acknowledged or remembered” (Wordsworth 403). This prophetic remark seems ruefully aware of an unstated debt to Smith’s forgotten sonnets, which introduced typical features of Romanticism such as the correspondence between the feelings of the poet and nature. In particular, it implies that the fact that she is a “lady” might account for her marginal place in literary history.

In recent years Charlotte Smith, along with other neglected authors of the so-called pre-Romantic period, has received great attention from scholars for her contributions as a ‘revolutionary’ in genre and gender issues. Stuart Curran, Judith Phillips Stanton and Claire Knowles and Ingrid Horrocks’ careful editions of the oeuvre and the personal letters of Smith respectively have opened the way to numerous studies about women’s place in literature, either with a feminist approach to the gender-genre bias in a male-dominated culture which marginalised writing women (including those of Labbe, Ty, and Batchelor) or with an eye to rethinking a female poetic tradition in aesthetic and literary terms (such as the work of Fry, Knowles, and Spencer). Taking up these currents, this article aims to describe the position Charlotte Smith took up both as private person and as public persona in the literary context of her time which was dominated by the cult of Sensibility, and highlight her skilful attempt at sounding out the possibilities offered by this ideology. Based on her biography and the close reading of some example texts from her body of works, I argue that Charlotte Smith’s difficult private situation led her to become a writer and in this peculiar public function she created a recognisable persona in-between normative and transgressive femininity. Through what I call ‘performative femininity’, she explored a variety of roles associated with gender and genre, though still maintaining public favour thanks to the sympathy she evoked in her readers.

SENSIBILITY AND THE NORMATIVE-TRANSGRESSIVE CONTINUUM OF FEMININITY

In the eighteenth century, the advent of bourgeois society following the revolutionary period transformed the reception and consideration of femininity at least in cultural terms, given that by the end of the 1790s women like Ann Radcliffe and Mary Wollstonecraft had obtained a remarkable recognition as established writers. This was also due to the cult of Sensibility, an ambiguous term used to describe a vogue which developed in Europe prior to the advent of Romanticism and praised a heightened ability to feel and express emotions. According to Claire Knowles, this new ideology markedly changed the cultural meanings around the discourse of “normative” and “transgressive” femininity. In the pre-Romantic era, as in any period of history, the concept of the ‘norm’ was generally taken for granted and therefore remained hazy; this means that the boundaries between what was regarded as normative feminine propriety and despicable conduct were mostly shaped in opposition to transgressive behaviours (Knowles 10). Conduct books would direct young girls towards desirable ‘natural’ and acceptable behaviours of modesty, chastity, purity, honesty, meekness and sensibility, which would turn them into good wives and respected mothers. Any deviation from that represented a social threat and was immediately condemned as unnatural and transgressive. Literary culture, too, started insisting on the public proof of female propriety in women authors and associated unruly emotions and political radicalism with a formerly idealistic discourse in order to preserve its status as indicator of feminine normativity (Knowles 12). At the same time, the acknowledged female superiority of feeling and sentimental refinement in the cult of Sensibility gave women the authority to introduce subjectivity in a Romantic or gothic sense, though within strict boundaries of genre and gender.

In *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen*, Jane Spencer illustrates that as female artists—novelists but also as writers in other genres—women could respond to the treatment society reserved for them in three different ways. They could critically question the role bestowed on them as individuals and authors by addressing socio-political issues with the result of facing severe criticism from the reviewers striving to keep the hierarchic order intact. Secondly, they could accept the authority offered to them as models and teachers of young (female) readers by means of didactic tales about ideal heroines, implying their conformism to the established normative feminine standard. The third alternative was to escape from the need to either conform or protest

