

*In 'the gloom of evening':
Margaret Bayard Smith's View
in Black and White of
Early Washington Society*

FREDRIKA J. TEUTE

ON a lovely August afternoon in 1994, I was in the reading room at the American Antiquarian Society, on the verge of a great discovery. My primary goal while at AAS was to attempt to identify as many of Margaret Bayard Smith's published writings as possible.¹ This might seem a simple enough task today, but in the first decades of the nineteenth century, when Smith was writing, men, often, and women, certainly, did not sign their names to published articles or books. The first piece known to have been published by Margaret Bayard was in 1800 in Charles

I thank Clyde A. Haulman, Mary Kelley, Sally D. Mason, and Mechal Sobel for reading drafts of this essay and offering constructive criticism.

1. Margaret Bayard Smith (1778-1844) was born during the Revolutionary War outside Philadelphia. Her father, Col. Jonathan Bubenheim Bayard, was a prominent Philadelphia merchant and patriot; her mother, Margaret Hodge, died when Margaret was two. She attended the Moravian school for girls in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and lived with her sister and brother-in-law, Jane Bayard Kirkpatrick and Andrew Kirkpatrick, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, until she married her second cousin Samuel Harrison Smith in 1800. She spent the rest of her life in Washington, D.C. In the 1820s she embraced writing as an avocation, publishing novels, stories, articles, and poems until the end of her life.

FREDRIKA J. TEUTE is editor of publications at The Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Va. This essay is adapted from the lecture presented at the semiannual meeting of the American Antiquarian Society at the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C., on April 20, 1996.

Copyright © 1996 by American Antiquarian Society

Brockden Brown's short-lived *The Monthly Magazine, and American Review*. She was then twenty-two, and she signed it 'N.'² As I was to find out during my researches at AAS, by the early 1830s, when she became a regular contributor to Sarah J. Hale's *The Ladies' Magazine*, Smith adopted a more obvious initial.³ She signed her pieces 'S.' and even sometimes gave the place of her residence, 'Washington,' where she had been living with her husband Samuel Harrison Smith for the last thirty years.

They had come to the District of Columbia with Thomas Jefferson's presidency shortly after the national government occupied its new headquarters there. Smith the husband was the administration's printer and published the newspaper the *National Intelligencer*. Margaret Bayard Smith is primarily known in the twentieth century for her letter-writing, a selection of which was published in 1906 as *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*.⁴ In correspondence to her sisters, she sketched in vivid detail the political characters and social scenes in the nation's new capital. Through her depiction of Washington society can be viewed the construction of a national political culture at the center of the recently formed union. Historians understandably have found her letters invaluable. Lesser known are Smith's two novels, *A Winter in Washington, or Memoirs of the Seymour Family* and *What Is Gentility? A Moral Tale*, that dissect drawing room society and middle-class aspirations in the capital city. Published anonymously in 1824 and 1828 respectively, they were nonetheless known at the time and since to have been authored by Smith.

These novels I knew about, as well as her early pieces in Brockden Brown's magazine and a children's book, *The Diversions*

2. 'The Evils of Reserve in Marriage,' [signed] 'N.,' *The Monthly Magazine, and American Review*, II (June 1800), 409-11. Significantly, she was engaged to be married to a man whose reserve and indifference led her to replay this theme numerous times in her published writings.

3. Hale published her magazine in Boston between 1828 and 1836, when she became editor for Louis A. Godey's *Lady's Book* in Philadelphia. Smith contributed articles, stories, and poems to Hale's magazine beginning in 1831 and continuing through the next to the last issue in 1836. She published less frequently in Godey's after Hale made the switch in 1837, but Smith had a piece appear as late as 1843, the year before she died.

4. Edited by Gaillard Hunt and published by Charles Scribner's Sons in New York.

of Sidney 'By a Friend of Youth,' published in Washington in 1805. But I had reason to believe that she had published much more than this. I had garnered a list of what I took to be titles from her letters and other random nineteenth-century references. At the moment of revelation, I did not know whether they were stories, articles, or books, published or not, and in what. My working assumption had been that the titles referred mostly to stories or essays published in Godey's *Lady's Book*. Elusive allusions to such as 'Force's Literary paper,' however, had me chasing after obscure early nineteenth-century serials that possibly made it to the second issue before becoming genuine nonentities due to the weak market for literary periodicals.⁵

As I was moving about the reading room in my first week at AAS, ricocheting between published bibliographies and guides and the card catalogues, a serendipitous collision occurred. I crossed paths with Laura Wasowicz, the children's literature bibliographer, recommended to me by John Hench. I told her that at some point I wanted to consult with her about juvenile literature because Smith had written some stories for children. I was particularly intrigued by one but wasn't sure of the title or in what form it had been published. I thought it was either 'An American Mother' or 'Old Betty.' 'Oh,' said Laura, "'American Mother.'" I just catalogued that. That's a very interesting children's book.' Because it had just been entered in 1994, even though published in 1823, the book appeared only in the on-line catalogue. My research on early nineteenth-century imprints had led me to focus on the card catalogues, forgetting to check the computer system. In return for Laura's revealing this book to me, I was able to share a bit of information with her: the identity of the unknown author.

