Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784) marked a turning point in the revival of the sonnet in the late eighteenth century. Today, Smith is regarded as a poet who was not only “[i]nfluential among her contemporaries” but who influenced both canonical and non-canonical writers of the sonnet in the Romantic period and beyond (Curran xix). Returning to the formal and stylistic characteristics of the sonnet that she adapts from the Italian sonnet’s medieval originator, Petrarch, Smith blends aesthetic and formal features of the elegy with the sonnet in her works. Critics, including Mary Moore, have argued that Smith’s adaptations suggest that she primarily employs the sonnet form to establish poetic authority in her collection, *Elegiac Sonnets* (150-51), but Smith has more radical proto-feminist artistic goals in mind. As Stuart Curran has argued, “a historical understanding of the cult of feeling and a contemporary feminism should allow readers
two centuries later a more sophisticated grasp of the personal and cultural dynamics at work” (xxv).

Scholarship has largely focused on the personal traumas Smith endured and the influence these life events had on Smith’s writing. As the letters of Smith demonstrate, she wrote under enormous personal, legal, and financial strains.1) While the extreme personal trauma Smith endured remains an important context for understanding her art, it should not distract us from considering how Smith’s literary hybridity in the *Elegiac Sonnets* advances her aesthetic of suffering, which influenced her choice of these forms. Smith wanted, above all, to establish a new discourse focused on pain: suffering as art.

As Christopher Stokes reminds readers, scholars have long dwelled on Smith’s life and speculated about her mental states, which he believes generated the “crushing melancholy” of the *Elegiac Sonnets*. This work in particular has often been seen as reflecting “a specifically female condition” (Stokes 143), with arguments by Stokes, Jacqueline Labbe, Kathryn Pratt, Deborah Kennedy, Elizabeth Dolan, and Sarah Zimmerman to varying degrees arguing that the sonnets interrogate Smith’s personal experiences of “womanhood.” While recognizing the importance of Smith’s life to her art, I wish primarily to consider the aesthetic treatment of same-sex desire in the *Elegiac Sonnets*. Drawing on the classical tradition, in which the poet woos the muse, urging

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1) Smith’s extensive correspondence, particularly with family members, have often led many critics to examine her works almost entirely in relation to her personal struggles. See Judith Phillips Stanton’s *The Collected Letters of Charlotte Smith*. 