through fantasy, transforming the feminine position (Spencer 107). The idea of “transforming” the feminine position remains vague in Spencer. In the case of Smith, I suggest calling this possibility to react to and at the same time perpetuate the ideology of Sensibility *performative femininity*. As her biography and examples from her works will show, by means of performative femininity Smith managed to move along what could be termed the ‘normative-transgressive continuum of femininity’ and position herself in-between the extremes. On the one side, she presented herself as a virtuous writer, as a representative of the landed gentry, and as a mother, compelled by necessity to write “in *observance*, not in the *breach* of duty”, as she stated in the preface to *Desmond* (4). Behind this public surface, however, there was a self-willed woman who chose to live apart from her spendthrift husband and took up the role of breadwinner, usually connected to the male sphere, to support her numerous children (in total, she had twelve children, but only six survived her). The financial independence granted by authorship might have given her the courage to tentatively address socio-political themes beyond the realm of normative femininity in her works, although she knew she could never risk losing public favour. For this reason, she created a recognisable persona, similar but not equal to Charlotte Smith, through which she could present herself in different roles without disrepute.

In this context, I make use of Jacqueline Labbe’s definition of *persona* as “metaphor for the fracturing of identity that a strict adherence to the idea of ‘gender’ requires”. In this sense, Smith built up an alter ego which was dependent on cultural mores, but she also questioned them through more or less open challenge (Labbe 12). As a perceptive businesswoman of her day, Smith adopted certain ideological positions of the cult of Sensibility to pursue personal interests. The fact that she presented herself as a mother forced to write to support her family evoked the readers’ sympathy to such an extent that even unconventionally deliberate hints at her biography or allusions to social issues in poetry and fiction were tolerated. Labbe’s concept of *persona* reprises both Judith Butler’s definition of gender as performativity or “theatrical self-representation” (Butler 95) and Judith Pascoe’s study of theatricality in Romanticism. Pascoe suggests that Smith invited the association of her poetic representation of life with her actual life and underscored the *performative* aspect of both social fictions (Pascoe 17). Moreover, the fact that the cult of Sensibility induced the readers to recognise reality in fiction, as Carroll S. Fry argues (Fry 2), opened a new sphere of expressing social criticism and of presenting femininity in public. Smith was one of the first writers to make use of a *persona* to partly control her works’ reception,

knowing that “every reader of Sensibility must be concerned to find that the amiable writer has had any reason to shed a tear”, as the *Monthly Review* wrote about her in 1784 (qtd. in Knowles and Horrocks 253). This article expands upon the potential of performative femininity in Smith’s work.

First, a brief overview of her biography will serve to draw parallels between her life and the autobiographical hints she blurs with fiction in her works. Then, the analysis of a few passages from her letters, prefaces and poems (the novels will be touched upon only marginally, as they would be too extensive for the scope of this article) shall show the process of embodiment of the writer as a recognisable persona in her literary output by consciously playing with vagueness in order to strike a balance between private decorum and outspoken performative femininity.

FACT AND FICTION IN SMITH'S LIFE AND WORKS

Like many of Smith’s biographers, Walter Scott defined her existence as “life in its most melancholy features” (Scott 185) and thus referred to the common thread of both her life and work: melancholy. Or, as Stuart Curran words it: “with dashed expectations she lived her entire life” (Curran, *Poems* xix), from her youth and marriage to the ‘eclipse’ from the literary canon despite her fame. But before making the same mistake as her sympathetic readers who superimposed the mourning characters of Smith’s work onto her biography, one should try as much as possible to separate fact from fiction to understand why melancholy became such a predominant *trait d’union* of Smith’s life and work. Her biography is necessarily tied to the autobiographical clues she gives in her personal and public writing and, given the outstanding circumstances which led her to become a writer, one is easily tempted to add some elements of romance to the mere facts, especially when the described person herself, Charlotte Smith, does so.

Born into a genteel family on 4 May 1749, the second daughter of Nicholas Turner and Anna Towers grew up moving between her father’s London townhouse and her beloved Sussex estates. Ten weeks before her sixteenth birthday, on 23 February 1765, Charlotte Turner married Benjamin Smith, five years older than herself and heir to a West Indian commercial enterprise, but more interested in gambling than in his estate. It was not until many years later that she realised she had been “sold like a Southdown sheep” (*Letters* 552), as she bitterly

wrote to her protector, the Lord of Egremont, on 4 February 1803, contributing to the construct of a wronged woman.

