



## *Romanticism on the Net*

### **Envisioning History: Helen Maria Williams' *Peru* and Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head***

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#### **Abstract**

The debate about the value of history and romance occupied a central place in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourses. Both historical and fiction writing aimed to provide narrative frameworks that would help explain the rapidly changing contexts of modernity and people's understanding of these changes. Although history was generally considered a male province, women writers incorporated historical material in their works to address social and political issues. This article discusses the uses of history in Helen Maria Williams' and Charlotte Smith's poetry, namely Williams' epic *Peru* (1784), later revised as *Peruvian Tales* (1823), and Smith's *Beachy Head* (1807). It focuses on how Williams and Smith used poetry as a vehicle to explore the connection between the past, the present, and the future by manipulating historical fact and evoking significant events as contemporaneous with the current political situation to address issues such as militarism, nationhood, and empire. It examines how Williams and Smith blurred the boundaries between the historical past and the present, while also merging the grand narrative of history with the little narratives of individual histories to negotiate the relationship between the two and interrogate the moral implications of progress.

#### **Biographical Note**

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1. This article will discuss how Romantic women writers Helen Maria Williams and Charlotte Smith rejected conventional linear historiography in their poetry: namely, in Williams' epic poem *Peru* (1784) and Smith's *Beachy Head* (1807). It will argue that both poets aim to interrogate the ends of history by using poetry as a medium and purposefully subsuming the grand historical narrative under the narrower focus of individual histories. Both poets use history to interpret the present through the past, seeking to reassess the moral value of progress by focusing on pertinent sociopolitical issues such as militarism, colonialism, and empire, and their effect on the lives of individuals. Angela Keane has discussed Williams and Smith in a comparative study, arguing that while both writers share the same historical moment their writerly approaches differ.<sup>1</sup> Keane's study touches upon Williams' and Smith's treatment of history in *Peru* and *Beachy Head* respectively, but rather in isolation. However, a comparison between the two poems reveals that both poets engage in a kind of historiography that challenges conventional historical narratives, which could be read as a response to the revolutionary climate in which they were writing. Significantly, despite the shared context, Keane points out, Smith's *Beachy Head* "looks towards and perhaps ... beyond Romanticism," while Williams places her works in the aesthetic and moral modes of the late eighteenth century (5-6). It is here that Williams' *Peru* and Smith's *Beachy Head* demonstrate a different attitude to historiography. Whereas Williams romanticizes history and tampers with historical fact to foreground the shattered lives of her characters, Smith collapses the totality of the grand narrative by focusing on geological minutiae, military artifacts, and discrete historical moments of political import, evoked as contemporaneous with the present. Moreover, Williams capitalizes on sentiment to render the events in mythic and empathic terms, while Smith combines lyricism and skepticism to show a

critical stance towards scientific and theoretical forms of inquiry. However, both stress the continuity of events and imply that conventional history writing fails to convey the complexities of individual everyday lives. The poems shift the focus to figures that are usually positioned at the margins of historical writing and foreground their stories as equally noteworthy as the overarching historical context. Significantly, the form of the two poems—*Peru*'s division into cantos, its subversion of the epic genre, and *Beachy Head*'s fragmentariness—also formally reinforces the fracturing of the grand narrative of history.<sup>2</sup> Employing poetry as a medium to communicate specific historical sensibilities, moreover, underscores the generic instability of historical narratives.

2. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle concluded that it was not the poet's concern to write about what had happened, but about what might have happened based on the principle of probability. Thus, the difference between the poet and the historian is not the form in which they are writing (verse and prose, respectively), but the fact that the poet writes about what might have happened, whereas the historian writes about what had actually happened (16). However, the boundaries between history and fiction, especially in eighteenth-century debates, are not clear cut, as historical fact was turned into malleable material for the conveyance of a truth that does not necessarily require empirical validation. In this light, history becomes an instrument to probe into the possible causes and underlying motivations behind events, whereby it also carries a didactic potential.<sup>3</sup>
3. During the eighteenth century, history became a major subject of inquiry, as the changing contexts of modernity necessitated a revision in how history was written and read.<sup>4</sup> Mark

Salber Phillips has pointed out that the scope of history was expanded beyond “the conventional narrative of politics,” that is the narrative of “the public actions of public men,” to incorporate the “social narrative that could stand beside and even subsume the conventional account of political action” (xii). This shift of perspective was provoked by “the social and sentimental interests of the age” and subsequently elicited a sympathetic, or sentimental, response on the reader’s part (xii). As Phillips argues, the social aspect of inquiry encompassed the reassessment of “the material and moral life of humankind,” as well as “the play of the passions and sentiments in the individual mind” (19). Such changing perceptions and approaches to history writing are of especial interest when considered in relation to women writers, as this allowed them to participate in historical discourse.<sup>5</sup> In this light, Greg Kucich has contended that women’s engagement in historical writing and their “historiographical innovations” gave rise to “an alternative or feminist historiography” that articulated their political views (36).

