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and Cronin? Where does one begin to measure intangible impact? Much simpler the parlor-game speculation of what Keats (an apprentice surgeon) might have writ upon first looking into *The Dynasts*, or what atonements might have moved François Villon (a swaggering scapegrace) could he in durance vile have read of Tess.

Two scintillae to round off the record: (1) While still awaiting sentence, Behan complains about his reading fare—this time it comprised a *Chums* annual for 1917 and a Selfridge furniture catalogue—and receives in replacement *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. For those anticipating another mystic introversion, alas, there is only disappointment. Behan utters not a word pro or con respecting this second Hardy selection. (2) An even sharper coincidence than the one Cronin mentions above crops up in Behan's scathing portrait of a humorless English prison medico who goes about "sighing like the doctor in *The Citadel*." (Of such small arcs are vicious circles made.)



BRYANT AND ELIZABETH OAKES SMITH:
AN UNPUBLISHED BRYANT LETTER

By ROBERT H. WOODWARD

AMONG the group of now almost unremembered writers who constituted the literati of New York City during the 1840s and 1850s were a husband and wife from 'Way Down East—Mr. Seba Smith and Mrs. Elizabeth Oakes Smith. Seba Smith's reputation in literature is now secure. The famous "Jack Downing," who pursued his epistolary career of humorous political satire from 1830 to 1864, is perhaps better known than his creator, but he has earned for Smith an undisputed niche as the inventor of what Constance Rourke in *American Humor* terms the "Yankee oracle." In the path blazed by Major Downing followed a sizable train of dialect commentators on society and politics: Thomas C. Haliburton's Sam Slick, Lowell's Ezekiel Biglow, Orpheus C. Kerr, Artemus Ward, Petroleum V.

Nasby, Bill Arp, and Mr. Dooley. Mrs. Smith, however, is of less renown. A prolific magazine writer during the mid-nineteenth century, she is now virtually unread, except perhaps by Melville scholars who glance curiously at five lines of verse included in the oddly varied "Extracts" prefatory to *Moby Dick*:

A mariner sat in the shrouds one night,
The wind was piping free;
Now bright, now dimmed, was the moonlight pale,
And the phospher gleamed in the wake of the whale,
As it floundered in the sea.¹

Similarly, Poe scholars will find among his critical writings a laudatory essay on Mrs. Smith's works. Her "The Sinless Child" could have been, Poe claimed, "one of the best, if not the very best of American poems." "Her faults," he concluded, "are among the peccadilloes, and her merits among the sterling excellencies of the muse."²

Seba Smith, born in Buckfield, Maine, in 1792, began his journalistic career in Portland, as assistant editor of the *Eastern Argus*. In 1823 he married Elizabeth Prince of Portland, a girl several years his junior, who was born at Yarmouth in 1806. For sixteen years they lived in Portland, he until 1826 editing the *Argus*, both of them contributing verse to the newspaper and taking active roles in Portland literary society. In 1829 Smith founded the *Portland Courier*, the first daily north or east of Boston, as well as a weekly, *Family Reader*. In 1830 the first of the Jack Downing pieces appeared. In 1837 Smith ventured and lost his wealth in land speculation, and the couple, with their five children, moved to Boothbay, where Smith hoped to regain his fortune financing a machine to cleanse cotton fibers, an invention of his brother-in-law. To promote his investment, he journeyed to South Carolina with his family in 1839. His hopes were soon shattered. The Smiths arrived almost destitute in New York City later the same year.

Both of the Smiths soon attained stature as periodical writers, making frequent contributions to *The Ladies' Companion*, *Godey's Lady's Book*, *Graham's Magazine*, and others. During the 1840s and 1850s Mrs. Smith was a prolific maker of

¹ From "The Drowned Mariner," in *The Poetical Writings of Elizabeth Oakes Smith* (New York, 1845), 186.

² *Complete Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison (New York, 1902), XIII, 85, 93.