In 1776, her father-in-law died and appointed Charlotte as joint executor of his estate in his will. Unfortunately, this well-meant plan led to an intricate twenty-year-long lawsuit. While her husband squandered most of his inheritance, she found some solace in literature, writing poems for her friends and family, but did not think of making them public yet. She would probably never have imagined that by July 1784, she could secure Benjamin's release from King's Bench Prison by paying his debts with the retail revenues from a collection of poems entitled *Elegiac Sonnets, and other Essays by Charlotte Smith of Bignor Park*, published at her own expense on 10 May of the same year (see Curran, *Poems* xxii). This publication turned Smith into an admired sentimental poet overnight and paved the way for the revival of the sonnet, virtually dormant since Shakespeare, which she combined with the elegy to create an original hybrid of sensibility, introspection and melancholy. The correspondence of emotions in nature and the grievance for the lost paradise of childhood became a standard for the sonnet in the early Romantic period. In her poems, these personal themes are expressed by a variety of speakers both female (the distressed woman, the solitary wanderer, the good mother) and male (Petrarch and Werter), proving that she experimented with fictional gender roles from the earliest stages of her writing. Until the final edition of 1800 in two ample volumes, *Elegiac Sonnets* was issued in new expanding editions every year. The sonnets of the second volume, added to the seventh edition in 1797, derived mostly from Smith's novels and thus featured new characters, like the male hero dominated by passions, the fallen woman, the wronged wife and other 'outcasts' apt to express socio-political criticism. What was also new was a more explicit reference to the writer's private plight, as will be shown.

Although her poems were evidently well received, the most money was to be made by novel writing, to which she turned shortly after her separation from her husband in 1785. Judith Phillips Stanton explains that "in the legal terminology of her day, she was a *femme covert*, a single legal entity with her husband, her very being subsumed in his" (Phillips Stanton xv) and therefore her earnings belonged to him, even after their separation. In the decade between 1788 and 1798 Smith produced ten novels which developed the conventions that dominated the sentimental and gothic novel of the 1790s, two genres increasingly linked to femininity (Fry 2). Her first novel, *Emmeline* (1788), was so popular that her publisher Thomas Cadell unexpectedly increased the fee he had originally agreed to pay

her (Spencer 9). While *Ethelinde* (1789) and *Celestina* (1791) followed the structure, content and style of *Emmeline* closely, *Desmond* (1792) was severely censured for its political and moral tendency. She regained public favour with *The Old Manor House* (1793), *The Banished Man* (1794), *The Wanderings of Warwick* (1794), *Montalbert* (1795), *Marchmont* (1796) and *The Young Philosopher* (1798), which followed in a strikingly short time span. After that, Smith turned to a more diversified output in the 1800s, writing children's stories, works of history and botany, and a collection of poems called *Beachy Head, with other poems* (published posthumously in 1807), filling up to twenty-six volumes in total until her death in 1806.

Doubtless she was proud of her popularity, but her higher social position made it humiliating for her to be reduced to selling her talents for a living. She repeatedly excused her presence on the market and made her reckless husband and her desperate situation responsible for her writing "in haste", driven by necessity and "animosity" to support her family; as she wrote to Cadell as early as 8 September 1790: "I am extremely sick of my trade and very anxious to leave it off" (*Letters* 29). Jenny Batchelor rightly affirms that Smith's openly stating the "labour" invested in the production of her works and her life of hard toil laid the foundations of the truth claims of her fiction and added worth to her challenging the categories of woman, mother and writer of her time (Batchelor 196). Against the undervaluing of the labour of novelists, Smith created a biographical narrative scattered through her work to bear witness to her achievement despite her "life of great and various sufferings", as her epitaph recalls.