4. “Between 1760 and 1830,” Lisa Kasmer writes, “history writing provided a public forum for British women writers even though women’s political status was quite ambiguous” (5). Devoney Looser has noted that the uses of historical discourse by women writers were not homogenous, since they sought to achieve various aims, ranging “from direct engagement with political history, to the use of historical forms in letters or travel writing, to manipulation of historical material in historical works” (2). In the context of this argument, neither Williams nor Smith was a stranger to the blurring of boundaries between genres which Looser mentions. Williams wrote her famous political observations as letters and travelogues — for example, *Letters Written in France, in the Summer 1790* (1790) and *A*

*Tour in Switzerland* (1798). Likewise, in addition to her large corpus of novels and poetical works, Smith wrote instructional literature for young readers where she discussed natural history and history in works including *Minor Morals, Interspersed with Sketches of Natural History, Historical Anecdotes, and Original Stories* (1800) and *Conversations Introducing Poetry, Chiefly on Subjects of Natural History* (1804). These, of course, were not divested of the writers' underlying political sentiments and criticism. Lisa Kasmer, for example, has read Williams' *Letters* as a kind of "'regendering' of history," arguing that Williams "reimagin[es] history as a romantic narrative" to demonstrate "that history is not simply a list of public events but a process that should involve human sympathies" (71). Such a reading can be applied to Williams' *Peru* which would anticipate her approach in the *Letters*. Likewise, Smith, as Kucich has argued, used "affective historicism" in her *History of England* to address national matters and political reform (37). In this light, Kucich has also argued that women's revisionist approaches in the educational histories they wrote involve "a more affective view of the past" which "helped to shape a new historical consciousness more open to the social wrongs of the past and more committed to righting their persistence in the present" (44).

5. Against these readings of Williams' and Smith's prose works, it is noteworthy to call attention to how they embedded history in their poetry to pursue similar ends. It is significant that Williams and Smith employ poetry as a framework through which to present a type of historical consciousness that deviates from, and thus challenges, not only the methods of historical writing at the time, but also the general view of history as a prose narrative. Additionally, the inherent open-endedness of the poems destabilizes the linearity

and plot structure of historical events. This formal choice grants Williams and Smith greater poetic license and flexibility over how they could approach and exploit history as a subject. Moreover, it underscores historical thought as inevitably linked to creativity and the subjective choices that a historian, and also a writer, has to make in order to give shape to historical events in a particular narrative form and articulate a historical sense of the age.<sup>6</sup> The poems blur the boundaries between fact and fancy, universal and individual, public and private, to present a more comprehensive historical view that takes into account human character and experience, thus calling for a more humanistic treatment of historical events.

### **I. *Peru* (1784): History as Romance**

6. Originally published in 1784, *Peru, A Poem* recounts the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest of Peru, led by Francisco Pizarro.<sup>7</sup> The poem follows the events of Pizarro's arrival, the insurrection led by Manco Inca, in the poem referred to as Manco Capac, and Pizarro's rivalry with Diego de Almagro. But in re-writing the history of the fall of the Inca Empire, Williams does not adhere strictly to fact; instead, she takes liberties with history and romanticizes it to focus on the shattered lives of the Inca and criticize the conquistadors' ruthless thirst for power.<sup>8</sup> Despite her sound knowledge of the geography of Latin America,<sup>9</sup> which is also registered in the forms of notes, in Williams' description Peru is fashioned as a mythical place to create a sense of distancing in time, while the personification of nature strengthens the correlation between the land and its people and their gentle sensibilities.<sup>10</sup> This further emphasizes the contrast with the invading Spaniards

and becomes a touchstone against which to gauge the motivations and actions of the conquistadors. Williams' revisionist approach to historical thought could be juxtaposed with Enlightenment historians' general tendency to valorize a rational approach towards history writing, excluding figurative thought as fanciful.<sup>11</sup> The fact that Williams' sources are both historical and literary further strengthens her skeptical attitude towards history writing during the century.

7. In the advertisement to *Peru*, Williams briefly describes her engagement with history, writing that "the author has not had the presumption even to attempt a full, historical narration of the fall of the Peruvian empire" (49). "To describe that important event with accuracy," Williams continues, "and to display with clearness and force the various causes which combined to produce it, would require all the energy of genius, and the most glowing colours of imagination." Williams' comment suggests that historical thinking and imagination are not divorced from each other, thus implying that the former is not to be strictly governed by rationality despite conventional Enlightenment historians' belief in reason as a primary mode for historical thought. Williams indicates that she used those fragments of history that would serve as a backdrop to the romantic and sentimental, and also literary, elements of her story, since the poem aims to depict "the unparalleled sufferings of an innocent and amiable people, from the most affecting subjects of true pathos" (49). This shift of focus from the more public narrative of the fall of the Inca Empire to the private and emotional experience of the Peruvians is indicative of the change in perspective in historical writing towards a history that incorporates the moral and emotional aspects of human experience.<sup>12</sup> Williams deliberately eschews a grand historical

narrative to focus instead on the ethical aspect of war and colonization, as well as on the moral character of the conquerors and the conquered. In this light, Paula R. Feldman has astutely pointed out that Williams' revision of the epic imparts a "more humane focus" to "the ancient, and often bloodthirsty, genre" (20).