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books, and both tried their hand as editor of the popular gift annuals. During the latter decade Mrs. Smith embarked upon a successful lecture career and was the first woman to be admitted to the lyceum. Most of her subjects were related to the rights of women.

After her husband's death in 1868, Mrs. Smith continued to write for periodicals—poems, prose articles, and sketches, and in 1877 was pastor of an Independent Congregation in Canastota, New York. After this post, she settled in Hollywood, North Carolina, where she spent most of the remainder of her life, venturing forth occasionally to lecture, but spending most of her time writing. During the half dozen years preceding her death in 1893, she worked on her autobiography. Mary Alice Wyman, her biographer, appraises her career as follows:

Her importance in the history of the woman's rights movement should not be overlooked; but it is perhaps of greater moment that in freedom of thought and courageous undertakings she came near exemplifying herself the ideal toward which she was striving, the emancipated woman . . . Her acquaintance and association with the greatest contemporary writers, of whom she has given delightful personal glimpses in her autobiography, entitles her to a permanent place in the history of American letters.³

One of the close literary acquaintances of the Smiths during their New York residence was William Cullen Bryant, at that time editor of the *Evening Post* and a poet of wide reputation. Bryant attended Mrs. Smith's Sunday evening literary salons, and she reciprocated by visiting his Roslyn, Long Island, residence, where she was endeared to Mrs. Bryant. To the Smiths Bryant presented a copy of "Thanatopsis" in his own handwriting, which they hung in their living room in Patchogue, Long Island, where they had moved in 1860. Mrs. Smith's affection for Bryant can be seen in her 1878 sketch of him, in which she described him as "the most genial and companionable of men," "playful and cordial," "a contemner of shams, pretenses, and affectations of every kind."⁴ The preceding year he had encouraged her during her despair at Canastota, when she had considered her best work already finished.⁵

³ *Two American Pioneers: Seba Smith and Elizabeth Oakes Smith* (New York, 1927), 232.

⁴ *Baldwin's Monthly*, September 1878; quoted in Wyman, 225.

⁵ Wyman, 227.

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Their friendship is further evident in a letter written by Bryant during 1848. Without solicitation, apparently, he wrote a theatrical director in behalf of Mrs. Smith and was perhaps influential in launching her upon a new career as dramatist.

Mrs. Smith chose as the theme for her first play the Leisler Rebellion in New York in 1689. Jacob Leisler, the leader of the rebellion, was a prosperous merchant, known for his anti-Catholic sentiments. When Captain Francis Nicholson, deputy governor for New York, fled to England in the confusion occasioned by the downfall of James II and the subsequent deposition of Governor Andros, Leisler accepted the will of the people and assumed command. In 1691 King William appointed Colonel Henry Sloughter as Nicholson's official successor; Sloughter promptly charged Leisler with treason. He was tried and executed in May 1691. Six years later Parliament reversed the decision of Sloughter's court as to the forfeiture of Leisler's property, declaring in effect that Leisler was unjustly condemned. The Leisler incident, fundamentally a contest between democracy and aristocracy, served to further "the rights of the small farmer, tradesman, and urban worker against the provincial aristocracy of merchants and large landowners."⁶

Mrs. Smith's interest in the incident very likely stemmed from her friendship with Charles Fenno Hoffman, founder and editor of *The Knickerbocker*, the most important New York magazine during the 1840s. In 1844 Hoffman had published a biography of Leisler, crediting him with firm principles and liberal feelings but recognizing his limited mental attainments and his credulity and suspicion.⁷ Mrs. Smith made a sentimental hero of him. In her play, her concern is the hostility between Leisler and Sloughter, a hostility both political and personal, since Elizabeth, Leisler's wife, had earlier been married to Sloughter and had fled to America to be away from him. Mrs. Smith took great liberty with the facts. Leisler's wife was indeed the widow of an aristocrat, but her name was Altye and her husband was not named Sloughter. When identities and roles are revealed in the play, Sloughter takes vengeance

⁶ Jerome R. Reich, *Leisler's Rebellion: A Study of Democracy in New York 1664-1720* (Chicago, 1953), 172.

