Smooth Words in Sedgwick’s “Letter to Charles Butler,” and Oakes Smith's "The Dignity of Labor"

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Last fall I got an email from Pat Kalayjian, who had seen the name “Elizabeth Oakes Smith” near that of Catherine Maria Sedgwick on the list of women invited to attend Farnum and Sheffield’s Great Excursion. Knowing my passion for all things Oakes Smith, she invited me to submit an abstract for this symposium, and I did, confident that Oakes Smith—who seemed to never have experienced anything in life without publishing something about it in a newspaper—would have had something interesting to say about it. After some weeks of research, I was surprised to find barely any mention of Oakes Smith in articles about the Excursion, and nothing by her about it. Finally, when I read in the preface to Steven J. Keillor’s book-length account of the event from 2004 that he had searched, but found neither correspondence nor writing on the Excursion by New Yorkers Caroline Kirkland and Elizabeth Oakes Smith, I began to worry some. My wife kidded me that if this kept up, mine was going to be a pretty short paper. At last I caught what I thought was a break—a citation to a book called Mr. Farnam’s Guests by Dick Stahl, in the middle of which we find a poem entitled “Elizabeth Oakes Smith Speaks from the Hurricane Deck.” The poem itself might provide a clue for me, I thought, and I’d email the poet to see what he knew about Oakes Smith on the Excursion. Perhaps he’d know which steam boat she was on, at least. But of course, when I finally got an email to Mr. Stahl through his publishers in early March, he admitted he had nothing specific to go on, just a reference book with a biographical sketch of Oakes Smith that, in a last laughable irony, I might actually have written.
Some stanzas from Stahl’s poem are worth quoting, in any case, for the way they open a discussion on how women’s public voices might be heard in the West in 1854.

This river’s a beautiful woman, poised
And passionate, going
Where she wants to, acting however
Her spirit moves her
And speaking. She
Croons in smooth words
Along her rolling waves, carps
With windy white caps…
And runs a fierce diatribe
Underneath
About whatever she feels hard
In her way.

She knows her rights as a river
And as a woman
So whenever you want an opinion
On boats lashed together
Like two hyphenated words
Caught somewhere
In mid-stream, look
At the lady from the bow
Of your boat,
And she’ll talk your leg off.

In an extended metaphor, Stahl imagines Oakes Smith claiming enormous power for women—of movement, of thought, of feeling—but whatever power she is afforded is subject to material limits; her voice must wait for the reader or listener to ask for her opinion, and when it is given, it will be found “somewhere midstream,” between “smooth words” and a “fierce diatribe” that “runs” “underneath.” How “fierce” or critical can such a voice be? As Keillor reminds us (and we have Fanny Fern to back him up on this point), a woman like Sedgwick or Oakes Smith could “go where she wished”—east or
west—only if she or her voice were literally or figuratively escorted there—in Fern’s slang, “with a hat on her arm.” More important, Keillor’s book serves to remind us of the material basis for Farnum and Sheffield’s event—that whatever speeches were made in trains or boats or lumber wagons along the way to the Falls of St. Anthony regarding the sublimity of the landscape, or the importance of carrying to the West the time-honored principles of education and religious freedom, ultimately, the Great Excursion was a promotional tour in support of Eastern investment in railroad stock—of the advance of capital into the West. Especially in the wake of upheavals in the Midwest banks resulting from land speculation around the rails, and the flooding of the market with Railroad stocks in general, by early 1854 the C and RI road needed to devise a way to impress current investors and entice new ones. The intention of it all was to give excursionists a sense of material facts underlying the ideological attitude of manifest destiny. At least, in the words of the St. Paul Pioneer on June 10, their object was to turn every one of their guests’ voices into perpetual advertisements, directing the attention of business men, capitalists, and communities—now ignorant of everything pertaining to us, beyond our location—to our exhaustless resources, and the certainties of our future greatness.¹

