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## The Digital Charlotte Smith

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## Counter Pastoralism in Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head*

Because Charlotte Smith's works have just recently been added to the literary canon, the focus of literary scholars, in my survey, tends to shift toward Smith as a feminist and political advocate rather than Smith as a poet, who works in and challenges genre, specifically the pastoral genre. As Judith Pascoe argues in her *Cambridge Companion* article "Unsex'd Females," looking at Smith's work as a part of a larger feminist whole limits her value as a writer. Drawing on current scholarship on Smith and the 18<sup>th</sup> Century pastoral tradition, I will argue that Smith's *Beachy Head* challenges the simplicity of life represented in the pastoral genre by revealing untraditional characteristics in her pastoral characters. I will examine the situational and physical characteristics of the shepherd crook, the retired poet, and the rustic hermit in *Beachy Head* and comparing them to other pastoral characteristics found in works by some of the great pastoralists. Further, I will show that there is more to Smith's writing than feminism and political advocacy and offer in-depth analyses of these characters by magnifying the ways Smith undermines the pastoral.

*Beachy Head* is a topographical blank verse poem in which Smith discusses Beachy Head—a set of cliffs on the coast of England—as both a historical place and political monument. Throughout the poem, she comments on the slave trade, the Roman Empire, the beginning of time, and the war with France as well as addresses characters such as a shepherd crook, herself (a retired poet), and a rustic hermit. Much of the scholarship on Smith and *Beachy Head* looks at these themes and characters as Smith's discussion of politics. However, with a closer look at the portrayal of the three major characters in this poem, it is noticeable that these characters evoke the traditional pastoral mode. The shepherd crook works with his hands in the land like a traditional shepherd, the retired poet is an admirer of nature like a typical pastoral poet, and the rustic hermit embodies the figure of otium, a reclining pose used to mirror leisurely life in the

countryside. Despite these superficial similarities between Smith's pastoral characters and more traditional pastoral characters, Smith's characters draw sharp contrasts within typical pastoral characteristics that appear in more traditional pastoral works. Though the characters seen in some more traditional pastoral works – such as William Wordsworth's *Michael: A Pastoral Poem* and Virgil's *Eclogue I* – also contrast typical pastoral characteristics, Smith uses her characters to undermine the idealization of rural life found in traditional pastoralism *differently* than Wordsworth and Virgil. This proves that she is aware of their intervention in the genre and is working to intercede uniquely. This also creates an element of intelligence in *Beachy Head* targeting the educated reader and arguably making Smith comparable to the great pastoralists like Virgil and Wordsworth.

The first major character Smith introduces is the crook, who at first seems like a typical shepherd. She begins explaining his dwelling place as “Roofed with green mosses” (131, 173) and “humbled” (131, 176)—a place “bosomed in some valley of the hills” (131, 168). Smith's description of home paints an idealized picture of what rural life looks like—hidden in the hills with moss and mountains. Wordsworth similarly describes a shepherd's dwelling place as picturesque and desirable in *Michael: A Pastoral Poem*: “The pastoral mountains front you, face to face” (520, 5)—“a hidden valley of their own” (520, 8). These descriptions correlate to the pastoral tradition in 18<sup>th</sup> Century literature, which served as a way to discuss “an idealization of social and political order” ( Fulord 109). Like in *Michael: A Pastoral Poem*, the initial description of Smith's shepherd crook's life seems orderly and simple.

