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Review of *Placing Charlotte Smith*, eds Elizabeth A. Dolan and Jacqueline M. Labbe

Abstract

A review of *Placing Charlotte Smith* edited by Elizabeth A. Dolan and Jacqueline M. Labbe, written by Heather Heckman-McKenna

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Elizabeth A. Dolan and Jacqueline M. Labbe, eds. *Placing Charlotte Smith*.
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While much has been written about Charlotte Smith (1749-1806) and sensibility, gender, the picturesque, genre, politics, and proto-feminism, amongst other topics, *Placing Charlotte Smith* editors Elizabeth A. Dolan and Jacqueline M. Labbe ask a series of new questions about Smith that are relevant to all other Smithian themes: Smith's placement in the world and literature.

Beyond, of course, literal place, this welcome contribution to eighteenth-century studies asks where we might find Smith in history, politics, aesthetics, and the natural world. Dolan and Labbe ask: can the many spaces Smith inhabits be comprehensively identified? Where can we locate Smith's various placements in their vast heterogeneity? The collection's primary goal, offering an impressively wide range of essays, is to find Smith's multiplicity of place and, to use Stephen Behrendt's germane term, her "multistability."

Placing Charlotte Smith offers a new critical framework for studying Smith and does the initial work of investigating in Smith's work and life the "elusiveness, liminality, allusiveness, and boundary-crossing" (19) of the many places we can find Smith. In the introduction, Dolan and Labbe point out that the diverse spaces we find Smith in her literature reflect the ever-moving Smith herself: Smith's characters and speakers are frequently compelled to flee as a result of family circumstances, political upheaval, and women's precarious positions in the financial and legal worlds. Given the instability of Smith's life, Dolan and Labbe convincingly posit that Smith used her writings to carry herself and her largely women readers outside the confines of their highly restricted lives. The collection's essays often intermix and move loosely from examining Smith's significance to her authorial audiences (think genre, readership, marketing), into discussing Smith's notions of home (including the implicit politics inherent in the concept of "home"), and finally considering Smith's wide range of works in natural science, aesthetics, and poetics.

Offering a foundation for the rest of the collection, Stephen Behrendt's essay explores where and how we might find Smith as she presented herself to her readers. Behrendt's compelling essay builds upon much of his other work on Smith, introducing the idea of her "multistability"—a central concept that permeates the collection—which he defines as a "phenomenon of representation

by which images, objects, or ‘states of being’ are presented in a sufficiently ambiguous fashion to permit one or more alternative logical interpretations” (28). Behrendt concludes that Smith commodified her image and in doing so invited readers to construct their own image/s of her through her works, allowing a wide breadth of potential interpretations. Claire Knowles builds upon this, discussing Smith’s multistability in more specific terms. Knowles’s thought-provoking essay triangulates a semblance of Smith’s many significations of home, particularly for women. Situating the precarious legal position of women, Knowles argues that Smith’s authorial persona was grounded in her own lived displacement. Smith’s lack of safety in home, and the political implications therein, Knowles suggests, establishes the conceptual safety of home as ultimately futile. Nevertheless, Knowles maintains that Smith created a different form of security through her community of readers, many of whom inhabited similar lived positions as her own.

Romantic women’s scholar-de-force Elizabeth A. Dolan’s essay decisively bridges the false gap between home and politics. Dolan posits that Smith constructed a sense of home through cosmopolitanism. Arguing that many British women felt homeless within their home country as a result of their utter lack of political agency, Dolan points out that women created new, fragmented forms of home. Such forms included developing close friendships for emotional support, having places to safely walk for physical exertion and pleasure, or using books for intellectual engagement—this last of which harkens back to Knowles’s point. Given women’s lack of political status, Dolan contends that women’s options were either to leave England entirely or to establish a less literal version of home based around community and personal growth.

The collection seamlessly shifts into Smith’s politics. Using eighteenth-century politician John Thelwall’s perspective on Smith as a patriot whose foremost concern was establishing freedom, Mary Anne Myers highlights that Smith effectively created a new homeland constructed by poetry itself. Anne Chandler’s essay builds upon this idea, linking geographic consciousness and the politics therein to Smith’s landscape poetics, and investigating the concept of political virtue and the potential safety such virtue makes possible. Chandler explores the bifurcation of Smith’s rootedness and rootlessness, much to Knowles’s and Dolan’s points, and illustrates that such positionality alternatively strengthens or weakens a woman’s political—in other words, financial and social—safety.

In a fascinating expansion of the idea of political virtue, Lisa Vargo’s essay connects Smith’s children’s literature to the politics of domesticity and nature, predominantly through “the common” (137). Vargo creates the fitting term

“environmental domesticity” as a way of expressing Smith’s care for land while also understanding land as a place of economic exchange. In essence, Vargo argues that Smith saw the common as a place for people and nature to harmoniously coexist. Melissa Bailes’s essay draws the collection fully into Smith’s nature and aesthetics. Decisively illuminating Smith’s parody of Erasmus Darwin’s taxonomies in *The Loves of the Plants*, Bailes points out that Smith’s taxonomical ambiguities articulate her own displacement and marginal position within the patriarchal order. Bailes decisively asserts that Smith’s eco-sensibility poetry “opens possibilities for mysteries of place, with all its connotations, to be explored through direct knowledge, observations, and descriptions that provide empathy and respect for difference” (176). Bailes’s essay thus brings the collection squarely back around to Behrendt’s concept of multistability.