5. Smith sent her sister 'some pieces of mine which have been published in Force's Literary paper & which I discontinued when he changed it to a political one' ([1824?], Smith to Jane Bayard Kirkpatrick, Margaret Bayard Smith Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [hereafter MBS Papers, DLC]). This would have been a publication by Peter Force in Washington, D.C., in the early 1820s. The most likely journal that I was able to identify was *The Washington Quarterly Magazine of Arts, Science and Literature* (Washington, D.C.: Pishey Thompson and Davis and Force, 1823-24). A total of two issues appeared in July 1823 and April 1824. The journal carried mainly practical information on internal improvements and patents and nothing by Smith.

The AAS's copy of *American Mother* is inscribed in Smith's hand to her older sister, 'Mrs. Kirkpatrick.' Furthermore, documentation in Smith's letters proves that the anonymous author was Margaret Bayard Smith. Published by Davis and Force in Washington, the book helped explain one of my elusive references. In June 1823, Smith had informed her sister that Force meant soon to print the children's books.⁶

One of the other clues had been a letter from Eliza Quincy to Smith giving 'almost unqualified praise to your *American Mother*.' Quincy had gone on to compliment the story of 'Old Betty' as 'natural' and 'affecting.' Quincy assured Smith that

There is no doubt a wide field for original, and affecting description on the subjects of slaves, and slavery. Humanity, and religion call for attention to their cause, and relief. It is a very difficult question, in the present situation of the slave holding states to say, how, or what can be effected, in a general way—but nothing but good can be the result of an appeal in their behalf for kinder treatment, and better instruction.⁷

I had never been sure about the meaning of this passage until Laura placed *American Mother; or, the Seymour Family* in my hands. Contained inside the cover were two separately paginated parts, each containing a discrete story. The second story was about 'Old Betty,' a homeless old slave wandering in the countryside on the outskirts of Washington near where the Seymour family lived. What I discovered that day in August was that Margaret Bayard Smith had written one of the earliest American antislavery children's stories known to exist.⁸

Until recently, Smith's career as a published author seemed to have begun in earnest with the appearance of *Winter in Washington* in 1824. The *National Union Catalog* lists only her two novels and

6. [Margaret Bayard Smith], *American Mother; or, the Seymour Family*. Part 1: *The Bees* and Part 11 (2 vols. in 1; Washington, D.C.: Davis and Force, 1823). Part 11 has no half-title, but it contains the story of 'Old Betty.' On June 10, 1823, Smith wrote to Jane Bayard Kirkpatrick concerning the children's books (MBS Papers, DLC). In a letter of Dec. [19], [1823], she referred to the first volume of *American Mother* (MBS Papers, DLC).

7. Nov. 26, 1824, Eliza Quincy, Boston, to Smith, MBS Papers, DLC.

8. In the online catalogue at AAS, Smith's *American Mother* comes up eighth chronologically in a search for slavery as a subject and juvenile literature as a genre.

the 1906 edition of her letters. Yet Smith published her first accounts of life in Washington as children's stories and embedded in them a serious critique of the early republic's central moral and political dilemma. These critical literary endeavors had completely disappeared from the record. Why?

One reason has to do with the form of juvenile literature. *Diversions of Sidney* and *American Mother* are small books cheaply printed. Both are just a little over three by five inches in their dimensions. These were not tomes likely to withstand the vagaries of time and to be found standing on bookshelves in private collections or libraries centuries later. Obviously, some have endured and have been collected. AAS has a major collection, but only in the last few years has it been able to afford to catalogue its children's books through a National Endowment for the Humanities grant. Generally, repositories have not catalogued their juvenile holdings, because of lack of time, funds, and, quite probably, lack of interest. Neither of Smith's children's books appears in printed bibliographies of children's literature.⁹

These books' physical inconsequentiality says something about their authors' attitudes. Women's ambivalence about appearing in print led to self-effacement through various means. The use of anonymity and choices of topics helped obscure the existence of their output and downplay their significance.¹⁰ In the first decades of the nineteenth century, publishing children's books probably was the easiest way for women to enter the literary marketplace. It was morally legitimate, utilitarian, inexpensive, and literally in-

9. D'Alté Welch, *A Bibliography of American Children's Books Printed Prior to 1821* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1972) does not list *Diversions of Sidney*, although the AAS bibliographer's reference copy has it pencilled in. *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, XLII: *American Writers for Children before 1900*, ed. by Glenn E. Estes (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research Co., 1985) does not have an entry for Margaret Bayard Smith.

10. This applies to women writing novels as well. See Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 125-27. Conflicting attitudes over publicity, print, and commercial publishing were not, of course, the exclusive preserve of women; male authors could share in these tangled values too. But women bore the double burden of exposing their intellectual egos and having their work devalued as women's (Susan Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* [Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1990], xii-xiii, 3-7).

conspicuous. These were tiny little books published anonymously for children. Writing to 'amuse' and 'instruct' juveniles could allay questions of female publicity and motive.

Evidently anxious, Lydia Maria Francis Child addressed these issues in the preface to one of her first literary undertakings, a children's miscellany entitled *Evenings in New England* 'By an American Lady,' published in 1824. She declared,

It is an awkward task for a young author to apologize for coming before the public; for it may well be asked, 'Why do you attempt to add your mite to the vast treasury of literary excellence, if you are doubtful of merit, or diffident of success?' Circumstances may indeed exist, that amply atone for the sin of printing; but personal motives, however cogent, are of no consequence to the busy world.