However, Smith challenges this notion of simplicity when she continues the shepherd crook's story. Though at first she describes him as a shepherd watching over his sheep—“The flock with dripping fleeces, are dispersed/ O'er the wide down” (131, 178-9)—we soon understand that he is also involved in illegal trade:

O'er the wide down; then from some ridged point  
That overlooks the sea, his eager eye  
Watches the bark that for his signal waits  
To land its merchandise. Quitting for this  
Clandestine traffic his more honest toil,  
The crook abandoning, he braves himself  
The heaviest snowstorm of December's night.  
When with the conflicting winds the ocean raves. (131, 179-186)

This is a complete deviation from the typical pastoral shepherd figure. John M. Anderson argues that this illegal activity causes the crook to abandoned his "pastoral purity," thus negating the traditional portrayal of the shepherd (567). By involving her first pastoral character in criminal activity, Smith is refuting the simple rural life she initially described when introducing the shepherd crook by revealing a darker, more complex reality. Though she begins this scene using language that relates to an idealized landscape perfection, she quickly transitions to using language that relates to peril:

The heaviest snowstorm of December's night,  
When with conflicting winds the ocean raves,  
And on the tossing boat unfearing mounts  
To meet the partners of the perilous trade  
And share their hazard. (131, 185-189)

This shepherd crook's life speedily shifts from simple and easy to complex and treacherous. Wordsworth's Michael also faces hardships, but his simple ethic and peaceful dwelling place stay constant because his hardships come from outside forces, like debt and the banishment of his son. Unlike Michael, the shepherd crook is the agent of his own corruption. Thus the shepherd crook *is* the cause of his loss of purity, which is causing distress in his life.

Further, Smith implies that the shepherd crook is not immune from the evil that industry brings. In fact, it seems as if the sea is what brings corrupted industry to the countryside:

Well it were for him  
If no such commerce or destruction known,  
He were content with what the earth affords  
To human labours, even where she seems  
Reluctant most. (131, 189-193)

Here Smith is saying that if it the sea didn't act as a vehicle for people to bring the industry of the city to the countryside, the shepherd crook wouldn't know any differently. The sea similarly acts as a threat in *Michael: A Pastoral Poem* when Michael's son goes off to sea, gets caught up in industry, and never returns. However in *Beachy Head*, the shepherd crook is involving *himself* in city-like activities via the sea while still living in the countryside, while Michael is left devastated because his son has gone of to sea. Not only is Smith making a political comment about industry and the city but also deliberately using some of the same pastoral modes Wordsworth did to illustrate her knowledge of conflict familiar to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century pastoral tradition. She is using the sea as a threat to the idealized pastoral life of a shepherd, yet suggesting that the shepherd is not a pure character who is corrupted by outside forces, but is like all other humans—pastoral or not—in that he is corrupt himself.

The next pastoral-like character Smith introduces is the retired poet—herself. Unlike the order in which she introduces the negative realities of the shepherd crook, Smith begins her journey through life in the countryside with said negative realities:

While Memory with faithful pencil drew  
The contrast, and, regretting, I compared  
With the polluted smoky atmosphere  
And dark and stifling streets, the southern hills  
That to the setting sun their graceful heads  
Rearing, o'erlook the frith where Vecta breaks  
With her white rocks the strong impetuous tide,  
Where western winds the vast Atlantic urge  
To thunder on the coast. Haunts of my youth! (134, 290-296).

Here Smith spends little time describing the countryside as light and perfect and rushes into pointing out its flaws. She sharply contrasts the city—“polluted smoky atmosphere/And dark and stifling streets”—and the countryside—“That to the setting sun their graceful heads/Rearing o'erlook the frith where Vecta breaks”—which is a major commonality in 18<sup>th</sup> Century

pastoralism, but she also notes that the countryside is where the “haunts” of her youth lie.

Describing the countryside as haunting is not typical in pastoral tradition.

This dark description of Beachy Head could also, however, be Smith’s way of magnifying her emotions. Katherine M. Rogers discusses the role nature plays in Smith’s novels and argues that Smith uses nature to “amplify the emotions of characters in a particular situation” (73). While Smith continues to describe nature here, her tone is much darker than that which is usually used to describe pastoral scenes. Instead of the idealized picturesque scenery the pastoral typically renders, Smith discusses the peril, possibly mirroring her emotional past.