PERFORMATIVE FEMININITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF

Throughout her writing career, Smith maintained her avid concern for presenting an accurate and therefore automatically "truthful" and indisputable picture of the female condition halfway between the realm of art and reality (Curran, *Poems* xxvi). In any genre, Smith's life was always complexly self-authored in the form of intensely personal prefaces and the recognisable names and places her sorrowful persona recalls. For this reason, many readers and even scholars have often felt free to fill the many gaps her biography leaves open. Indeed, the ingenious merging of fact and fiction worked so well that it is hard to distinguish between the two. In a like manner, Smith blurred the line between realism and romance to the point that her poetic persona became her heroines, and her heroines became her. To exemplify this, it suffices to consider the claim of an an-

onymous commentator in the *Lounger's Common-Place Book* of 1796: “Were a work of this writer [Smith] put into my hand, without her name prefixed, the composition by internal evidence, would almost instantly point out the fair author” (qtd. in Labbe 24). According to Labbe, the “real” Charlotte Smith hides in the remotest parts of her writing and in the powerful framework of preface, sub-plots, footnotes and illustrations surrounding conventional genres and themes which are thus assigned a new power to evoke and control the wished-for effect in readers, be it sympathy, admiration, pity or empathy (Labbe 25). A few examples shall illustrate this.

First, a personal letter to the reverend Joseph Warton dated 31 August 1791 shows how Smith wove strands of fiction and fact together to turn even a seemingly autobiographic document into a constructed product meant to evoke some specific sentiment in the reader. In this case, the writer wanted to impress the headmaster of her son Lionel’s expensive school, Winchester College, by using sentimental attributes and an elegiac tone to merely allude to the prosaic financial and personal worries concealed in her self-revealing but never completely limpid ‘performance’. In fact, Smith’s persona was so well-rehearsed that it appeared a perfectly natural and unfeigned combination of art, artifice and authenticity.

But when above seven years have pass’d in such circumstances, that sickness of the Soul which arises from Hope long dealy’d will inevitably be felt. The worn out pen falls from the tired hand, and the real calamities of life press too heavily to allow of the power of evading them by fictious detail – Another year however is coming when I must by the same motives be compelled to a renewal of the same sort of task – A tragedy would most undoubtedly be more honourable and more profitable. But it still appears to me an effort in which I should fail. (*Letters* 36).

The quoted extract contains many typical devices of Smith’s performative femininity. For instance, there is the poetic and elegiac description of her unnamed and unnameable sorrows depicted with detail but abruptly suspended when it comes to explaining the source of this distress. Just when the reader is drawn in, the writer guides the attention to her present financial anxieties connected to the literary market and personal cares too degrading to deserve her attention, if only her situation was less desperate. The sympathy of the recipient is heightened by the past and present calamities the writer patiently endures. As a final stroke, she

adds the *topos* of modesty to captivate the headmaster's benevolence towards her understated talents, which are clearly displayed in this letter. Such artistry is more than would be expected in a personal document, but evidently Smith was so used to presenting her persona whenever she talked about her delicate family affairs that she resorted to it even for a very small audience.

Secondly, her favoured genre, the sonnet, made use of a similar method of combining fact and fiction. Smith had certainly learnt by trial and error to construct her voice and persona neither too close to her sources of inspiration such as Petrarch and Goethe, nor too imprudently to jeopardise her social status of respectable gentlewoman in economic distress. By carefully measuring out autobiography and conventions and by professing sincerity she led her readers to sympathise with her persona, mistaking it with her person. In other words, she perfected the method of showing the 'real' Charlotte Smith in a multitude of roles and situations, giving enough background detail to be easily recognisable, but so vaguely that she could always retreat and hide behind the façade of fiction.

The following semi-autobiographic sonnet from the first edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784) shows the great potential Smith's performative self-representation could have on her readership, working not only in her favour but also against those who caused her sorrows. Unlike the sonnets preceding and following this one, there is no dedication to abstract entities like Friendship (Sonnet XXVIII), to friends and benefactors (XX and XXIX) or to physical places such as the river Arun (XXVI, XXX); nor is the speaker a fictive male character as in the series attributed to Goethe's Werter (XXI-V). Instead, it is an intimate description of a domestic scene overshadowed by unnamed but apparently more 'realistic' sorrows than Werter's suicidal despair. Unsurprisingly, the most powerful and irreplicable source of compassion, authority and respect resided in Smith's most realistic role: that of mother.