⁷ Charles F. Hoffman, *Administration of Jacob Leisler* (Boston, 1844), 195.

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and has Leisler executed. Elizabeth dies in Leisler's arms at the scaffold.

The play was at least partly written by May 1848, and later in the year Bryant was urging a Mr. Blake to consider the drama for production.

New York October 3d 1848.
Office of the Evening Post

Sir,

Mrs. Elizabeth O. Smith, has I learn placed her drama of Leisler in your hands, with a view to its being brought upon the stage, if its merits as an acting play should promise it success. How skilfully constructed it may be for stage effect, I cannot say, and it would ill become me to pretend to judge. Her friends, however, among whom I number myself, are anxious that it should have the benefit of as friendly an examination as you can give it. They think highly of her talents, and hope that it will prove that in this instance they have been successfully exerted. The interest they take in her welfare and reputation as an author will I am sure be received as an [sic] sufficient apology for my addressing you in regard to this subject.

Yrs respectfully⁸

Mr. Blake—

The Mr. Blake to whom Bryant addressed this recommendation was probably William Rufus Blake (1805-1863), a popular light comedian of New York following his début in 1825-1826, who on February 21, 1848, was engaged by the Broadway Theatre of New York to take charge of "the entire Direction of the Dramatic Department."⁹

The play, *Old New York: or, Democracy in 1689*, was neither produced nor published until 1853,¹⁰ the delay possibly caused by the presentation in 1848 of Cornelius Mathews' *Jacob Leisler*. In the winter of 1853, however, Mrs. Anna Mowatt took the leading part in the Broadway Theatre production, though her illness prevented any extended engagement. The drama was later presented in Albany and Washington, as well as in New Orleans; and Mrs. Smith included it among her public readings. Such contemporary reviews as can be found

⁸ The signature has been excised but there is no doubt of the authenticity of Bryant's handwriting. The letter is owned by Mr. Elisha Rosanova, of Honolulu, Hawaii, and is printed with his permission.

⁹ See T. Allston Brown, *A History of the New York Stage* (New York, 1903), I, 280-281; W. Davenport Adams, *A Dictionary of the Drama* (London, Philadelphia, 1904), I, 168-169; and George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (New York, 1931), V, 339-340.

¹⁰ By Stringer and Townsend, New York, 1853.

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afford high praise to the play, but the sentimentality of Mrs. Smith's handling of the story would preclude any lasting merit.

Despite the shortcomings of the play itself, the letter by Bryant suggests sincere affection and respect for Mrs. Smith and dispels to some degree the general conception of Bryant as cold and aloof. It serves, furthermore, to recall one of the most versatile and capable woman writers produced by the Pine Tree State.



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Colby College Library is indebted to the following good friends who in the near past have added to its special collections of books, letters and manuscripts.

MRS. DAVID T. MARTIN of Stillwater, Oklahoma: for being our current Lady Bountiful. In several shipments since March, Mrs. Martin has enriched our collections in every sector.

As to books, there are some forty first editions, mostly inscribed by Sir Sydney Cockerell, retired Curator of the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge and secretary to William Morris during the Kelmscott Press days. Some of the authors represented in the SC circle are Alice Meynell, George Bernard Shaw, Robert Louis Stevenson, Karen Blixen (Isaak Dinesen), William Morris, Walter de la Mare, John Cowper Powys, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, Max Beerbohn, Laurence and Clemence Housman. Among Mrs. Martin's own friends who autographed books are Ruth Draper, the world's première *diseuse* for a generation, and Vachel Lindsay, the midwestern poet and *rara avis*, whose florid calligraphy and expansive delineations of nature adorn the endpapers and flyleaves of his *Every Soul Is A Circus* and *The Golden Book of Springfield*.

In the line of autograph letters, Mrs. Martin has favored us with liberal specimens from the pens of Viola Meynell, John Cowper Powys, Alexander Kerensky, James Norman Hall, Sara Allgood, Harry S. Truman, a batch from Laurence Housman,