As Smith continues to discuss her childhood, she describes the scenery with a lot of scientific detail. In a traditional pastoral scene, the landscape would be idealized and described by perfection. While the scenery Smith discusses is beautiful, it is painfully realistic:

An early worshipper of Nature’s shrine,  
I loved her rudest scenes—

I loved to trace the brooks whose humid banks  
Nourish the harebell and the freckled pagil,  
And stroll among o’ershadowing woods of beech,  
Lending in summer, from the heats of noon,  
A whispering shade; while haply there reclines  
Some pensive lover of uncultured flowers  
Who from the tumps with bright green mosses clad  
Hear-shaped and triply folded, and its root  
Creeping like the beaded coral; or who there  
Gathers the copse’s pride, anemones  
With rays like golden studs on ivory laid  
Most delicate, but touched with purple clouds—  
Fit crown for April’s fair but changeful brow. (135-136, 345-6, 354-367)

This detailed description of place is rare in 18<sup>th</sup> Century poetry. Judith Pascoe has argued that in Smith’s “Sonnet II,” “... the pastoral verse tradition collides with Linnaean science, but in her attention to botanical exactitude, Smith still manages to serve the ideal of a highly decorative and carefully crafted style of poetry...” (“Unsex’d Females” 220). Further, she argues that parts of *Beachy Head* are poetic versions of botany handbooks (“Female Botanists” 152). This accuracy

validates the natural history discussed in *Beachy Head* and contributes to the undermining of the traditional pastoral by referencing how Smith has actualized (rather than idealized) the pastoral in her works, specifically in *Beachy Head*.

This scientific knowledge reveals a lot about Smith as a pastoral—or anti-pastoral—character herself. Like Milton's *Lycidas*, *Beachy Head* is filled with language that worships nature, but while Milton suggests that nature is still a safe haven even when death occurs, Smith suggests that nature is scientific and mortal like humans. Milton references ancient Greek gods and pastoral poets who keep nature alive, idealizing nature as a type of god, whereas Smith references science, actualizing nature. While the eponymous hero in *Lycidas* and the rustic poet in *Beachy Head* are both challengers of the pastoral and admirers of nature, they have differing views of how nature functions—the eponymous hero's is sublime and the retired poet's is scientific. This shows that Smith is knowledgeable about how great pastoralists, like Milton, worked in and challenged the pastoral genre and proves that she is able to challenge the pastoral differently than someone like Milton.

The last character Smith introduces is the rustic hermit. Much like the introductions of the shepherd crook and the retired poet, this rustic hermit is introduced as a traditional pastoral character. Though he isn't a shepherd, he is described in a shepherd-like way: "For often, stretched upon the mountain turf/ With folded arms, and eyes intently fixed/ Where ancient elms and firs obscured a grange" (141, 521-523). This figure of otium seen in the rustic hermit's seemingly relaxed, stretched out position is one familiar to the pastoral character. We also see a traditional figure of otium in Virgil's *Eclogue I* with both shepherds, Meliboeus and Tityrus. These two shepherds represent the figure of otium differently—Meliboeus represents otium as a blissful moment and Tityrus represents otium as a complete way of life—but both idealize this figure (Alpers 451). Alpers argues that this creates a divide into "two versions of pastoral" (451),

but Smith seems to pose yet another version of the pastoral figure of otium, if not a counter-pastoral version of it. While the stranger in *Beachy Head* is introduced as leisurely resting in the mountains, we soon see that he is not joyous nor relaxed, but deeply saddened:

They heard him complaining of his fate,  
And to the murmuring wind of cold neglect  
These plaintive sounds remember, and even now  
Among them may be heard the stranger's songs. (141, 526-530)

Here we are exposed to the realistic life of the rustic hermit. We see that he has experienced life in a way that evokes disappointment and loneliness.