Child went on to offer a rationale for presenting her collection of stories in spite of the superior contributions to the genre already made by Maria Edgeworth and Anna Letitia Barbauld. The problem with their books was that they 'are emphatically *English*; and I indulged the hope that American scenes, and American characters, would give a delightful locality to the following stories, though they could not boast of such simple elegance of expression, or such pointed purity of moral.' Having laid out her nationalist agenda and demurred from any literary pretensions, Child offered her work to the public's judgment—but not before one last attempt to place her offering beyond reproach. Admitting that 'vanity, ambition, and avarice' play their part in human enterprise, she trusted some would believe 'that nothing has afforded me so much unalloyed pleasure, as the hope of adding a trifle to juvenile knowledge and virtue, and of making my name dear to young and innocent hearts.' Who could impugn her for that?¹¹

11. [Lydia Maria Francis Child], *Evenings in New England. Intended for Juvenile Amusement and Instruction*. By an American Lady (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard & Co., 1824), iii–iv. As Child noted in the preface, some of the pieces were not original; she had compiled them for their interest and utility. Nevertheless, the collection's contents are significant; the preface alone is noteworthy. Yet this book is not mentioned in Child's entry in *Notable American Women, 1607–1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, ed. by Edward T. James et al. (3 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 1, 330–33. And she is not noticed as a children's author in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*,

In fact, the combination of financial necessity and intellectual ambition impelled Child, like many other women writers of her generation, into print. Writing children's literature, like adopting anonymity, offered a halfway house sheltering female authors from exposure to public scrutiny. What could be more domestic than producing stories inside the household, usually about mothers and their children at home, to be read by mothers to their children within the home? At the same time, such literary endeavors offered women an outlet for their personal aspirations outside the home.¹² Certainly this was so for Margaret Bayard Smith.

No one understood better than Smith how a woman's desire for achievement and fame transformed the home into a prison. Fascinated with politics and power in the nation's capital, Smith's intercourse with men of influence stirred her discontent with 'the discharge of female duties.' Comparing herself to a bird in a cage, she 'longed to soar in the regions of intellectual existence[.] I feel within me an activity & restlessness of thought, an elevation of soul, a soaring of imagination, which quite unfit me for the lowly duties of my humble fortune.' Nevertheless, she clipped her wings with Christian resignation to her fate. Ultimately, she transmuted her experiences of politics and men that so stimulated her into the stuff of her fiction. In her published writings she appears to have reinscribed the proper role of womanhood. Moral mothers abound, such as Mrs. Seymour in *Winter in Washington*, but so does Smith's alter ego, a discontented protofeminist embodied, for instance, by Mrs. Mortimer in that novel.¹³

XLII: *American Writers for Children before 1900*, ed. by Estes, even though this book is only the beginning of her many contributions to the genre. The point is that even the juvenile literature of serious authors is likely not to get its due historical weight. Of course, Carolyn L. Karcher gives Child's juvenile literary career its full due, but she treats *Evenings in New England* as if it were an original work by Child, which it was not. The significance of this will become apparent below (*The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child* [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994], 55-79, esp. 60-66).

12. Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*, 124-28, 100-107, 144-46.

13. Sept. 17, 1806, Diary 1804-07, MBS Papers, DLC. For a fuller development of this theme in Smith's life, see Fredrika J. Teute, 'Roman Matron on the Banks of Tiber Creek: Margaret Bayard Smith and the Politicization of Spheres in the Nation's Capital,' in *A Republic for the Ages*, ed. Donald R. Kennon (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, forthcoming).

Once Smith began writing in the early 1820s, 'my pen has supplied to me an occupation so agreeable, so interesting & so inexhaustible, I have been happier than I ever have been—I no longer suffer from the *monotony* of life—That insupportable burden of which I used to complain.' While residing at their country home, Sidney, on the outskirts of Washington, Smith found intellectual fulfillment. By further withdrawing into 'a room exclusively my own,' she secured a 'retreat free from all intrusion & where my writing desk & my books were my only companions.' For her, books were both solace and empowerment, enlarging the mind and rendering women 'independent of the external circumstances of fortune.'¹⁴ Writing and publishing her own books and stories became the solvent of the tensions in Smith's life, as well as an emanation of those discontents. Through literary production, she could express her social vision and implement her intellectual goals.

Society was the engine of her ambition,

and every time I mix in the world, I discover in myself such an unabated relish for its pleasures, such unsubdued desires for its honors & distinctions, that I fear should I again be thrown into its bustling scene, I might be as much exposed to *moral danger*, as I ever was.—my sober judgement tells me I am *better & happier* in seclusion. therefore tho' I might not have the resolution to *choose* the better part—If Providence assigns it to me—I *will rejoice*.¹⁵

The Smiths over the course of their forty years in Washington moved back and forth between their country home and the city, depending on political patronage and the various positions held by Samuel Harrison Smith. When participating in the city's offerings of politics and intelligent conversation, Smith experienced the stimulation that bred dissatisfaction with her assigned lot.

The District of Columbia, then, was a site where individuals were in danger of succumbing to vices the city was established to avoid. Meant as a showcase for the new republican experiment in

14. S****, Washington, 1831, 'My Books,' *Ladies' Magazine*, iv (1831), 404–12 (quote at 405).

15. Mar. 8, 1812, Smith to Jane Bayard Kirkpatrick; Jan. 17, 1824, same to same, MBS Papers, DLC.

self-government and as a national jurisdiction cordoned off from corruption and partisan interests of the states, political society there instead unleashed ambition and exposed the self-aggrandizing underpinnings of democracy. Public life, rather than promoting simplicity and virtue, became a stage for self-display. Behind the curtain worked the corrosive effects of personal desires and unbounded power. Slavery was the most potent metaphor of the imbalance between republican ideals and liberal politics.