8. In the poem, collective history and individual history merge to reveal the ramifications of war, imperialism and colonialism, both on the public plane and the private plane, as Williams seeks to expose the inhumanness behind European ambitions for power and expansion.<sup>13</sup> Alan Richardson has discussed *Peru* in relation to the ambivalent attitude towards imperialism found in epic poetry of the Romantic period expressed through generic subversions via the interpolation of elements of romance and critique of Western imperialist practices (266-267). Richardson has read Williams' "turn to romance" as a "self-consciously feminine, domestic rhetoric with which she frames her condemnation of imperialist violence" (267). Although Williams bases the plot of her poem on historical accounts, she deviates from her sources, offering an alternative reading;<sup>14</sup> she changes perspectives and manipulates historical fact to underscore the ethical dimension of her project. Feldman, for example, has noted that Williams "evidences a strategic and selective use of historical texts in her poetic adaptation" (59n1). Such strategies are observed in her presentation of Ataliba and the inclusion of Las Casas in the temporal framework. Moreover, Williams' poem eludes a totalizing narrative, which is formally consolidated by its division into separate cantos, each of which has a specific focus. This method becomes even more evident when in 1823 Williams refashions the cantos into tales for *Peruvian Tales*. Each tale in the revised edition focuses on a female heroine, whereby Williams also



articulates a feminist stance as she lays specific emphasis on each of the suffering female subjects.<sup>15</sup>

9. Williams' approach of transposing the present into the past is registered by a tendency to mythologize the Inca Empire before the Spanish invasion. The beginning of the poem immediately foregrounds Peru as a paradisiacal place, the embodiment of virtue, innocence, and concord.<sup>16</sup> Williams praises its natural state of liberty, communicating a utopian vision of its past:

Nor less, Peruvia, for thy favour'd clime  
The virtues rose, unsullied, and sublime:  
There melting charity, with ardor warm,  
Spread her wide mantle o'er th' unshelter'd form;  
Cheer'd with the festal song, her lib'ral toils,  
While in the lap of age she pour'd the spoils. (I. 41-46)

Williams combines her knowledge of the natural resources of the land with her romanticized idea of it as a remote, uncorrupted place. The simplicity and profusion of the land show it as "unsullied" by modern civilization. This image is further strengthened by the presence of the mythic "meek nymph" (I. 48) as a presiding nature deity. The salutary propensities of the Peruvian climate are signified through the allusions to "The balsam [which] ever drops a rich perfume" (I. 14), the "balmy dew-drops" (I. 18), and "the health-diffusing plant," by which "Disease, and pain, and hov'ring death retires" (I. 19-20). The

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land is described as an exotic pastoral setting where humans and nature live in harmony. Moreover, it is evoked as existing outside a fixed historical framework. Williams configures the land, that “gentle region” (I. 51), as a metaphorical expression of the character of the Incas: the richness of Peruvian nature figuratively represents the spirituality of the place and its people. Peru is a “sweet scene, to all the virtues kind” (V. 1). The sensibilities of the Incas are symbolically rendered through the description of the flora and fauna: “the plaintive humming-bird” (I. 29) becomes a symbol of the social sympathies, as it “seeks with fond delight the social nest / Parental care has rear’d, and love has blest” (I. 35-36).<sup>17</sup> The virtues of domestic love and communal bonding are praised as inherent to the Incas, as everyone is part of Nature’s “works of love” (I. 40). This perennial idyll is broken “When sudden clamour the illusion broke” (I. 141) and the fear-inspiring ship of the conquistadors is seen on the mains. Williams as poet prophesies the fall of the Peruvian empire and the state of innocence from the perspective of her stance in the future, thus picturing the events as anticipated rather than already realized:

Peruvia! oh delightful land, in vain  
The virtues flourish’d on thy beauteous plain;  
In vain sweet pleasure there was seen to move,  
And wore the smile of peace, the bloom of love;  
For soon shall burst the unrelenting storm,  
Rend her soft robe, and crush her tender form:  
Peruvia! soon the fatal hour shall rise,  
The hour despair shall waste in tears and sighs;

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Fame shall record the horrors of thy fate,  
And distant ages weep for ills so great. (I. 127-136)

As the lines suggest, Peru would be transformed from a mythical prelapsarian place into one of violence, bloodshed, and despair, whose tragic story the poem will transmit to future generations by memorializing it. Invested with a feminine mythical quality, Peruvia is portrayed as a maiden, soon to be ravished by the Spanish invaders and their masculine energies, which embody Western hegemony.<sup>18</sup> Nature physically suffers the violence inflicted by the conquistadors – the invasion of the Spanish is described as a sickness: “While buried deep in everlasting shade, / Those lustres sicken, and those blossoms fade” (III. 9-10).<sup>19</sup> In addition to personifying the land and its virtues, Nature collectively embodies the terror of the people and the suffering inflicted by the conquering foe: as one reads in Canto V, for example, “O’er the fair valley sudden darkness throws / A hideous horror; thro’ the wounded air / Howl’d the shrill voice of nature in despair” (V. 82-84).

10. The present in the temporality of the poem is one wrecked by war, struggle, and the conflict between Western nations as the aggressor and the indigenous Other as the innocent victim of worldly appetites. As part of Williams’ turn to a narrative that focuses on the moral principles of humankind, *Peru* relies on popular binary strategies to emphasize the difference between the South Americans as the victims and the Spaniards as the victimizers, thus reinforcing the moral disparity between the two. The Incan emperor Ataliba is described as having a “pure and gen’rous heart,” in which “[t]he virtues bloom’d without the aid of art” (I. 63-64), and is possessed with “native grace” in battle (II. 11).