Further in the poem, this figure of otium seen in the introduction of the rustic hermit is completely shattered. Very quickly, this love-struck stranger becomes a depressed hermit with the forest as his shelter and bread as his sustenance. There is nothing leisurely about his life in the wilderness. In fact, he becomes pitied by community members and is called a loiterer. Even more tragically, he disappears, never to be seen again:

And in his wanderings reared to soothe his soul  
Ideal bowers of pleasure. Then, of solitude  
And of his hermit life still more enamoured  
His home was in the forest, and wild fruits  
And bread sustained him. There early spring  
The barkmen found him ere the sun arose;  
There at their daily toil, the wedgcutters  
Beheld him through the distant thicket move.  
The shaggy dog following the truffle-hunter  
Barked at the loiterer, and perchance at night  
Belated villagers from fair or wake,  
While the fresh night-wind let the moonbeams in  
Between the swaying boughs, just saw him pass—  
And then in silence, gliding like a ghost  
He vanished, lost among the deepening gloom! (142, 559-573)

Instead of portraying the idealized rural life traditional in the pastoral genre, Smith highlights the degeneration of this rustic hermit's life. While Meliboeus and Tityrus sit around discussing the philosophy of shepherding and leisure, the rustic hermit toils and works to provide for himself while trying to make sense of his emotions. This is not to say that Virgil doesn't challenge the



pastoral through Meliboeus and Tityrus. Both of Virgil's most famous shepherds deal with their own hardships and skepticisms in and of the pastoral, including marginalization and exile.

However, Smith's rustic hermit challenges it differently. While Meliboeus and Tityrus challenge the pastoral through their discussions with each other, the rustic hermit defies the physical figure of otium and the notion that pastoral figures have the time and energy to talk about pastoral life.

Smith continues this conflict between typical pastoral figures and atypical pastoral figures all the way to the very end when the rustic hermit dies. If she hadn't already made a strong case that this rustic hermit is a pastoral character surrounded by an untraditional pastoral setting, she hones in on this idea by describing the rustic hermit's death as dark and secret. Very few people know of his death, and he dies by drowning in a violent storm, again referencing the sea as a threat to the pastoral:

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.  
At daybreak, anxious for the lonely man,  
His cave the mountain shepherds visited,  
Though sand and banks of weeds had choked their way:  
He was not in it, but his drowned corse,  
By the waves wafted, near his former home  
Received the rites of burial. (146, 716-726)

This is an utterly anti-idealistic portrayal of how life in the countryside exists and passes. The rustic hermit dies depressed, alone, and crude, negating any perfectionistic view of rural life. Like in the story of the shepherd crook, we see the sea as a major threat to peaceful pastoral life. More than that, here we see the sea as the bane of the pastoral character's existence. This is similar to the threat the sea poses in *Michael: A Pastoral Poem* because the rustic hermit was driven into the sea by outside forces—love and marginalization—but in *Beachy Head* the sea literally exterminates the pastoral character instead of taking away from the pastoral character. In

other words, while the sea threatens life in both *Michael: A Pastoral Poem* and *Beachy Head*, the life being threatened in Smith's work is the rustic hermit's himself, not his son's. Through the story of the rustic hermit, Smith leads readers to believe that he embodies the figure of otium, then weaves through a series of events that conclude in a completely opposite idea. Instead of dying peacefully after a life of leisure, the rustic hermit dies violently after a life of hard work and emotional struggles—much unlike the ending to a traditional pastoral character's story.

