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Romanticism Honors Essay
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**Suffering Mothers:
Gender Politics in Charlotte Smith's "The Emigrants"**

For a woman of the eighteenth century, it was dangerous for a woman to engage in politics, let alone engage in explicit anti-war writing. Yet Charlotte Smith does just that in her impassioned brief epic "The Emigrants." Published in 1793, "The Emigrants" moves chronologically: the first book begins in November 1792, two months after the abolition of the monarchy and the imprisonment of the royal family in Revolutionary France, and the second book picks up in April 1793, with the execution of Louis XVI and Great Britain's declaration of war on France. Smith does not simply chart the misfortunes of the French émigrés in the context of a horrific war. Instead, Smith uses the situation of the emigrants in order to merge revolutionary politics and gender politics, and the political with the personal to draw attention to her own exile and the cultural isolation of women. In this way, she enters the poem as one of the four suffering mothers so that she can embody the *gendered* injustice of this war.

Smith evokes epic form in order to revise it sentimentally to engage the perspective of those who are marginalized, both the emigrants and women. Smith does not retell heroic deeds by a single protagonist like in Homer's "The Odyssey," and uses the personal pronoun "I," thereby interweaving her own personal troubles, a move that critics of the time considered to be "egotistical" and formal confusion. Before publishing "The Emigrants," Smith had a reputation of being a sonneteer; her *Elegiac Sonnets* were personal reflections rather than political indictments. Unlike her more lyric sonnets, Smith's "I" in "The Emigrants" soliloquizes her condemnation of war; Smith's speaker is performative.

In her dedication to William Cowper, Smith acknowledges that she modeled “The Emigrants” after “The Task,” but also asserts her departure from his masculine framing of the epic. Smith writes, “I am perfectly sensible that it [his poem “The Task”] belongs not to a feeble and feminine hand to draw the bow of Ulysses.” While some may read this as a self-abasing comment (Smith characterizes her own hand as “feeble” and “feminine”), it also allows for Smith to move away from the “bow” or conventional male epic and instead work in her own terms. In her essay, “Charlotte Smith’s ‘Emigrants’: Forging Connections at the Borders of Female Tradition,” Susan J. Wolfson claims that Smith has “other bows to draw” (Wolfson, 518). She argues that Smith “writes across gender” by calling upon the male canon, but that “The Emigrants” is a “canny intertextual performance, and its deepest polemics are about the tradition itself, literary, and political” (Wolfson, 511). Smith works within the canon in order to gain literary credibility, but at the same time, departs from traditional conventions to make room for a “polemical” indictment of the war and of typical gender roles.

Smith also explicitly outlines her intention to depart from epic generic convention:

I was gradually led to attempt in blank verse, a delineation of those interesting objects which happened to excite my attention, and which even pressed upon a heart that has learned, perhaps from its own sufferings, to feel acute though unavailing compassion the calamity of others (101).

In this passage, Smith openly discloses that she will not follow that narrative structure of the epic: she will not tell the tale of one man and his adventures. She follows Cowper’s procedure of writing of “those interesting objects which happen to excite [her] attention,” but in a way that immediately calls attention to her “own sufferings.” She justifies writing of personal experience so that she can “feel acute though unavailing compassion the calamity of others,” in this case, the emigrants. Additionally, Smith chooses not to write in the traditional militaristic epic. Wolfson

quotes Mellor, who suggests, Smith creates, “female poetry of condemning war as ‘patriarchal militarism’” (Wolfson, 512).

Smith uses the situation of the emigrants to highlight her own self-exile, and she uses “I” to position and intensify her sympathy for the exiles and for women. She writes: “I lament your fate,” or “I mourn your sorrows, for I too have known/Involuntary exile” (Lines 155-156). Smith knows what it is like to be wretched and in abject circumstances. From 1784-5, Smith and her family went into “involuntary exile” when they were forced to live near Dieppe so as to avoid her husband’s creditors. Jacqueline M. Labbe, in her book, *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, poetry and the culture of gender* suggests, “the emigrants function not merely as representatives of victims of the French Revolution, but as metaphors for Smith’s own sense of marginality, personal and cultural” (Labbe, 122). Smith brings up the mother who sitting on the shore is “lost in melancholy thought” and mourns for her native land. In this way, Smith can truly demonstrate her empathy as an emigrant herself and as a mother.

Smith shows her marginalization as a woman in the line, “How often do I half abjure society” (Line 43). She wishes to withdraw from society to “some lone cottage” in the “green woods,” in a place that is free from war and from the England’s corruption from the third estate. Smith spent time in debtor’s prison with her husband, so she has a jaundiced view of England’s legal system, and not without reason. Smith wants to escape her domineering and philandering husband to “behold/the beauteous works of God unspoiled by man” (Lines, 55-56), or look upon God’s world, which in solitude, is “unspoiled by man.” I take man to be an extension of society here. Labbe points out, “by ‘half abjuring’ she [Smith] leaves open the other half, and creates a sense of the marginal of things half-said, of stances half embraced, of anger half-expressed, and of loyalties half-withdrawn” (Labbe, 120). Smith therefore takes the stereotypically “masculine”

role of engaging in politics through her critique of the war and England's legal system, yet she also takes up the more typically feminine role of being compassionate and motherly.

Smith genders Peace, Liberty, and Freedom as female, under attack from men. Smith writes, "Peace, who delights in solitary shade, /No more will spread for me her downy wings" (Lines 65-66). Smith's gendering of peace as feminine is unable to "spread for [her] downy wings" because it is impossible to live in seclusion or "solitary shade." Peace cannot be Smith's escape from society. While "Peace" is unattainable, "Liberty," is literally destroyed: "...Reason would raise to Liberty, destroyed by ruffian hands" (Lines 49-50). Here, liberty is personified, and "ruffian hands" are a synecdoche for men who mean to defile her, and thereby for a Revolution gone too violent and too far. "Freedom" was also corrupted:

From Freedom's name, usurped and misapplied,
And, cow'ring to the purple tyrant's rod,
Deems *that* the lesser ill. Deluded men!
Ere ye profane her ever-glorious name,
Or catalogue the thousands that have bled
Resisting her