Under his rule Peru enjoys the “lib’ral ray / Of mercy” (I. 61-62). In contrast, the Spanish conquistador Pizarro is “stern” (II. 2) and is an embodiment of hypocrisy and avarice. Importantly, it is in the description of Ataliba that Williams’ uses of history begin to waver so as to enhance the emotional impact of her poem. Richardson has discussed Williams’ deviation from historical fact in the portrayal of the Incan leader: “Williams,” he writes, “strategically elides the background material supplied in her principal historical sources” (269). Williams imagines Ataliba as a paternal figure and so circumvents his portrayal in the sources as an arrogant leader. As Feldman’s comprehensive footnotes to her edition of Williams’ poems show, Ataliba (or Atahualpa as he appears in Williams’ sources) is described as vicious and selfish (53n2).<sup>20</sup> Williams’ poetic license with her historical material on the Incan emperor is a strategic move which evinces her dualistic approach. Her romanticized portrayal of Ataliba seeks to cement the figurative correspondence between land, ruler, and nation, as his virtuous character is a reflection of the virtues of Peruvian nature.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, the Spaniards are described in demonic terms: they are “[t]he fiends of slaughter” (II. 33), “a fiercer fiend” that “Feasts on thy [Peru’s] suff’rings (III. 13, 14), and are associated with “fanatic fury” (III. 15); they are “the hostile sons of Spain” (III. 16), “Iberia’s ruthless sons” (V. 53), who “Roll the stern eye, and shake the pointed lance” (V. 54), they are “the destroying band . . . / come to plant despair” (V. 55, 58).

11. This juxtaposition between figures who embody moral ideals and those who embody the imperialist thirst for power is further demonstrated by Williams’ reshaping of historical fact and reframing of the temporality of historical events. Williams introduces figures that are absent from historical records of the events she narrates.<sup>22</sup> One such figure is Las Casas,

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who is described in Williams' footnote as "that amiable Ecclesiastic, who obtained by his humanity the title of Protector of the Indies" (Feldman 66n). His placement in the narrative is key as he serves as a foil to the fanaticism and cruelty of Vicente de Valverde and allows Williams to eschew severe censure against Catholicism. In the poem, Las Casas is a messianic figure who embodies the Christian virtues, unlike Valverde who despite being a man of God is described as the opposite of what his faith preaches:<sup>23</sup>

Fanatic fury wakes the rising storm—  
She wears the stern Valverda's hideous form;  
His bosom never felt another's woes,  
No shriek of anguish breaks its dark repose. (II. 27-30)

The lines clearly show Valverde's lack of human sympathy. The reason why Williams decided to disrupt the chronology of the events may be explained by the fact that Bartolomé de Las Casas was a political reformer who promoted the abolition of slavery in Latin America and also wrote against the cruelty and oppression of the Spanish aggressors. Placing him at the heart of the events that ultimately led to the subjugation of the Incas reinforces Williams' critique against the injustice of colonization. Moreover, this revisionist gesture strengthens her design to turn the attention to the moral character of different individuals and the motives behind their actions, thus stressing particularity over abstraction and the overarching moral and sentimental thrust of the poem.<sup>24</sup>

12. That the historical event of the Conquest of Peru should serve as an example to future generations is iterated in the closing lines of the first canto. With historical hindsight, Williams ventriloquizes personified Peruvia, who as presiding genius loci deplors the unjust fate of her land:

My sad prophetic soul can pierce the gloom;  
I see, I see my lov'd, my favour'd clime,  
Consum'd, and fading in its early prime.  
But not in vain the beauteous realm shall bleed,  
Too late shall Europe's race deplore the deed. (I. 168-172)

The lines communicate a sense of anteriority and a haunting presence of history as a lesson to be understood at a later stage, which also underpins the sense of historical continuity. Peruvia is depicted as the embodiment of sensibility as she laments the profuse natural resources of the country, those “guilty treasures” (I. 180), which the conquistadors want to exploit—“the lost Peruvia’s bleeding land” (I. 179). The fact that Williams stresses avarice as a principal cause for the Spanish invasion already indicates the ethical issues that lie at the heart of the poem and that partake of the reframing of narrative history to one oriented towards the social function of historical writing.

13. In the final Canto VI, Williams returns to her prophetic role, thus framing her poem as a vision. Sensibility descends to illuminate the “dark horrors of the raging storm” (VI. 215).

