

Charlotte Turner Smith

While little-known now, Charlotte Turner Smith was a well-regard and influential poet and novelist of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, anticipating many of the central themes and concerns of the more famous male romantic poets of the era. In particular, Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* (published in 1785) made her famous and became a key influence on Wordsworth and Coleridge and their practice of the form. Her posthumously published "Beachy Head" takes up many of the central themes of other romantic literature, in particular the relationship between individual experience in nature and the development of the imagination.

Charlotte Turner was born in 1749 to an affluent family, and, despite losing her mother when she was only three, she enjoyed a childhood of ease, in which she read a great deal and had tutors in all the areas deemed appropriate for a young lady of her status. Her life took a turn for the worse, though, when at age 16 she entered into an arranged marriage to Benjamin Smith. For the next decade, she suffered her husband's infidelities, abuse, and financial mismanagement, which finally landed them in debtors' prison. In 1785, Charlotte secured a legal separation from her husband and embarked on a writing career to support herself and her living children (she had a dozen children, three of whom died as infants). In the two decades that followed, Smith produced a wealth of works, including long poems addressing the French Revolution and the English reaction to it, ten novels, and a pedagogical guide to introducing children to poetry and nature. In part due to her experience in her marriage, Smith supported reforms that would grant women more rights, ideas she explored in some of her fiction. Like many other British romantics, she embraced the French Revolution. While not as vocal as Mary Wollstonecraft in her call for women's rights, Smith, like Wollstonecraft, was at times attacked for her views.

While Smith's poetry and novels were well-regarded at the time of her death, her literary fame faded over the course of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. With the revival of interest in women's writings over the past few decades, however, she has begun to regain her place as an important voice in the romantic era.

Summary

- Smith's writings were an important early articulation of British romanticism, helping to revive the sonnet as a form and offering her own account of the importance of nature and the imagination.