Sonnet XXVII

SIGHING I see yon little troop at play,
By sorrow yet untouch'd; unhurt by care;
While free and sportive they enjoy to-day,
'Content and careless of to-morrow's fare!'^{*}
O happy age! when hope's unclouded ray
Lights their green path, and prompts their simple mirth,
Ere yet they feel the thorns that lurking lay
To wound the wretched pilgrims of the earth,

Making them rue the hour that gave them birth,
And threw them on a world so full of pain,
Where prosperous folly treads on patient worth,
And, to deaf pride, misfortune pleads in vain!
Ah!--for their future fate how many fears
Oppress my heart—and fill mine eyes with tears!
(*Poems* 30–31)

* James Thomson, *The Seasons*, “Autumn”, line 191.

The sonnet convincingly presents Smith as doting mother watching her children play free of cares. While their hearts are still full of mirth, the writer feels melancholy and longs for the happy age of hopes that has gone; all that is left are “thorns”, pain and anxiety for their future. The vague reference to the “deaf pride” to which “misfortune pleads in vain” functions as an indirect attack on the lawyers and trustees of her father-in-law’s fortune, who had her children’s destiny in their hands but did not care to react to the moving appeal of a sorrow-stricken mother. In this disguise, Smith’s tender plead before the readers was more effective than if she had presented it from the point of view of a distressed woman without maternal cares. Moreover, Smith deployed motherhood as a metaphor for respectability to validate her position as a writing woman. Critics could hardly attack her for needing money to support her children, so it was of vital importance to visibly write for her children, even though at times it sounded like a literary artifice, especially once her offspring were no longer in the cradle but fully-grown adults able to support themselves. Even then, however, she struggled to maintain her social status of gentlewoman and needed more money than her writing could provide to secure promising positions for her sons and advantageous marriages for her daughters. Since she hated the humiliating role of the “needy author” (Fry 13), she focussed on an industrious and altruistic self-representation, as in Sonnet XXVII.

Driven by necessity and intelligence, a writer such as Smith understood the terms in which she must present her life through her works in order to make her self-representation work in her favour. Knowing perfectly well that if condemned as a woman, she would also be blamed as a writer, Smith strived to be virtuous in every respect and publicly stressed the blamelessness of her life despite the injustices and calamities she had to bear. The fact that expectations re-

garding gender and genre in audience and criticism were so closely interlinked with evaluation made the recurrence to a performative femininity an even more necessary and effective device. Thus, she influenced Romantic poetry by re-introducing apparently intimate and personal details, which the readers would take for “REAL woe” (from “Sonnet to Mrs Smith”, *European Magazine*, 1786, qtd. in Knowles and Horrocks 259), unaware of the fact that they were carefully selected to form a homogeneous image of feminine propriety. The reason for this artificially sincere construction was to evoke sympathy, sometimes to such an extent that a reviewer of the third edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* even wished the sorrows were just fictitious despite their realism. As the quote from the *Gentleman’s Magazine* of 1786 states: “we cannot forbear expressing a hope that the misfortunes she so often hints at, are all imaginary”, since “we must have perused her very tender and exquisite effusions with diminished pleasure, could we have supposed her sorrows to be real” (qtd. in Knowles and Horrocks 253). Yet the fascination lay exactly in the illusory authenticity of the troubled sensibility on display in *Elegiac Sonnets* and Smith wanted the readers to believe they arose from real-life suffering. The performance worked only as long as it was invisible and “sincere”, a point on which the writer insisted as being confirmed by her life: “I am unhappily exempt from the suspicion of *feigning* sorrow for an opportunity of showing the pathos with which it can be described” (qtd. in Knowles and Horrocks 98). In short, she wrote mournfully because she was unhappy, but reactive.