The collection shifts from eco-sensibility into the picturesque. Claiming that Smith’s picturesque often re-envisioned pastoral tropes of William Gilpin, Rachael Isom convincingly demonstrates that *Beachy Head* points to the limitations of the picturesque rather than its potential. Val Derbyshire’s essay takes this premise further, arguing that Smith emulated George Smith’s picturesque style, but that Smith conveyed not only nature’s sublimity but also its rot and decay. Like Isom, Derbyshire suggests that Smith included decay in her picturesque scenes as a means of exposing the vulnerable realities of rural poor and women.

Bringing the collection full circle, Amelia Worsley’s significant essay harkens back to Behrendt’s concept of multistability. Worsley demonstrates that *Beachy Head* is a composite of many places: it can be found in echoes of disparate landscapes, through other writers’ and artists’ tropes and ideas that Smith draws from, and through echoes back into Smith’s other works. Worsley asserts that such echoes continually produce new spaces and meanings throughout Smith’s large body of work, each building upon the others. Worsley also brilliantly illustrates that shells—objects that permeate many of Smith’s works—are themselves “boundary objects,” and are literal containers of echoes with the unique ability to move around the world through different elements. After all, Worsley argues, “Shells in Smith’s poetry function not only as symbols of solitary voices, but as spaces in which many solitary voices can find community” (244). Indeed, this collection continually locates Smith in various communities, often of her own creation.

While the essays in *Placing Charlotte Smith* find Smith in the eighteenth century, Judith Phillips Stanton’s epilogue finds Smith in the now. As the only editor of Smith’s letters, Stanton—in effect the originator of Smithian studies—discusses

the time travel inherent in such scholarship, especially in the implicit connection across the transtemporal and placement. To accomplish the gargantuan task of finding, transcribing, and annotating all of Smith's existent letters (as of 2003), Stanton locates Smith within the physical objects of the letters themselves while she simultaneously inhabits Smith's world through the remarkably complicated matter of transcription—which reveals Smith through what is on the page as readily as what isn't—and through the research necessary to understand and annotate the letters.

The collection ends with an important call to action: Stanton encourages scholars to reside inside authors' "original works and letters, to go and inhabit, however briefly, the places they lived in, the places their letters and original editions live today, and to place yourself back in their place and time" (274). In short, Stanton locates Smith in all areas of this collection—indeed, she finds Smith across minds—and encourages us to continue this valuable work.

While no volume can cover every potential aspect of its subject, *Placing Charlotte Smith* offers a comprehensive first step in locating Smith in her multiplicity. Some of the essays offer similar perspectives and frameworks, but I do not consider this a detriment. Dolan and Labbe foreground essays with far-reaching implications for eighteenth-century studies, and these are punctuated by essays that drill into the details of the new ideas at play, offering a spectrum of perspectives that mirror the multistability we find in Smith. Such similarities and differences in how one might see Smith encourages further scholarly reflection and strengthens one of the major goals of the collection: to find Smith widely, and to consider her many sides as a professional writer and a remarkable historical figure.

The collection has notable absences, including Smith's roles in economics, in more diverse social and financial ranks, in issues of race, and in queer placements, nor does it offer a thorough look at how and where Smith worked with men. Nevertheless, the collection offers an exceptional breadth of genres (plays, novels, long narrative poems, letters, children's literature, sonnets), finds Smith in a range of physical locations, foregrounds psychological (dis)placements within the cosmopolitan and natural worlds, and articulates the vital importance of community building.

Dolan and Labbe's wide-ranging yet cohesive collection of essays offers a comprehensive and convincing breadth that succeeds in its mission of placing Charlotte Smith. Beyond Smithian scholarship, the volume comes at a prescient time. Consider that the collection examines Smith's challenges as a woman living

in a place of legal, political, and social patriarchy. Consider also recent Supreme Court decisions with women's basic human rights increasingly precarious in the United States. This collection does important work that contributes to our growing map of Western historical pre- and proto-feminist ideas, and it offers a perspective on historical patterns that can inform current events and help us think through contemporary problems. As we consider Smith's multistability, we also have the opportunity to consider our own.

Placing Charlotte Smith finds a prismatic array of places that Smith inhabited and still inhabits today. This collection is an important addition to the current body of Smithian scholarship, and, perhaps more importantly, it offers context on contemporary problems around gender and oppression and scaffolds a way of thinking through our own multiplicities. It is a valuable contribution to eighteenth-century studies, and it succeeds in articulating the vital role of place in eighteenth-century studies.