¹ In “The Excursion and its Effects” (June 10, 1854), editors of the St. Paul Pioneer remind their readers that The men composing this excursion-party, are those having direct and frequent communication with the masses of the people where they reside, and many have the ears and eyes of thousands among whom they will disseminate the information of which they have by this means become possessed. They are intelligent writers and talkers, almost without exception. They will become to us perpetual advertisements, directing the attention of business men, capitalists, and communities,--now ignorant of everything pertaining to us, beyond our location,
Is Sedgwick’s “Letter to Charles Butler” to be included, finally, in the C and RI road’s promotional scheme? No doubt she owed her hosts some thanks for the experience, but if you’re like me, you’d like to see a “fiercer” diatribe running beneath the “smooth words” here, all the more since (as I have learned recently from Cindy Damon-Bach) she had long demonstrated a grasp of modern labor theory in her study and translation of Sismondi’s work, and since (as I have learned recently from Jenifer Elmore) she was aware enough of the ideological and physical violence created by railroad technology to joke about it in her “Day in a Railroad Car” sketch of 1842. True, as Matthew Teutsch reminds us through Lydia Maria Child, Sedgwick’s is probably not going to be the most radical voice, but come on. Generously, we might point out that even with its effusive praise for her hosts’ success and largesse, Sedgwick is actually very careful to distinguish between what she considers their “productive labors” and mere “speculation,” or worse, the accumulation of wealth for consumption or princely self-aggrandizement. Emphasizing the capacity for cultural, intellectual and social improvement in the westering population, throughout the piece Sedgwick wants to assure readers of the salutary effects of capital investment beyond the physical: “We have reason to know,” she assures her readers, “that the necessity of diffusing intelligence and improving morals, and of raising men thereby out of and above the vortex of speculation to our exhaustless resources, and the certainties of our future greatness.

As we all know from the central text of this conference, there was at least one female on the excursion who, though less frequent a communicator than she had been, was certainly an “intelligent writer and talker,” and who would, in her article for Putnam’s Monthly in September 1854, serve somewhat as an “advertisement” for her hosts’ event, for their stock, and for the promise of western development generally, but it is arguable that the point of Sedgwick’s “praise,” largely based on the promise and potential of cultural development in the West, differed significantly from that promised by the St. Paul editors, which had more to do with dollars rolling west with the Railroad.
and mere material acquisition, is keenly felt by the best men at the West” (321). Finally, Sedgwick lauds the most promising effects of travel—not as leisure or the consumption of luxury but as a force productive of new ideas, among them a collective self-respect: guests “were invited not to admire their [hosts’] state, or to envy or covet their wealth, but to see—most of us for the first time—the inappreciable riches and untold beauty of our own country…the first intimation of its glorious future.”

Ah, the glorious future. To some who consider themselves materialist critics, Sedgwick’s general argument and these last words in particular are not critical of, but continuous with, the ideology of manifest destiny—and her specific target of “mere accumulation” a naïve criticism at best—or perhaps a signal example of what Herbert Marcuse called the “affirmative culture” of the bourgeois epoch, asserting its values in some realm of future possibility rather than squarely addressing the material facts of capitalist social relations. In Stahl’s terms, more “smooth words.”

My argument in this paper is that while there seem to be many obvious reasons for Sedgwick and other women on the Excursion to criticize, if not their particular hosts, certainly the system of capital expansion that was in the process of violently displacing indigenous cultures and local economies in the new “West” even as it created social hierarchies that would benefit the few at the expense of the many, any such critical desire fails to take gender into account, or more specifically the material position of women in the mid-nineteenth century trying get their voices heard, or trying to influence the course of American social and political development. Professional women writers like Sedgwick might have understood Thoreau’s warning about the railroad (the emblem of capital) riding on us instead of the other way around—but they also knew that unlike
Thoreau, they had few other political options than finding a place for themselves, or their words, in one of the cars, and co-opting its colonizing and disseminating force for better ends. Moreover, even in light of the potential and already actual exploitation of labor by capital in growing American industry, women as a working class could still view the market revolution and Western expansion in general as an opportunity for independence and increased social and economic equality. This, anyway, was what Elizabeth Oakes Smith would argue in her Lyceum lecture “The Dignity of Labor,” written in 1851.