Finally, the point of contact between poetic persona and representation of the self is to be found in the prefaces, which in Smith’s case are revealing examples of ‘double-faced’ Charlotte Smith, poet and novelist with well-defined aims and needs, and her constructed alter ego ‘Mrs Smith’, answering most of the readers’ expectations. The preface of the sixth edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* in 1792 makes clear that the writer was aware of the public’s wish for more cheerful poems, but also understood that she could not give up the characteristic to which she owed her success: feminine melancholy. In the form of a staged fictive dialogue addressing at once a friend and competent judge as well as the reader, she took a stand for her inescapable sadness which—being an integral part of her life—made her poems authentic.

You know the circumstances under which I have now so long been labouring; and you have done me the honor to say, that few Women could so long have contended with them. With these, however, as they are some of them of a domestic and painful nature, I will no longer trouble the Public now;

but while they exist in all their force, that indulgent Public must accept all I am able to achieve - 'Toujours des Chansons tristes!'. (Preface to the sixth edition of *Elegiac Sonnets*, qtd. in Knowles and Horrocks 54)

Although she expressly does not wish to "trouble the Public" with the "domestic and painful nature" of her circumstances, she openly makes her private situation responsible for her producing only elegiac "Chansons tristes" about a despair which not even nature can soothe. However, to some more critical readers, her incessant woe appeared more like a marketing strategy, as a satiric reception of her sonnet "Written on a Sea Shore" (1784) shows:

And when you stood "upon a rock,
A shipwreck'd mariner," to weep,
It gave my nature such a shock,
Upon my life, I could not sleep.
To lend you succour I was willing
And instantly subscrib'd my shilling.
(Ticklepitcher, "Ode to Charlotte Smith"
in *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*,
14 December 1789, qtd. in Knowles and Horrocks 261)

These caustic verses look through the pitiable persona the writer presented to reach her readers' heart and purse, but at the same time they prove the effect of her ability to exploit the potential of well-placed silences and omissions. Playing with the dialogic relationship between narrator and reader in a similar way that an actor does with the audience, Smith evoked responses towards her person, sometimes sympathy and sometimes contempt.

As far as reception is concerned, Smith's case is particularly interesting as she was one of the first women writers to resort to the pen in order to sustain herself and her children after the couple separated. This peculiar situation is connected to her writing career and the strong public favour she obtained from readers acknowledging her skill and celebrating her impeccable literary reputation despite her pitiable "strains" that would have driven many women of her social extraction into silence and reticence. At least this is the image conveyed by the writer's willingness to bring her life and constructed femininity closer to the "gentle minds" of the readers by means of autobiographical hints. Some of her readers and influential supporters would even propagate the 'myth' of her sor-

rows in their own works and letters. Walter Scott, for example, compared Smith to a “galley-slave... bound to his oar”, compelled by financial necessity to a life of “literary composition” (Scott 189). Even though there were also some negative remarks regarding her excessive harshness against the trustees in whose hands the management of her family affairs lay, Scott readily excused these foibles for arising from the plagues of her literary life. As Diane Boyd argues, by turning the reader’s attention to her life rather than her works, Smith obtained a less severe judgment, attenuated by the sympathy she inspired (Boyd 147). Generally, the reception of Smith’s works refers both to her plight and to her firmness, two elements so tightly connected in her life and work that they are almost inseparable. Reading Smith only as a “pitiable case” does not reveal the irony, acumen and courage of this self-aware and talented woman.