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Significantly, the image of Williams as poet and that of sensibility merge. The prophecy is shaped as an anterior past:

“But, lo! where bursting desolation’s night,  
A sudden ray of glory cheers my sight;  
From my fond eye the tear of rapture flows,  
My heart with pure delight exulting glows (VI. 319-322)

The “ray of glory” foreshadows Williams’ more immediate present and the potential for freedom, inspired by the 1780s rebellions for independence led by Túpac Amaru II. Jessica Damián has indicated that “[b]y collapsing a sense of linear time,” Williams “summons the political insurrections of the 1780s while anchoring Peru’s historical timeframe within the Spanish conquest of the 1530s” (para 15). This dislocated temporality also helps Williams distance herself to assume the role of the poet-prophet so as to reinforce her historical vision of the past and the present, as well as her critique. The poem imagines the end of the Spanish rule: “see Iberia bleeds! while vict’ry twines / Her fairest blossoms round Peruvia’s shrines” (VI. 327-328). Williams’ use of prophecy as the vehicle for her views is not insignificant, as the approach brings together the past and the future at the moment of utterance. Moreover, prophecy as a *topos* was to inform many of the revolutionary writings in the 1790s, thus reconciling political with biblical discourse.<sup>25</sup> Williams’ prophecy offers a prognosis of the future of the Inca and their independence, but this remains in the purview of vision. As she points out in an accompanying note: “An Indian descended from the Incas [Túpac Amaru II], has lately obtained several victories over the Spaniards [...] and there

is much reason to hope, that these injured nations may recover the liberty of which they have been so cruelly deprived” (Feldman 96n2). The ending of the poem hopefully wishes for the reinstatement of freedom, peace, and innocence. Williams’ gaze is turned to the future, envisioning the recuperation of the land through the liberation from “lawless power” (VI. 332). The physical rejuvenation of Peru presents a view of tyranny as disease, cured by the salubrious powers of freedom and peace. Williams implicitly impersonates the Muse, wistfully looking forward to Peru’s “future triumphs o’er unnumber’d shores” (VI. 356), whereby the narrative of the sixteenth-century colonization of the Incas reveals itself as a vehicle to bridge the gap between past, present, and future, with poetry as the medium to facilitate such an affinity and to perpetuate Peru’s deeds and struggle for freedom. Commenting on *Peru* years later in *A Tour in Switzerland* (1798), Williams wrote that the poem expressed her wish to see the liberation of that nation — “that the natives of that once happy country might regain their freedom” — which was yet to occur in the annals of mankind. Importantly, this wish was more of a “dream of fancy” rather than being “founded on any solid basis of hope” (vol. I. 127). In that sense, the future in the poem is an imagined ideal and open to conjecture, further underpinned by the poem’s open ending.

## **II. *Beachy Head* (1807): Fragments of History**

14. In her study, Angela Keane has observed that in *Beachy Head* there are traces of Williams’ vacillation between the grand narrative voice of male historians and the ethical voice of female historians, which is further complicated by Smith’s use of various “narrative voices” and “historicist discourses” (59). This multiplicity is clearly part of Smith’s attempt



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to fracture the totality of the grand narrative and show its heterogeneous nature. Smith's approach combines a view of history both from above and from below, as she oscillates between the historical past and the local present, focusing on the lives of Sussex country folk. The poem conflates visions of history: that is, the grand narrative of the past and the accounts of natural history, with the small narratives of the place and its inhabitants. Jacqueline M. Labbe has pointed out that the poem offers "a staggering array of layers, exploring history, science, literature and memory; the past, present and future" (6). In addition to this multifaceted nature, the poem addresses social issues such as the corrupting influence of mercantilism and imperialism, portraying the age as one governed by appetites for dominance and expansion. Smith stresses the continuity between past and present by drawing parallels between the present, fraught with the fear of military invasion by France, and a past marked by large-scale battles and conquests, showing history as following a circular movement.

15. Writing on Smith's poem, Theresa M. Kelley has read *Beachy Head* as a response to the "grand march of history," which, she argues, Smith aimed to destabilize (287). Kelley writes that the poem "dramatizes an impasse in Romantic historiography," produced by the clashing historical models which Smith sought to consolidate: that is, the broader, collective model, and the small-scale, regional model (287, 288). Clearly, this articulates Smith's skeptical view towards a totality of history and the attempts at a comprehensive historical account which historical writing sought to provide. Smith fluctuates between the broader and smaller planes in order to underscore the repetitive nature of historical contingency, on the one hand, and, on the other, to examine the idiosyncrasies of the locale

and its inhabitants, their motives and character, as well as the influence of the socio-political climate on their actions. Her myopic focus on minutiae and fossils that disturbs the historical account of past battles and invasions seeks to fracture historical linearity, further strengthened by the multiple vignettes that constitute the poem's fabric. Like Williams, as the previous section discussed, Smith foregrounds the personal narratives of the locals to emphasize the importance of individual history. In addition, she interpolates her own personal narrative as a native of the region to strengthen the importance of personal histories within the overarching historical contexts. Discussing Smith's "topographical poetics," Kevis Goodman has rightly suggested that Smith attempts to read the locale of Beachy Head "as simultaneously local and global" (986). "This exploration," Goodman continues, "involves her in a revisionary understanding of the nature in natural history as a part of an overall historical process that includes human history no less than any other, and not as an unchanging stratum above which social and political processes happen" (986). Although Goodman's comment here focuses on the figurations of nature, it also points to history being construed by the interrelatedness between the different discourses that constitute it. The geology of the place and its history comprehensively accommodate past, present, and, by extension, future. According to Smith's historical sense, the past and the present are contemporaneous, as the present still carries the vestiges and memories of the past, which, as she implies, can be used to teach a lesson, and which her poetic vision consolidates. This is also what Williams' *Peru* does but by inverting the pattern, as her approach transplants the present into a past framework to disturb the linearity of historical events and question the notion of history as following a linear trajectory.