Enlightened men had rationally organized the urban spaces of the nation's capital, equitably distributing power among the branches of government and the people. Those excluded from that power structure saw something else. Smith, for one, perceived a moral topography in Washington in which the locus of real power was misapprehended. People on the margins—poor white women, free blacks, enslaved African Americans—held moral ascendancy over those conventionally assumed to possess authority—yeomen patriarchs, male slaveholders, even middle-class white women like herself. Through her writings, she explored this moral terrain.¹⁶

The efflorescence of children's literature that began in the 1820s is taken to index emergent concerns about middle-class values and individuals' roles. Interpretations of the nineteenth-century juvenile genre most often emphasize family, morals, duty, and industriousness as qualities necessary to stabilize a society in the midst of democratic and economic change. Grafted onto the eighteenth-century purpose of instruction were fictional forms meant to entertain young minds while inculcating in them middle-class mores.¹⁷ This is the final reason why Smith's children's

16. See Fredrika J. Teute, "A Wild, Desolate Place": Life on the Margins in Early Washington,' in Howard Gillette, Jr., ed., *Southern City, National Ambition: The Growth of Early Washington, D.C., 1800-1860* (Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University Center for Washington Area Studies, 1995), 47-68, 97-102. I am indebted to Chandos M. Brown for pointing out the implications of Smith's moral topography contained in this essay.

17. Anne Scott MacLeod, *A Moral Tale: Children's Fiction and American Culture, 1820-1860* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1973), 9-13, 16-17, 20-21; Isaac Kramnick, 'Children's Literature and Bourgeois Ideology: Observations on Culture and Industrial Capitalism in the Later Eighteenth Century,' in *Culture and Politics: From Puritanism to the Enlightenment*, ed. by Pierre Zagorin (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1980), 213-14; Karcher, *The First Woman in the Republic*, 59, 62.

stories disappeared from sight. Critical interpretation tends to focus on the didacticism and formulaic elements aimed at a segment of the population in its minority and passive in its reactions. Historians have not taken children's literature all that seriously and have missed the adult messages written into it.

Attention has not been paid to the publications for what they can reveal about cruxes in the cultural politics of the new nation and the messages encoded in them. Women writing children's stories were writing their own stories as well, telling them to their children who would come after them and to the women who were reading them at the time.¹⁸ Beneath the surface, Smith's *American Mother; or, the Seymour Family* is much more than a children's book. A subversive text, it rejects, questions, or undermines hierarchical relations between men and women, masters and servants, whites and blacks. In almost every instance, not only moral ascendancy but knowledge and competency are attributed to the latter, rather than the former. Hidden behind the innocent title of *American Mother* was an explosive topic and an expansive definition of American.

Certainly on one level, Smith meant her stories to be, and they must be read as, didactic tales of a mother's instructing her children on proper behavior and the lessons to be learned from nature. What surprises is who does the teaching and what is being taught.

18. I am indebted to Mechal Sobel for many insights into Margaret Bayard Smith's life and writings. Among them is seeing that in her writings she was explaining her life to her children. In some of her diary entries, she addressed them directly, drawing moral lessons for them on how to live their lives based on her own struggles with discontent and depression. At the same time, she was conveying to them the knowledge of those inner conflicts. See the quotation above about her longings for intellectual existence. Part of a much longer passage, it ends with submission to duty, admonishing, 'Oh my children remember this, & however humble, the part allotted, endeavour not only to act it well, but to act it willingly—A willing mind makes labour easy & a cheerful heart makes duty pleasant.—Seldom have I to struggle with discontent, or depression of spirits & when I find myself analyzing [sic] & questioning the pleasures & duties of life, I generally [sic] check this habit of the soul, which if indulged would degenerate in to discontent' (Sept. 17, 1806, Diary 1804-07, MBS Papers, DLC). G. J. Barker-Benfield suggests ways in which the sentimental lessons concerning kindness toward animals in English children's literature of the eighteenth century also were addressed to women and were a kind of surrogate feminist message (*The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], 235-36).

Part one of *American Mother* is subtitled 'The Bees.' Dick, an old enslaved black man of a neighboring farmer, delivers a beehive to the Seymours. Smith quickly establishes the disparity in experience and common sense between elite and simple, white and black, city and country. Mrs. Seymour asks for advice on keeping bees, and Dick replies, "To be sure, Mistress, you can't be expected to know the like, seeing you be just come from the city, and the *quality*, I reckon, don't raise bees, or chickens, or the like in Washington." When he informs them how to get the honey by killing the bees with smoke, the children, Louisa and Emily, and the servant girl Matty react in horror (1, 6-8, 12-14). Dick matter-of-factly rejoins,

'La's, Miss, you kill something to eat every day, don't you?'

'Why no, to be sure,' said Louisa.

'Don't you eat chickens, and turkeys, and geese?' . . .

'But we don't kill them,' said Louisa.

'La's, Miss, you don't eat them alive, do you?'(1, 14)

This confounds the children, who, living in the city, have never considered that the food placed on their table was once alive.