For those of you unfamiliar with her work, Elizabeth Oakes Smith was a poet, novelist, playwright and essayist, and after 1851, a lecturer on women’s rights and capacities. Only beginning to return to our syllabi and anthologies today, in the mid-1850s her name was so well-known that P.T. Barnum appropriated it to boost ticket sales to one of his Baby-Shows, falsely advertising Oakes Smith as one of his judges. From the publication of her series of essays for the New York Tribune entitled Woman and Her Needs in 1850 until at least 1879, Oakes Smith’s name was found in nearly every report of National Women’s Rights Conventions and directly associated—whether revered or lampooned— with progressive ideas about women’s social, political and even biological condition. Beginning with a lecture on “Dress: Its Social and Esthetic Relations” at Hope Chapel in New York City in June of 1851, Oakes Smith’s first lecture tours took her from New York City to Lynn, Concord and Worcester, Nantucket and Portland, back to Brooklyn, and then on to the West, via Philadelphia, Cleveland, Louisville, and finally to Chicago by June of 1852. So if in fact Oakes Smith did travel along with Sedgwick and 1200 others on the Great Excursion, this would not have been her first time in the West.
With an ebullient tone similar to that in Sedgwick’s “Letter” to Putnam’s, Oakes Smith’s “The Dignity of Labor” starts out unequivocal in its support of capitalist enterprise, and uniformly optimistic in its prospects for our economic destiny. Where it differs—and differs markedly—from Sedgwick’s work is in its gendered critique of this development in a particular rhetorical maneuver we see in many of Oakes Smith’s feminist essays, where the reader or listener is treated to a title, vocabulary and arguments familiar and acceptable to him that lead imperceptibly into a rhetorical trap. As Mary Kupiec Cayton and Angela Ray remind us in their studies of public speaking in the U.S., in the case of Oakes Smith’s work, this “acceptable” set of ideological and formal elements was built into the purposes of the Lyceum and other young men’s organizations where Oakes Smith booked her lectures (often paid for, in fact, by successful merchants like Sedgwick’s hosts on the Excursion). As Ray notes, such venues provided a stable means of “moral, intellectual and practical self-improvement,” “consolidating the young business class of the city by introducing them to one another” and providing them with a training ground for skills in debate and public speaking. If ideally the purpose of the venue was to “inculcate the values of the college-educated elite among the broader public,” it would be difficult not to assume that for most audience members, such self-improvement and self-culture had an end, and that end was material advancement, social attainment, in a word—power—all values concomitant with strengthening national myths of upward mobility and manifest destiny. Carefully calculating her appeal to an audience with these assumptions in mind, Oakes Smith begins “The Dignity of Labor” with a seemingly transcendental view of the spiritual grounds of all human labor: “when I behold a Steamer, a Locomotive, and consider the amount of intelligence required to
build such a structure—recall the rude ore to be dragged from the bosom of the earth, consider the toil of the forge, the sinewy blows of the blacksmith; the application of science, the skill of the Artisan; the inspiration of the architect; the imagination of the Artist, all essential before the wonderful work is complete, I confess I am filled with amazement and awe as if the very work of a God were opened before me.” “The comet is no more wonderful than the locomotive,” she continues, “the builder of a ship, as a good worker, approaches the dignity of the builder of the planet. The same intelligence, the same forecast, the same adaptation of means to an end are required in the one as the other, differing only in degree.” Gradually evoking more practical applications, Oakes Smith moves to material equivalents more consonant with her audience’s common sense: Now, “in the material world, you perceive that power, art, beauty, progress, are involved in the career of the intelligent worker. He subdues the external world, and navies appear upon the Sea, and Cities arise upon the land. He evolves his ideas, and Governments are formed.”

But just as the young men before her are beginning to see the glory and promise of Western settlement, along with their potential to play a part in its conquest, Oakes Smith springs the unexpected trap—or in Dick Stahl’s terms, releases the “log” from beneath the surface, overturning, reframing and otherwise questioning the basic assumptions she has been using thus far by addressing the material difference gender makes: “In all of this,” [she asks] “What has woman done?” Where is the invention she has made? The palace she has designed? Where are our female Legislators? our women Salons?...We admit this frankly, and generously. There are none… In the long ages she has had all the drudgeries of toil, without its dignified results.” Having led her audience
to celebrate a set of abstract, universal human rights, capacities and values represented by a new land and a new government in an ideal form they accept without question, Oakes Smith simply asks them to engage the same assumptions when thinking about women attempting to access these same rights, according to the same values. “Thus it is,” she intones, “that we stand upon the solid basis of our humanity, as one half of the genus homo, and claim, that in a Republic, Man's freedom is woman's freedom also.”

Of course the difference gendering makes is crucial: while an acceptance or celebration of manifest destiny for young men in the West would continue to undergird the current political and economic structure (one that many, then as now, might consider ideologically more than suspect), their acceptance of the same values, when actualized in women’s rights to gainful work and political enfranchisement, would be tantamount to an acceptance of sweeping social change.