16. Smith's positioning in the poem is of particular significance to her role as a poet-historian:<sup>26</sup> she appropriates the prospect view in an attempt to construct a narrative based on a vision grounded in the material context of the region and its historical background.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, this elevated position situates her at a distance which mirrors Smith's critical distancing. The abrupt opening of the poem shows the speaker situated on a precipice, ready to transcend the limitations of the physical, and by extension the material aspect of history: "On thy stupendous summit, rock sublime! [. . .] / I would recline; while Fancy should go forth, / And represent the strange and awful hour / Of vast concussion" (1, 4-6). This nod to an atemporal existence suggested by Smith's enlarged vision already challenges the perception of historical narrative as strictly bounded in time. Smith's approach differs from that of Williams, who, as the previous section indicated, uses her imagination to romanticize the past and prophetically address the future: if Williams brought the present into the past in *Peru*, here Smith brings the past into the present. The fact that fancy is Smith's driving principle merits attention since it suggests the potential of the imagination to reconstitute the historical past. Giving freedom to her poetic vision, Smith's imaginative flight overrides the limits of time and space, plunging into history and the separation of the British Isles from the European continent: "when the Omnipotent / Stretch'd forth his arm, and rent the solid hills . . . and from the continent / Eternally divided this green isle" (6-10). Smith points to a geological past when both countries belonged to the same terra firma. Smith's explanatory notes provide brief information on the geological formation of the two countries, tracing the differences and speculating about the possible validity of the geologic idea that England was once part of the European continent (217n2). This questioning of geological theories is observed repeatedly in the poem and registers

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Smith's interrogation of theories which challenges abstract philosophical thinking to underscore the importance of a more particularized history of human existence.<sup>28</sup>

17. In the poem, Smith emphatically references important political events to blur the boundaries of the local past and its present, which serves an instructive purpose. The Norman Conquest is evoked as a climactic point that terminated the glorious and judicious reign of the Anglo-Saxons: the battle lost notwithstanding the strong opposition, the Isles "saw the Saxon heptarchy / Finish for ever" (137-38). From the vantage point of the present, the lines mask an uneasiness that England might suffer defeat in a possible coup de main with France, thus stressing the continuity of historical events. Matthew Bray has argued that Smith's evocation of the Norman Conquest of Anglo-Saxon England is instrumental since it invites associations with England's demise and apprehends a possible "second French conquest by Napoleon" (156). This is strengthened not only by the lines describing the Norman Conquest, which underscore the country's threatened position, but also by the allusions to Italy's and Spain's yielding to Napoleon during the Wars. The parallel between past and anticipated future fulfils an instructive purpose, as it serves as a warning that history might repeat itself, as does the allusion to the Battle of Beachy Head in 1690 during the Nine Years' War.<sup>29</sup> The lines capitalize on the popular fear of invasion that had gripped the nation during the proximity of the French after their naval triumph. As Goodman writes, "The place's past adumbrates that past's future in the present" (989).

18. It is apposite to mention that Smith begins her excursions in the annals of history by presenting her mind as a vast repository of knowledge, and herself as the embodiment of reflection:

Contemplation here,  
High on her throne of rock, aloof may sit,  
And bid recording Memory unfold  
Her scroll voluminous—bid her retrace  
The period, when from Neustria's hostile shore  
The Norman launch'd his galleys, and the bay  
O'er which that mass of ruin frowns even now  
In vain and sullen menace, then received  
The new invaders; . . . (117-125)

Smith presents human consciousness, and not material records, as a purveyor of historical truth, thus stressing the important role of the poet in historiography. As the previous paragraph pointed out, Smith draws a parallel between the political tension between England and France and a historical event resembling the current state of affairs, which implies a circular movement of history. The note that accompanies that vignette is of particular interest, as it provides a concise account of the historical circumstances to which the poem alludes. The historical factual information appears only as paratextual material and is in this way subsumed under the major narrative which the poem constitutes. Although Smith is painstakingly meticulous about annotating the poem to demonstrate her

erudition, it is the poet's imagination that is foregrounded. In this light, the concepts of memory and contemplation are central to the idea of history in *Beachy Head* and the role of the poet's imagination: they narrow the gap between past and present, thus making them occupy the same temporal plane, as constructed in the poetic speaker's consciousness, which she then verbalizes aesthetically. Sarah Zimmerman has noted that in the poem "Memory" and "Contemplation" are "the vehicles of both personal and social history," arguing that by embodying contemplation Smith "raises social questions," whereas "Memory" is associated with her historical accounts (64). Importantly, both of these "facilitate social consciousness" (65). By embodying these two concepts, Smith provides an alternative narrative to the one based on empirical evidence. Instead, empirical evidence is continually questioned and shown as limited, whereas theoretical conjectures are dismissed as far removed from the concerns of common people's reality.<sup>30</sup> Smith's skeptical attitude articulates a view according to which history is discursive rather than systematic, which her misgivings about scientific and theoretical knowledge adumbrate.