Dick's earthiness contrasts with the Seymours' refinement. Offered a glass of wine, he rejects it as "truck I never drank. . . . A little whiskey would suit the likes o'me, if it's agreeable to the Madam." He polishes the glass off, 'smacking his lips' (1, 18-19). Finally, he announces it is time for him to go, for he must cut wood before he goes to bed. Astonished that he had such tasks to do at night, Mrs. Seymour questions him about his work routine. Dick works "all day for Master, and half the night for myself; and many a night for master too. Why Mistress, we makes all our cider, and husks all our corn, and shells the corn, and beats our hominy, all o'nights, and likes a dance after its done," said he smiling' (1, 21-22). Dick is admirable for his hardworking ways, practical knowledge, and appropriate deference. His basic relation to life's realities makes him an authentic American, a pragmatist, and a self-reliant man—in spite of his status as a slave.

Mrs. Seymour the next day uses the bees to instruct her chil-

dren about nature—and society (1, 27, 43 passim). The organization of bees becomes a metaphor for human social structure. It is a distinctly matriarchal system consisting of “‘The *Queen*, or, *Mother-bee*, the *Drones*, or *male-bee*, and the *Working-bee*. There is never more than one queen, and all the rest obey her; and she is the mother of all the other bees.” With this statement Smith makes the female the source of authority as well as of life. The lesson then further disturbs customary understanding with this startling explanation:

‘The *drones* never work, but fly about from flower to flower to get honey and amuse themselves: there are seldom more than a hundred in a hive. They are like rich gentlemen, such as you meet with in the southern States, who have nothing to do but ride about their plantations and enjoy themselves, while hundreds of slaves labour for their support. The *working-bees*, of which there are from fifteen to twenty or thirty thousand in a hive, do all the work.’ (1, 44)

Here is Smith’s critique of society: woman as queen; wealthy, particularly Southern, men as parasites; and lower classes, especially slaves, as the industrious workers. Sex was both the foundation of the system and a source of exploitation. In Smith’s children’s stories, the absence of husband and father is striking. When referred to at all, he is at a distance, away in the city with no time for the family. A sense of abandonment filters through Smith’s stories—and alienation from a male-dominated world.

Part two is primarily devoted to the story of ‘Old Betty.’ It is framed as a lesson in middle-class benevolence to the poor, but Smith subtly reverses the terms of the equation. Mrs. Seymour and her children encounter the aged black woman as they return from visiting their humble but hardworking neighbors. The Seymours contribute to the family’s support by purchasing Mrs. Friendly’s produce and baked goods (11, 10–24). Mrs. Friendly’s self-sufficiency and competency show up the city folk’s ineptness. In part one of the story, when the bees swarm, Mrs. Seymour appeals to Mrs. Friendly for assistance. She confesses to the country woman, “‘You must direct all. . . . We are quite ignorant”” (1, 51).

Old Betty is worn out with a lifetime of enslaved labor performed for white people. She now lives on the charity of the neighborhood, admitting that "if there be *bad* white people, there be *good* white-people too; . . . there be many . . . here . . . , and poor folks too, who are always willing to give a cup of cold water for Christ's sake—who feed the hungry and cover the naked." Wanting to shoulder her share of the burden, Mrs. Seymour invites Old Betty to visit them the next day (II, 27–30).

Upon her arrival, Old Betty is so exhausted that the children help guide her to a seat and then proceed to feed her. Grateful, Old Betty declares, "Well, to be sure, who would have thought o' the like o'this, for a poor slave, the likes o'me, to be waited on by such fine young ladies." The role reversals continue, as Old Betty preaches to Mrs. Seymour and her children on the hardships fate may hand them and urges them to fix their hearts on the treasures of the next world, rather than of this. She warns them, "for rich as you now may be, my old eyes have seen grander houses than this, though this is grand enough, brought low to the dust, and as pretty white hands as yours, obliged to do hard work" (II, 36–42).

Old Betty then proceeds to narrate her pilgrimage through life. She grew up on a large plantation in Georgia as a house-servant, a favorite of her mistress's. Falling in love with the master's body servant, Caesar, precipitated the catastrophe that led to all the rest of the troubles in her life. Forbidden to marry at so young an age, she disobeyed her mistress and united with Caesar. Sex was the source of her downfall. As punishment, she was beaten, bound, and sold (II, 43–49).

Placed in the hold of a ship with other "poor wretches like myself[,] . . . I hated every white body in the world. . . . I resolved never again to work for white people, and wanted to die, that my present Master might lose his money. I would not eat, and no food passed my mouth, but what he poured down by force." Under these conditions, her child was born.

"The sound of its cries pierced my heart, and I now wished to live, that I might take care of it; but I soon thought my new Master would be

glad of its birth, as he would have another slave. Well, thinks I, he shan't have that reward; no, not he indeed; I'll not raise him up another wretch to work for him. But I never could resolve to kill the poor thing, but I knew not what to do for it, poor ignorant creature that I was, and before the week's end it died in my arms. Then did I bewail it, and felt as if Caesar was again taken from me, and I would have killed myself, had I known how—they took it from me, and in the next moment I heard a splash in the water; oh, Mistress, Mistress! it was a sound that struck me like thunder! I clenched my hands, and struck whoever opposed me, climbed up to the deck, and before any one could hinder, threw myself in the sea.' (II, 51-54)

Rescued, Old Betty resisted living and was 'whipped severely' (II, 55). After her threats to kill the mistress's baby, her master sold her to a slave trader who took her to Georgetown. There she finally fell into the hands of a kindly couple whose saintly daughter, before she died, converted Old Betty to Christianity. Framed as a moral tale, the story tells of Christian repentance for one's sins—of disobedience, lying, fornication—and resignation to one's fate. Inside this scaffolding, the narrative plumbs the full latitude of cruelty within the slave system and the double entrapment experienced by enslaved women exercising sexual choice.