In terms of production, Smith adhered to the gendered and generic conventions of her readers, formally confining her themes to the feminine and domestic and relying on her established reputation of arbiter of propriety. When Smith started expressing an interest in revolutionary ideals and presenting her situation in proto-feminist terms following Mary Wollstonecraft (with less vengeance but equal liberality) as usurped separated woman, a part of public opinion felt uneasy about her transgressive femininity while others felt all the more drawn to her. As a matter of fact, following her very outspoken preface to the sixth edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* (1792) and her more political novels *Desmond* (1792) and *The Old Manor House* (1793), respectively about the French Revolution and the American War of Independence, the subscriptions for *Elegiac Sonnets* dramatically decreased by two thirds in 1797 (Fry 24). Sensing her critics’ concerns, Smith seems to have answered them through the protagonist of her novel *Desmond*, who proudly declares that: “where the intention is perfectly pure, it is not always wrong to follow the dictates of the heart, even when they impel us to act contrary to the maxims of the world, and even in defiance of its censure” (*Desmond* 301). Read against the background of her works, in this quote Smith seems aware of her performative femininity. The perfectly convincing picture she created attests her skill as writer and businessperson complying with the image of propriety while at the same time going beyond the “maxims” of her time. Every detail in Smith’s poetry—the exact descriptions including places and dates as well as the heart-felt intensity of her emotions – claims sincerity and pleads for sympathy. More importantly, her performative femininity was a decisive step towards a cult of personality and a public and political authority legitimised by melancholy in various hues which pre-announced Romanticism.

CONCLUSION

As has been shown, Smith's major achievement as a writer was to create a double of herself, a hybrid in-between the roles of woman, wife, mother, literary celebrity and performative persona according to the standards of Sensibility. The theatrical self-representation by means of performative femininity in her works was dramatically dependent on recipients responding to the staged construction of gender either admiringly or critically. To secure her fame as representative of 'normative femininity', Smith turned what could have made her the target of public contempt – for example her sympathies for revolutionary ideals and her humiliating legal diatribes to obtain her legitimate inheritance – into the source of admiration and pity that granted her acceptance and success. Her repeated public claims that she was a writer out of necessity and the constant reminders of the cause of her afflictions shaped much of the critical response to her reading.

The innovative approach of performative femininity as movement along the normative-transgressive continuum of female behaviour allows one to retrace Smith's balancing act of complying both with the demands of the literary market and her own ideas, conscious of the ways in which her appearance as persona might compromise her claims to feminine propriety as a writer. As Kandi Tayebi suggests, Smith's melancholic persona contributed to making one's gender, life experience and social status essential to poetry and challenged cultural assumption of literature and politics as a male domain (Tayebi 435). Her biography and examples from her letters and poems have displayed her ability in exploiting the intrinsic vagueness and ambiguity of social standards and generic conventions in such a way as to keep her reputation intact. As has been argued, the aim of her performative femininity was to confuse fact and fiction in order to justify her position and to placate the censorious readers, knowing that her success relied on authenticity.

On a personal level, her writing career allowed her to be the breadwinner for her family, replacing her spendthrift husband in this usually male role to support her numerous children after the couple separated. On a public level, she established a recognisable persona in her works, both in the generally male-dominated sonnet and in the realm of sentimental novels, traditionally associated with a female readership. Labbe states that in her sonnets Smith is read as a woman in the roles she takes up, be it the good mother or the woman in need (Labbe 3). This is certainly true for her early career, in which she still had to become estab-

lished on the literary market. After the initially normative femininity displayed in her early works, she experimented with performative femininity to explore less normative gender roles and liberal, republican attitudes in the wake of the French Revolution, especially in her prefaces and novels. The decline in public favour which followed these changes and the too personal preface of the sixth edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* shows that she had moved too far away from the normative and towards the transgressive end of the behavioural continuum available to women. Therefore, in later life, she 'retired' towards safer, less engendered genres, like children's books and botanical treatises. Even in her poetic answer to Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" (1798), "Beachy Head" (1807), Smith's poetic persona remains in the background compared to the predominance of the sublime natural landscape and its history. Even though Smith stated on 18 August 1805 that "it is on the Poetry I have written that I trust for the little reputation I may hereafter have" (*Letters* 706), it would be interesting to also analyse her novels in light of her performative femininity to trace the writer's movement along the continuum more precisely and to compare the effect of this movement to contemporary literary production and critical reception. Ultimately, it was not only "Pity" that "rehearsed" her life and work to "distant ages" but her performative femininity, which secured Charlotte Smith a well-deserved place in the literary canon as an innovative and even revolutionary woman writer.

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