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The Politics of the Observer: Envisioning a Better Citizen in Charlotte Smith's *Conversations Introducing Poetry*

Charlotte Smith's final children's book, *Conversations Introducing Poetry* (1804), follows the Talbot children as they observe animals in their natural habitats, discuss what they see with their mother, and, through observation and discussion, become increasingly attuned to the value of animal life. Combining dialogues in prose with poems that the Talbots recite to the animals they encounter, Smith's book asks its child readers to observe and understand nature as it really appears and also, almost paradoxically, to anthropomorphize animals by applying what they learn to their burgeoning understanding of human social life. *Conversations Introducing Poetry* serves as a culmination of interests Smith develops throughout her oeuvre in social reform, morality, and the political potential of sympathy. She develops what I call the politics of the observer, a method of occupying and observing one's natural habitat that develops one's sympathy and sense of community, which lays the groundwork for civic participation.

I argue that Smith emphasizes the ethical and political dimensions of observing animals and thus reimagines citizenship to include domestic and natural spaces. The child characters, and in turn the child readers, come to understand how to sympathize with animals, which the book indicates can lead to both the end of animals' mistreatment as well as the awareness of mistreatment and injustice in society. Smith's re-visioning of the boundaries between the human and the non-human, the domestic and the civic, the moral and the political, demonstrate that all of these categories are inextricably fused in her vision of the ideal citizen. Smith envisions children's future citizenship as being particularly attuned to all of these spaces and, through their empathetic understanding and newly developed sense of political engagement, committed to observing others' needs and ending their suffering.