Described in this story was racial and maternal rage so deep as to provoke thoughts of infanticide and attempts at suicide. One hundred fifty years later, Toni Morrison in *Beloved* probed the same fierce love willing to kill what's dearest to protect it from oppression.¹⁹ This is a strange topic for a children's book. At the heart of the nation, Margaret Bayard Smith articulated white fears of African Americans' true feelings toward them. Within the cover of a mother's story was revealed racial alienation from white domination and feminine alienation from a system of sexual control that repressed female freedom and required female sacrifice. Smith first brought herself to express these sentiments in juvenile literature, hidden then and now from the gaze of a widespread adult readership. She spoke through Old Betty to herself and to

19. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987. The genesis of this novel about an African American mother killing her child was in a newspaper story that Morrison read.

other middle-class white women. She also spoke *with* Old Betty. Smith's was a complex message of anger against men and her own class and race, and of the justness of blacks' hatred toward whites.

In fact, Smith had spoken with Old Betty. Under a May 13, 1807 diary entry, Smith recorded her and her children's encounter with 'aunt Betty.' Smith's emphasis was on her own children's having imbibed lessons of generosity and charity, so that the episode focused on their behavior toward Aunt Betty rather than on Betty's life. The parallels to the story of 'Old Betty,' however, are unmistakable.

On their return from buying cakes from their poor neighbor Mrs. Fries, Smith and her two daughters, Julia and Susan, 'met a very old black woman who could barely crawl.' The girls gave the woman their cake and shook hands with her. Smith inquired to whom she belonged, and she replied 'to nobody.' Years ago her husband, a free man, had bought her at the sale of her master's property for a shilling, for even then she had been

weak and worthless. . . . He was now dead, [and] she could not work & was supported by the kindness of the neighbours.—I bade her come to me the next day, she did so & Julia & Susan most assiduously waited on her & would suffer no one else to interfere, let me pour aunt Betty, tea out Mama, said Julia, me carry aunt Betty my bread, said Susan. The whole morning they were running with something to her. She poor wretch, unused to kindness, was all astonishment & put up her hands exclaiming, did I ever see the like, such little babies so good! Why they have done more by me than any grown body in the neighbourhood; god bless god bless you my pretty babies.²⁰

What else Aunt Betty said that morning Smith kept to herself. Stitched into the account of her children's goodness was the life of a woman ill-used. Aunt Betty endured in Smith's memory.

She suppressed her anxieties over African Americans' enslavement and their hostility for nearly fifteen years. From the time she and her husband came to Washington, they had hired blacks, both enslaved and free, as house servants and farm hands, and she

20. May 13, 1807, Diary 1804-07, MBS Papers, DLC.

recorded her encounters with them in her unpublished diaries and letters during the first decade of their residence. About the beginning of the War of 1812, she became silent on the topic. Fears of slave insurrection during that war, nationalist sentiments in its aftermath, and guilt over their own ambivalent stance may have inhibited Smith from expressing her sympathy with blacks and from criticizing her southern friends in Washington. The Smiths had become complicit in their reliance on black labor; they may even have owned African Americans for a period during the 1810s. Their dependence on enslaved laborers may explain Smith's silence during this period and her subsequent publication of 'Old Betty.' The story can be read as an expression of Smith's own guilt and repentance for having participated in a system that enslaved African Americans.²¹

In her early commentary on her difficulties with hired black servants, Smith recognized the legitimacy of their insubordinate behavior. Sukey stole and lied, but 'how can we expect Justice or fidelity from those, whom we have robbed, yes cruelly & unjustly robbed of all that gives value to life.—How can we expect implicit obedience from them, when we disobey all the laws of God & nature.'²² The lives of other slaves whom they hired from nearby slaveowners provided materials that Smith wove into her children's stories. Her favorite servant girl, Matty, figured prominently in *Diversions of Sidney* as the moral exemplar to the white child in the story, Julia, just as she was in life. It is Matty who is endowed with good manners and disciplines Julia's ill-temper and thoughtlessness. Smith taught Matty to read and write along with

21. In a letter of July 20, 1813, to her sister, Jane Bayard Kirkpatrick, Smith reports on the fears of a slave insurrection around Washington. This is one of the few references to slaves in the published letters (Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, 90). However, her diaries and letters, 1801 to 1807 or 1808, periodically give accounts of black servants in the Smith household. See July 15, 1804, Smith to Jane Bayard Kirkpatrick; May 31, 1807, same to same; Aug. 12, 1811, same to same; Apr. 20, 1813, same to same; Jan. 30, 1820, same to same, MBS Papers, DLC, and see below. The 1811 letter contains the clearest indication that they purchased a woman servant; the 1820 letter says the Smiths let a black family go. Whether they ceased hiring them or sold them is not clear.

