

Alexandra Paterson. "Tracing the Earth: Narratives of Personal and Geological History in Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head*." *Romanticism*, 25. 1 (2019): 22-31.

In "Tracing the Earth: Narratives of Personal and Geological History in Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head*" (hereafter "Tracing the Earth") Alexandra Paterson examines the way in which the reading of personal history is linked in Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head* (1807) to the reading of geological history. In *Beachy Head* the geological history of landscape reconfigures Smith's representation of both self and landscape, a process complemented by Smith's recasting of lines and themes from her earlier *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784-1800) such as Sonnet V, "To the South Downs".

"To the South Downs" charts an emotional estrangement from the landscape, with the octave of the poem working to emphasize the change in the speaker's emotional state over time. The disjunction between the child and adult's relationship with the landscape in the sonnet reappears in *Beachy Head*, where around twenty descriptive lines extend the sonnet's quatrain. Yet, while the compression of both adult and childhood experiences into two quatrains in "To the South Downs" make the contrast between the two evident, *Beachy Head* blends the speaker's past and present so that they overlap. Images of tracing and weaving emphasize connections between the two poems and between the child and the landscape, but also weave together past and present selves. In *Beachy Head*, however, the adult's perspective is interwoven with the display of botanical knowledge, including endnotes indicating the Latin names of several of the flowers she mentions in the descriptive passage, emphasizing the coexistence of child and adult. In this way, the poet allows the speaker not only to view, but also to be part of, her own history.

The extension of childhood play into geological enquiry, however, also connects the telling of personal histories to a "much longer history of the land" (26). By furnishing her own history with an extended observation and engagement with the landscape, Smith reinforces the idea not only that childhood play continues into adulthood but that it matures into a scientific engagement with the land. Moreover, Smith's focus on geological history allows her to recognize continuity without necessarily filling the gaps of a narrative. Smith offers two accounts of the origin on the "strange and foreign forms / Of sea-shells" (ll. 373-4): either they were placed there "playfully" by nature or their presence indicates that this dry land was once covered by the sea (26-7). Geologist William Smith's stratigraphy in the early nineteenth century created a cultural shift in the depiction of rocks: rocks become legible through organic geology. Smith's approach to narrative in *Beachy Head* is thus linked to *Beachy Head*'s legibility, a process Smith explores through "tracing" or rather "not tracing" (27-8). *Beachy Head* opens by emphasizing the impossibility of fixing a single historical narrative, as the speaker sends her "Fancy . . . forth" to "represent the strange and awful hour / of vast concussion" (ll. 4-10). In her accompanying note about the "vast concussion" – a major geological event separating France from England – Smith claims that although England was once joined to the continent of Europe she could never "trace" the resemblance between the two countries (27). Paterson persuasively argues that the poem therefore performs a representation of "narratives as possibilities" (28) instead. Building on Kevis Goodman's work on the "constructedness" of scientific theories, the author posits that Smith's representation of geological narratives is a creative act (28), suggesting that Smith acknowledges the "constructedness" of her

histories in both the sonnets and *Beachy Head*. Smith extends her exploration of the role of the imagination in historical narrative to the narration of human history, suggesting that it is fancy that acts as an alternative to tracing histories or narratives, embracing ancient history and deep geological time, as well as the speaker's memory. She offers instead multiple, competing histories or narratives that are imaginatively constructed, created, transformed, which are in turn themselves mirrored in the poem's heterogenous form. For Paterson, Smith's acknowledgement of an ancient but intrinsically unknowable or illegible landscape rebuilds Smith's narrative of self as dynamic and not fully understandable.

The creative act was often onerous for Smith, and it would have been useful to have gained a sense of how the imaginative construction of narrative inflects Smith's view of her own creativity. It would have been useful, too, to have had a more of a sense from the author of how Smith's response to geological narratives sits within a wider Romantic frame: Erasmus Darwin, whose influence permeates *Beachy Head*, for instance, wrote much of his scientific work in poetic form and claimed that his botanical garden at Lichfield was designed to "enlist imagination under the banner of Science" (Strachan and Moore: 75). Nonetheless "Tracing the Earth" provides a stimulating account of the way in which early nineteenth-century geological narrative helps reshape notions of Romantic selfhood.

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