19. It is early in the poem that Smith presents the social consciousness that informs her vision and introduces her critique of British imperialism through the lens of the local context. Looking at the distance, the speaker marks the course of "[t]he ship of commerce richly freighted ... / Bound to the orient climates" (42, 44). The ship is described as a "dubious spot" (40), which implies its "morally suspect" position to underpin the mercantile ends of imperialism. Kari Lokke has similarly argued that the ship of commerce's description as a "dubious spot" "calls forth meditations on imperial exploitation and human slavery practiced by those who value 'gaudes and baubles' over the 'sacred freedom' of their fellow

men” (46). Smith alludes to Indian trade and exploitation of labor, by presenting a catalogue of riches, aiming to censure British colonialist mindset and the policies that favor such inhuman practices: “There the Earth hides within her glowing breast / ... the round pearl ... / which the slave, / With perilous and breathless toil, tears off / From the rough sea-rock, deep beneath the waves” (50-54).

20. Smith’s critique of the underside of imperialism is also furthered by the description of the contraband activity that was taking place on the coast. Smith observes a peasant who “Quit[s] for this / Clandestine traffic his more honest toil” (182-83). Smuggling is described as a “perilous trade” (188) and a “commerce of destruction” (190). McGavran has noted that Smith “deplores the clandestine activity, contrasting it with the moral freedom of an innocent shepherd and his ‘industrious mate’” (24). The latter are “more happy” (193) in their “human labour” (192) and “independent hut” (195). Smith validates this picture by providing a note which asserts her familiarity with the illegal transactions of the Sussex locals provoked by excise laws, the ban on imports from France, and the heavy taxes on imported commodities that were reinforced as a result of the political conflicts with France and the need for government revenue.<sup>31</sup> In describing the scene of “clandestine traffic” (183) and juxtaposing it with the honest labour of uncorrupted folk, Smith narrows the scope to the particularized context of the locale while also gauging the moral principles of individuals, at the same time voicing her socio-political criticism of England’s imperialist ideologies that extend their power in regions outside urban dissipation. The march of progress, Smith implies, inevitably induces underprivileged members of society to resort to illegal means of sustenance.

21. In addition to this contemporary socio-historical context, Smith calls attention to the past's conspicuous presence in the present. In the poem Smith alternates scenes of historical warfare with present-day local life, juxtaposing times of violence and death with rustic simplicity. Smith uses the allusions to military conflicts to impart an anti-war critique, dismissing ambition as inhumane, whereas records of military history are denounced as "the nothingness of all" (420). Likewise, the past, as a collective repository, contains the relics of individuals long gone (419-434). The memory of the grand narrative of battles and conquests is intertwined with the vestiges of personal histories of unheroic figures. Time effaces and at the same time preserves collective and individual history, showing their close ties. The land carries the memory of the unscrupulous pirate and the gentle native, warrior and savage, thus cancelling the differences that social hierarchy would have imposed. Such individuals might be missing from the narratives of history but Smith evokes them to living memory through her imagination, as she uses it to reconstruct the past into the present. Such temporal continuity is also illustrated by the bucolic image of "an humbler homestead" (502) incorporated in the grand historical vignettes, with the flock of sheep substituted for the "armed foeman" (503). This demonstrates Smith's emphasis on the individual histories of common people, whereby she subverts the general narrative of political history. Moreover, the past, Smith demonstrates, is literally embedded in the topography of the place and its traces are evident in the present. The remnants of historical warfare are still discernible in the present, serving as a memorial of bloodshed and destruction: one reads about "the ruin'd battlements / Of that dismantled fortress" (496-497) and later, "In rude disorder fallen, and hid with brushwood / Lay fragments gray of



towers and buttresses” (508-509). The ruins of war creep into the present to remind of the inevitability of death and decay, as well as the hovering external threats over which the individual holds no power. This diminishes the strict separation of the past from the present and emphasizes their continuity.

22. The focus on minute particulars and traces of the past in the present is further demonstrated by Smith’s contemplation of fossils and minutiae (368-389), which has drawn especial critical attention. Anne D. Wallace has pointedly argued that “Beachy Head’s fossils evoke not only the general range of geological controversies, but specifically, ... the deepening temporal description of the earth’s history, and the accompanying possibilities for epistemological uncertainty” (87). This uncertainty could be read as a deliberate destabilization of abstract knowledge, as theoretical thinking is far removed from the daily lives of simple folk: scientific discovery is shown as “vain” and not providing ultimate truths, “little light its flame yet lends / To its most ardent votaries (391-392). The origin of the fossils is “but conjecture, / Food for vague theories, or vain dispute” (393-394) and unknown to the peasant whose focus is his “daily task” (395). Smith’s reluctance to associate the fossils with any existing contemporary theory but rather to imagine their origins defies the search for a concrete explanation, which is shown as having no value in the context of ordinary men’s lives. The fossils rather evoke the continuity of history as vestiges of the past, buried in the soil along the remains of warriors and “the remains of men, of whom is left / No traces in the records of mankind” (402-403), thus creating a kind of temporal cohesion between the past and its presence in the present. Moreover, it gestures

towards the absence of ordinary men in historical records, which Smith fills by virtue of stressing this very absence in her poem.