22. Undated entry; Oct. 3, 1806; Diary 1804-07, MBS Papers, DLC.

her own children and found her to be the quickest learner of the group. The young enslaved girl 'has a mind & disposition that were it not for the misfortune of her birth, would make her a distinguished woman. How often when some trait of sensibility or genius, displays itself; do my eyes fill with tears as I look at her & from my heart I grieve that such a mind & heart is destined to servitude!'²³ By the early 1820s Smith had become more dry-eyed. In part two of *American Mother*, she presented Matty's lot as a given to be accepted. Even 'though a *slave*,' Matty was treated like one of the children and looked upon Mrs. Seymour like a mother, but 'this could not last, the age for labour was drawing on, when, instead of being the playmate, she was to become the servant of the young ladies, but always a favoured one' (II, 33). With this injunction, Smith retrospectively instructed Matty on her place in life and uneasily resolved Matty's status to herself by pledging favor. Smith's sympathy did not extend to advocating insubordination or political change to end slavery.²⁴

The tragedies of several other hired slaves in the Smiths' first years in Washington had brought home the institution's evils. In 1806 their hired man Jessy pleaded with Samuel Harrison Smith to buy him to protect him from a cruel master. Because of his scruples against owning enslaved blacks, Mr. Smith refused;

23. [Smith], *Divisions of Sidney*, 16-19, 21-22, 35-36, 41, 44-46, 51-53; Apr. 3, 1807, Diary 1804-07; Jan. 6, 1806, Smith to Mary Ann Smith; May 16, 1806, same to Susan Bayard Smith (sets example); Sept. 17, 1806, same to Jane Bayard Kirkpatrick (outstrips Julia in learning); Mar. 1807, same to same; [Nov.?] 22 & 28, 1807, same to Maria Bayard Boyd (quote), MBS Papers, DLC.

24. Smith, of course, was always operating from a privileged position within the dominant power structure, but this should not negate the validity of her criticism of that hierarchy. Her ambiguous status as a middle-class white woman was the source of her insight and her ambivalence. Dana D. Nelson analyzes the interdynamics between resistance and consent for colonial dissenters, suggesting that contesting the system from within can be productive, even if shot through with contradiction ('Economies of Morality and Power: Reading "Race" in Two Colonial Texts,' in Frank Shuffelton, ed., *A Mixed Race: Ethnicity in America* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], 19-38, esp. 21, 28, 35-36). See also Nelson, *The Word in Black and White: Reading 'Race' in American Literature, 1638-1867* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), esp. 65-89, in which she discusses the complications for white female authors in their sympathetic treatment of race. Nelson analyzes Catherine Maria Sedgwick's and Lydia Maria Child's alternative social visions that offered likeness rather than difference, along with the limitations in assimilative middle-class white standards.

Jessy's master sold him to a Georgia slave trader. Three years earlier, Margaret Bayard Smith had tried to intervene with the Carroll family over the sale of one of their enslaved men to another Georgia slave driver. The young man's sister Milly was the Smiths' hired servant, and her aged mother lived at the Smiths' with Milly. Upon being sold, James tried to drown himself; the mother, Phylis, who had attempted suicide coming over on a slave ship from Africa as a young girl, now made multiple attempts to kill herself. The Carrolls turned their backs on this woman who had served them her entire life. Milly chided her mother, "You might have known what to expect from your master; What do you cry for, why don't you know *white people* will sell their own blood & their own soul for money?—What do you cry then for, you know what *white people* were.[""]' Smith witnessed this wrenching experience, and was 'shocked at the inhumanity of some of the people as much as with the event.' The devotion of mother, son, and sister to each other profoundly affected her. Elements of this horrific story reverberate in *Old Betty's*.²⁵

With the publication of *American Mother* in 1823, Smith gave voice to some of the human suffering she had witnessed over her years in Washington. She also raised questions about black-white relations that have often been elided in American consciousness and historical record. Published in the midst of Anglophilic racism at the beginning of this century, Hunt's edition of Smith's papers barely alluded to the existence of slavery in the nation's capital. In Smith's children's books, a lost genre in themselves, are the hidden matters of race and slavery that profoundly disturbed her. Through her writings she portrayed not only the justness of black resentment, but also intimacy and equivalency in social exchanges between blacks and whites. Her vision of American society, especially among the lower classes, was one of racial interconnection. Dick, *Old Betty*, and *Matty* all figure as individuals

25. July 4, 1806 (Jessy), Diary 1804-07; Sept. 16, 1803, Smith to Jane Bayard Kirkpatrick, MBS Papers, DLC.

with legitimate claims to respect and autonomy. They are part of America.²⁶

Although Smith expressed concerns about slavery, she never was involved in the antislavery movement. Living midway between North and South and at the political center of the Union, she perhaps was too implicated personally and socially in the status quo. Instead, she became one of the earliest and one of the few authors to write on the topic for the next generation. Placing her children's literature on slavery in context reveals there are very few stories for the 1820s. Lydia Maria Child published one in her 1824 children's collection mentioned above, *Evenings in New England*, 'The Little Master and His Little Slave.' Acknowledging it as taken from *A Winter in Washington*, Child reprinted verbatim a story out of Smith's novel of that title published earlier in the same year.²⁷

Rather than a story by another author, a second one of Smith's had been republished within a year. She seemed to have cornered the market on antislavery tales for children. This was a case of almost instantaneous reader response and dissemination. Child picked up Smith's story and through her book made it widely available to an audience of children and adults. In the early 1820s neither Smith nor Child was arguing for emancipation. This was not a position promulgated in popular fiction, much less in children's stories, and certainly not by female authors at this time.