This sense of mental and physical struggle seen in the rustic hermit's experience in the countryside could also be Smith's way of characterizing the poet, a common theme in 18<sup>th</sup> Century pastoralism. John Krapp argues that female Romanticists wrote about nature differently than their male counterparts. He claims that for the most part, females wrote about how nature allows them to see to themselves as a part of a larger community of human beings, while males wrote about how nature allows them to think more deeply, or in Wordsworth's words, develop a "philosophic mind" (79). In other words, female writers wrote about nature as a way to better understand their place in the larger society while male writers wrote about nature as a way to better understand themselves. While this is arguably inaccurate in the case of, for example, Wordsworth's "The Leech Gatherer," where Wordsworth reflects on a clear feeling of solidarity with the Leech Gatherer in the poem, the claim holds true regarding *Beach Head*. Because the rustic hermit has two pastoral poems of his own in between Smith's narration, and because these poems are what keep him from being completely forgotten in his community, we can assume that Smith is using the pastoral character to mirror the poet, thus relating herself to someone she's never met. Both the retired poet and the hermit struggle with broken hearts and feelings of abandonment and both see the reality of pastoral life rather than the idealized version of it. Often times in pastoral poetry, like in most of Wordsworth's works, the poet is described as the vehicle through which the sublimity of nature can be relayed—someone who is elected out of all of

humanity to do so. Dissimilarly, the both rustic hermit and retired poet's reflections of the pastoral in *Beachy Head* highlight the actuality of the countryside and struggles the poet faces when trying to portray it—people who are undesirable or face the greatest troubles. The last two stanzas of the rustic hermit's last lament focus on the ways in which the poet can struggle while reflecting on nature:

Oh, could I hear your soft voice there,  
And see you in the forest green  
All beauteous as you are, more fair  
You'd look amid the sylvan scene,  
And in a wood-girl's simple guise  
Be still more lovely in mine eyes.

Ye phantoms of unreal delight,  
Visions of fond delirium born,  
Rise not on my deluded sight,  
Then leave me drooping and forlorn  
To know such bliss can never be,  
Unless Amanda loved like me. (144, 642-654)

Here the rustic hermit—the poet—is the one nature brings Wordsworth to see as the “still, sad music of humanity.” It seems Smith is implying that the poet is effective when he or she experiences the hardships and complexities of the countryside and doesn't just use it as a muse. Further, by allowing a rustic hermit to write his own poetry inside her poem, it seems as if Smith believes that anyone can be a poet if they experience enough life. Like Krapp argues, the struggles outlined in the stranger's poem—even the fact that this pastoral character is given two of his own poems in *Beachy Head*—seem to suggest that Smith sees herself as a poet working in the pastoral genre to connect herself to a greater community of thinkers and writers.

Smith displays her mastery of the pastoral genre by pushing the boundaries of what makes a character represent pastoralism. The characteristics and circumstances of all three of Smith's characters can be compared to those in traditional pastoral works, and related to the works of Virgil, Milton, and Wordsworth. Like the portrayals of pastoralism in works by great

pastoralists, there are certain elements in that of the characters' dwellings, experiences, and work lives that negate traditional pastoral images such as the figure of otium. In-depth analyses of the pastoral in any of Smith's works, like the ones above, are rare. Unlike the surplus of scholarship done on the famous pastoralists like Wordsworth and Milton, the work done on Smith's representation of the pastoral, especially in *Beachy Head*, is limited. This may be because *Beachy Head* is not a pastoral poem, but the three major characters in this poem undeniably represent issues with connecting pastoralism to a life of peace and leisure in the countryside. Much of the scholarship surrounding Smith's works is focused on her political advocacy and feminism. This may be because her works were just recently added to the literary canon, but these characters prove that there is more to Smith's works than controversial statements. It is clear through her portrayal of the lives of pastoral characters that Smith is fully aware of genre and working inside of it. However, like all great writers, she pushes its boundaries and challenges certain aspects of it, which arguably prove her to be comparable to writers like Virgil, Milton, and Wordsworth. In *Beachy Head*, we see that Smith challenges the idea of flawless rural life commonly found in traditional pastoral literature. Through the shepherd crook, the retired poet, and the rustic hermit, Smith informs readers of the reality of rural life—that though physically beautiful, it is complex and difficult. This makes readers think more critically about the philosophies of pastoralism and see Smith as an intelligent and clever writer.

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