23. In light of the discussion, the form of the poem as a fragment is not to be ignored. The poem was allegedly left unfinished and “not completed according to the original design,” as the preface states (215). Whether Smith intended to conclude her poem ‘properly’ and not end it with the death of the hermit figure is open to conjecture. The poem is, as John M. Anderson dubbed it, “an elliptical and self-referential collage,” or a “fragment of fragments, fashioning a mosaic of broken tiles” (551). Reading the poetic fragment in relation to historical totality raises the question whether historical events can be interpreted in isolation, as the public discourse of history is inevitably linked with the more private sphere of individuals and their lives. Furthermore, the poem’s fragmentariness leaves the poem to a continual reading and interpretation, or to a perpetual open-endedness. Compared to the conclusive structure of traditional historical writing, the poem aesthetically challenges history as a narrative with clear beginning and ending. What both Williams’ and Smith’s poems adumbrate is a view of historical time as cyclical, at the same time challenging conventional views of history writing by showing that historical thought is not purely rational but also involves imaginative vision in order to communicate the complexities of human existence.

24. As this article aimed to show, history in Williams’ *Peru* and Smith’s *Beachy Head* is evoked not as the exclusive totalizing account of a grand narrative, but as including the small narratives of individuals, which the classical understanding of history writing tends

to ignore. Williams and Smith express a concern that traditional methods of history writing fail to provide a narrative that encompasses the particularities of humanity and everyday life, offering the poetic form as an alternative that has the capacity to synthesize multiple narratives and voices. Both poems register a shift in the conceptualization of history towards a Romantic one that bridges the temporal gap between past, present, and future, revealing them as contemporaneous and contained in one another. Both poets articulate the significance of the poet's gaze in (en)visioning the intricate relationship of these temporalities.

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<sup>1</sup> Angela Keane, *Revolutionary Women Writers*, 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> For a commentary on Williams' use of the epic, see Feldman's edition of *Peru and Peruvian Tales*, 18-20.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion on the changing perspectives in history writing, see Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*. I am indebted to Lisa Kasmer's *Novel Histories* for leading me to Phillips and his research on eighteenth-century historiography.

<sup>4</sup> Phillips, xii.

<sup>5</sup> See Kasmer, 155.

<sup>6</sup> White, x. For a discussion on the writing of history and the various strategies and modes that historians employ, see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> The edition used is the 1786 edition of the poem in *Peru and Peruvian Tales*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Feldman discusses Williams' sources in her introduction, 21-25. Importantly, Williams' sources are both historical and literary, which shows the interrelationship between fact and imagination.

<sup>9</sup> Jessica Damián has pointed out: "After studying and translating thousands of manuscript pages of Humboldt's *Vues des Cordillères, et Monumens des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique* (1814), and the *Relation historique du Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* (1814-29), Williams became more than a participant in the production of a Latin American literary culture in the 1800s; she was one of its chief exponents," (para 2).

<sup>10</sup> Also Feldman, 29-30.

<sup>11</sup> White, 49-50.

<sup>12</sup> For Keane's account of the relation between history, morality, and emotion in Williams' poem, see 70-71.

<sup>13</sup> See Feldman, 19, 21; Richardson, 267.

<sup>14</sup> See note 8.

<sup>15</sup> For a commentary on Williams' revisions, see Feldman, 20-21.

<sup>16</sup> See Feldman, 29.

<sup>17</sup> See Feldman, 29-32; Damián, para 14.

<sup>18</sup> Also Feldman, 26.

<sup>19</sup> See also Damián, para 14.

<sup>20</sup> Feldman writes, "Whereas HMW portrays Ataliba as a latent Christian, whose very reverence makes him lose his grip on the Bible, Robertson has the Peruvian emperor aggressively desecrate the book: "The Inca opened it eagerly, and turning over the leaves, lifted it to his ear: 'This,' says he, 'is silent; it tells me nothing'; and threw it with disdain to the ground" (II: 175)," 59n1.

<sup>21</sup> Damián has noted that Ataliba's affinity with the Sun as the Inca deity naturally posits him as "the embodiment of the natural world," writing that "Ataliba reflects" the land which he rules, which "link[s] Ataliba to the social and environmental realms of Perú" (para 12).

<sup>22</sup> Feldman, 66n1; Keane, 80.

<sup>23</sup> Feldman, 30, 33-35.

<sup>24</sup> See Feldman, 33-34.

<sup>25</sup> See Orianne Smith, *Romantic Women Writers, Revolution, and Prophecy: Rebellious Daughters, 1786-1826* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Theresa M. Kelley has written that Smith's voice in the poem differs from her various enactments of subjectivities and her autobiographical persona in *Elegiac Sonnets* and instead "competes with a grander voice of the historian whose reach goes back in space and time to the geological beginning of the site," 297.

<sup>27</sup> Writing on Smith's use of the prospective view, Kari Lokke argues that "[t]he political, moral and historical lessons learned from Smith's prospect are [. . .] far different from those taught by the traditional, reassuring eighteenth-century prospect poem," 46. See also Jacqueline M. Labbe, "Charlotte Smith, *Beachy Head*." *A Companion to Romanticism*, ed. by Duncan Wu, (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1999) 221-227.

<sup>28</sup> See Goodman, 986, 991.

<sup>29</sup> Also Goodman, 988, 989.

<sup>30</sup> See Wallace, 79, 83.

<sup>31</sup> See McGavran 24, 26.