26. The theme of racial amalgamation is most fully developed in her unpublished novel 'Lucy,' written in the mid-1820s, where black and white characters unite out of common cause in seeking human companionship and individual fulfillment and in resisting constraint and exclusion (MS, Papers of William Thornton, DLC). It is also present in Smith's novel *A Winter in Washington*. See Teute, "A Wild, Desolate Place": Life on the Margins in Early Washington,' in Gillette, ed., *Southern City, National Ambition*, 54-68. Being American involved conflict and compromise among racial groups within a framework of white domination. Frank Shuffelton suggests the dynamism contained in the concept of "a mixed race," as posited by Margaret Fuller in 1846. Although her vision was defined by a European admixture that invigorated the American character and contributed to a national literature, Shuffelton critically expands her notion historically to the foundational experience of America in which ethnic confrontation and negotiation shaped cultural and power relations ('Introduction,' in Shuffelton, ed., *A Mixed Race*, 3-16).

27. [Margaret Bayard Smith], *A Winter in Washington, or Memoirs of the Seymour Family* (2 vols. in 1; New York: E. Bliss and E. White, 1824), II, 47-54; [Child], *Evenings in New England*, 138-47.

Both women saw slavery as a problem, and their approach to the subject in their writings was ameliorative. Child framed Smith's story as proof 'that kind masters and grateful slaves are very numerous at the South. I will read one instance of this from "The Winter in Washington."' The narrative the aunt proceeded to tell her nephew was a story told by the Seymour children to their mother about their father when he was a little boy as related to them by his slave. Mr. Seymour as a child had protected the young slave Ned from a whipping and being sold. Ned ever since had been Seymour's loyal personal servant. In the aftermath of the Missouri Compromise, Child from her distant vantage point in New England chose to emphasize a gradualist solution contained within a shared culture of humane values with our 'Southern brethren.' Seven years later, looking more askance at slaveholders, she embraced radical abolitionism, a doctrine Smith never adopted.²⁸

Hailing from the middle states of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, Smith spent her adult life in the midst of southerners and their slaves. She could not so easily distance herself, for she was more intimately involved with them both than was Child. In Smith's stories blacks and whites envision each other, suggesting that each bore the impression of the other's soul in their consciousness. Smith identified with both.²⁹

At the beginning of the story of 'The Bees,' Matty, the young servant girl, drawing curtains against the dusk, exclaims, "What is that coming up the walk? It is a great white thing" (1, 6). In part two, the initial encounter with Old Betty occurs in the woods 'as the gloom of evening increased.' Louisa Seymour, startled, cries

28. Karcher, *The First Woman in the Republic*, 61-65; [Child], *Evenings in New England*, 138. Smith claimed that the William Wirt family was the prototype for the Seymour family in *A Winter in Washington* (c. Dec. [19], [1823]), Smith to Jane Bayard Kirkpatrick, MBS Papers, DLC).

29. My thinking has been influenced by Mechal Sobel's analysis of the interpenetration of white and black consciousness in early America. See her essay 'The Revolution in Selves: Black and White Inner Aliens,' in Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute, eds., *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming). This essay is a part of Sobel's book-length study on the subject.

out to her mother, "What great black thing is that coming along the road?" (11, 25-26). This seemingly neat pairing of white and black images contains far more tangled sets of identities.

In *American Mother* Smith does not reveal that Matty is an enslaved African American until halfway through the second story, on the morning of Old Betty's visit to the Seymour home (11, 33). The 'white thing' espied by Matty out the window turns out to be the old black slave Dick hidden behind the beehive covered with a sheet. Blacks enter the story of 'The Bees' in disguise, leaving their identity open until the mother fixes them in their racialized place. The white apparition strikes fear in the child we later learn is enslaved, just as 'the dark object' causes terror in the white children, who fear that it might be 'a *negro-buyer*' or 'a run-away negro.' The middle-class white mother in each case defuses the situation with rational explanation. An old black man was to be treated kindly rather than feared, and 'in our happy country' people could move about safely free from any danger. A slave trader posed no threat, for 'we are not negroes.' And a fugitive slave would 'be afraid of us' (11, 26-27).

Through this simple dialogue, Smith opens a huge chasm within America, a land of freedom for middle-class whites and a place of oppression for blacks. The children better see in the shadows what is scary in the country. Recognizing that unrestrained power lurks around society's edges, Louisa and Emily imagine the horrors of enslavement. Although racial oppositions construct in starkest form unequal power relations, Smith also suggests the interdependence of identities between black and white. Each carries within the image of the other. Matty and Dick reverse from white to black; they stand as moral paragons to the whites, Matty as tutor of discipline and duty and Dick as a fount of practical knowledge.

In the dusk where light and dark mingle, another set of identities may be blended. Who was the American mother in Smith's children's book? In my quest for elusive titles, I sought 'The American Mother' or 'Old Betty.' I thought I had found the an-

swer when the *American Mother* turned out to have two parts, the second about 'Old Betty,' the whole about Mrs. Seymour and her children. She is the archetypal mother of nineteenth-century American children's literature. But another mother, within repressive constraints, asserted her right to form a family and fought fiercely to protect her child. Old Betty revealed the costs exacted by patriarchal power from American mothers. Margaret Bayard Smith spoke through both women. Smith believed in Mrs. Seymour's moral discipline as necessary to sustain society, but she felt all the anger of Old Betty at that society's injustices. She set it down on paper in black and white.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.