In the same way that Sedgwick’s “Letter to Charles Butler” cautions capitalists to make their profits productive of greater good, Oakes Smith’s lecture only begins with the demand for women’s opportunity to join her brothers in the labor market before moving on to greater ideas. In fact, much of the lecture is devoted to a catalog of examples of individual working women and whole classes of working women (artists, factory women, authors, printers, postmasters) that establish their participation in the nation’s economic development not as an ideal to be hoped for but as an established fact—indeed, a destiny, already manifest. But neither labor nor even the vote, which follows as a logical and even legal appurtenance to economic success for men, is held up as an end in itself. These are rather means to the dignity of opportunity, aspiration, material self-reliance and ultimately, power: “The mere idea of a vote is nothing” Oakes Smith tells her audience—
“it is the power which is behind it, at which we aim, the power to redress our own wrongs, and the power to aid our brothers in redressing theirs.” With the admonition that “we are on the verge of revolution” in the social order, Oakes Smith ends her lecture with a more specific list of reforms that women are destined to lead in the nineteenth century: “I believe that woman must awake to her mission to redeem the world, to reorganize society upon a more humane basis, to render governors more protective to the governed, to do away with the legal taking of life—to prevent the effusion of blood amongst nations of the earth by war, and to raise herself out of the dust of sexual degradation.”

This, anyway, is the plan. Sad to say, in the turn from Oakes Smith’s public representation of the dignity of women’s labor to its private representation in correspondence, we move, in the manner of Etta Madden’s paper on Anne Hampton Brewster, from utopia to dystopia. The problem was not railroad capitalists or profit-minded publishers. As long as the works of these women sold, the likes of the Harpers, Joseph Derby or Fowler and Wells were happy to print and advertise and distribute them, and the rails were happy to charge by weight; in fact technological innovations certainly enabled Oakes Smith and Sedgwick to reach far broader audiences than they might have before the development of roads like the C and RI. More debilitating in Oakes Smith’s case (others can argue the case with Sedgwick) was the dominant ideology that released a woman into the market economy as a dignified laborer only if she continued to satisfy her responsibilities in the domestic economy. I will conclude with some excerpts from Oakes Smith’s letters from her lecture tour in the spring of 1852, which demonstrate a perverse literalization of Amy Kaplan’s phrase “manifest domesticity:” April 4, from
Philadelphia: “I am pretty anxious about you all…but I work, work, and try not to think…I shall make about $100 here. I wish Edward to have his bill made out and sent on to me.” “Do see that the boys study… Tell them to go to the Mercantile Library and take out books. I hope the rose bushes are well watered.”

The following week, from Louisville, her report juggles worries about her husband’s arrangements with their new landlord with her challenges and successes as a professional: “I am lecturing every evening and am much worn with travel and effort of every kind. Honors are lavished upon me, but none of these things move me, any more than abuse would do so. I beg you will take care of yourself and see that your room is quite taken care of. I think Miss Hamilton [the family’s new landlord] is so mean and crowding that you should leave if possible.” [skipping down here]

On June 2, from Cleveland she reports “suffering from so much stress,” that she “cannot hold her pen without great pain.” Nonetheless, her worries center on her children’s accommodations in the new flat they have rented: “Do see that…Edward has a proper place and Alvin also—God knows I should not be away from them were it possible for me to do otherwise.” She will be in Chicago the following week.

From the remaining letters, we cannot tell what was happening in New York, but whether the men back home were ignoring her requests or if the mail system failed to forward correspondence on to her, her frustration boils over in Chicago: “If I do not find letters at Buffalo, I shall be obliged to throw up other engagements and return…for I have not strength to labor for no purpose. If my children are idle and wasting what I earn in one place it is little use for me to work for them in another.”
In the end, I still don’t know if Elizabeth Oakes Smith ever made the trip on the Great Excursion. If it were not for some advertising of the event in New York papers that includes her name and some prominent mention of her presence in a report in the Saint Paul Democrat of that city’s grand “Ball” held for the excursionists, one might believe this to be yet another hoax—this time not by P.T. Barnum but by the C&RI railroad—using Oakes Smith’s popular name along with Sedgwick’s, in a promotion to gain publicity. One can be sure that if she did go along, her decision not to write about it (if in fact she never did) was just her way, in the words of Dick Stahl’s poem, of “acting however the spirit moved her.” Maybe she decided she needed what every working woman in the service of humanity deserves once in a while—a vacation.