

Charlotte Smith’s “The Emigrants” may be classified as a brief epic due to its verse form and book-length, though it by no means adheres to the conventions of the form. Smith does not retell heroic deeds by a single protagonist like in Homer’s “The Odyssey” and she invokes the personal pronoun “I,” thereby interweaving her own personal plight, a move that critics of the time considered to be “egotistical” and formal confusion. I want to suggest that Smith was perfectly consciousness of her departure from epic’s generic form and that she does so in order to engage a new perspective: that of the wretched and more specifically that of women. In her dedication to William Cowper, Smith writes, “I am perfectly sensible that it [his poem “The Task”] belongs not to a feeble and feminine hand to draw the bow of Ulysses.” While some may read this as a self-abasing comment (Smith characterizes her own hand and “feeble” and “feminine”), it also allows for Smith to move away from the “bow” or masculine framing of epic and instead work on her own terms. In her essay, “Charlotte Smith’s ‘Emigrants:’ Forging Connections at the Borders of a Female Tradition,” Susan J. Wolfson suggests Smith “undermines the Burkean ethic of chivalry, of men going to war to protect the women of hearth and home” (Wolfson, 534). In a single sentence, Smith genders war as masculine and refuses to write in that language: Smith will not use the militaristic epic form.

Rather than tracking Smith’s allusions to her male predecessors and contemporaries like Wolfson does in her essay, I will trace where Smith *departs* from literary conventions in her use of “I,” in her gendering of war as masculine and Liberty and Freedom as feminine, and finally in her use of the mother, in order to demonstrate a reading that conflates revolutionary politics and gender politics. In this way, Smith creates a polemic, compassionate antiwar poem that moves

beyond the troubles of the actual emigrants from Revolutionary France, and thus evoking the “war of the sexes.”

I first would like to call attention to Smith’s dedication to William Cowper, since she explicitly outlines her intention to depart from epic generic convention. Smith writes:

I was gradually led to attempt in blank verse, a delineation of those interesting objects which happened to excite my attention, and which even pressed upon a heart that has learned, perhaps from its own sufferings, to feel acute though unavailing compassion the calamity of others (101).

Here, Smith openly discloses that she will not follow that narrative structure of the epic: she will not tell the tale of one man and his adventures, but instead will write of “those interesting objects which happen to excite [her] attention.” She also immediately calls attention to her “own sufferings” and justifies writing of them so that she can “feel acute though unavailing compassion the calamity of others.” Thus, Smith herself informs the reader that she is aware that she is not writing the typical epic poem. She also suggests that this different rendering of the form (especially given that she’s a woman) can be read as compassionate, and as we will see, she writes sentimentally throughout “The Emigrants,” but not without Reason.

A caveat to my argument that Smith does not have inherent “egotism” in comparing her own suffering with that of the emigrants, is Smith’s first allusion to her own predicament in Book One. The reason that this first self-referential moment can be read as somewhat “egotistical” is because it can only be read literally as Smith’s dire situation rather than as symbolic for women’s universal suffering or as a suggestion that she can empathize with the emigrants. Smith writes, “How often, when my weary soul recoils/from proud oppression, and from legal crimes.” “Legal crimes” literally refers to her husband’s debts and the fact that she had to live in debtor’s prison with him. This would not have been problematic had this allusion been in Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets*, which are biographical and do not claim to be read as

delineating the suffering of anyone other than the persona (or Smith). But here, Smith claims to be writing of the emigrants (the poem's namesake), so it feels out of place for her to bring up her own situation without framing it in a way to say, "I understand how you feel, for I have suffered."

This is the only place in the poem for me, where Smith is somewhat "egotistical;" every other location where she alludes to her personal life, she does so in a way that goes beyond the personal and into the realm of the political. For example, later she writes to the emigrants, "I lament your fate," or "I mourn your sorrows, for I too have known/Involuntary exile." In this way, Smith gives a legitimate reason for bringing up her own situation: she knows what it is like to be wretched and in abject circumstances. And as the emigrants sail in to England's shore, Smith brings up the mother who "lost in melancholy thought," mourns for her native land. In this way, Smith can truly demonstrate her empathy as an emigrant herself and as a mother.

In the same stanza, Smith genders peace as female and suggests that solitude is the only escape from men's society. She writes, "How often do I half abjure society...For I have thought that I should then behold/the beauteous works of God unspoiled by man...Peace, who delights in solitary shade,/No more will spread for me her downy wings." Smith claims here that she must withdraw from England's patriarchal society. She wants to escape her domineering and philandering husband and look upon the God's world, which in solitude is "unspoiled by man." I take "man" to literally mean "men," rather than humankind. Throughout my reading of this poem, I will continue to read "men" in this way. Smith's gendering of peace as feminine cannot "spread for [her] her downy wings," because it is impossible to live in seclusion or "solitary shade," and thus peace cannot be Smith's escape from society; Smith cannot fly away. These

quoted lines are the first instance of the gendering that occurs in the poem: of the world being “spoiled” by men and women as representing the prospect of peace.

The most important passage in Book One is where Smith genders Liberty as feminine.

She writes:

...There arise
The infernal passions: Vengeance, seeking blood,
And avarice, and Envy’s harpy fangs
Pollute the immortal shrine of Liberty
Dismay her votaries, and disgrace her name.

The “infernal passions” can refer to the realm of the dead in ancient mythology. Vengeance and presumably are violent they “seek blood” and “pollute” Liberty, who can be seen as a religious figure (“votaries” is one who is bound by vows to a religious life; a monk or a nun. This could also refer to the emigrants, who were Catholic clergy.) By rendering Liberty as a religious figure, “disgracing her name” is suggestive of taking the lord’s name in vain. Therefore, disgracing Liberty’s name can be read as a form of blasphemy. The single word that complicates this passage from the masculine vengeance/avarice and the feminine liberty is the “harpy.”

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “harpy” means “a fabulous monster, rapacious and filthy, having a woman’s face and body and a bird’s wings and claws, and supposed to act as a minister of divine vengeance.” What does it mean that Envy can be gendered female? Is it a contraction in Smith’s argument? This problem is especially significant because in Book Two, Smith calls men “monsters” of war. Why would Smith use the word harpy here?

Moving to Book Two and deeper into the realm of the French Revolution, Smith more overtly alludes to the particular situation of the emigrants. She explains that the “lorn” (lost, perished, doomed to destruction) exiles are “amid the storms/Of wild disastrous anarchy” where “Desolation” (counterrevolutionary forces) riot. Smith uses the storm metaphor to describe

France's state of chaos—that Liberty and Freedom's name had been “usurped and misapplied,” beginning the violence of the Reign of Terror. Again, Smith attributes religious connotations to Liberty, claiming that “deluded men” (men here as literally men rather than people) have “profaned her ever-glorious name” (again, evocative of “do not take the lord's name in vain.”)

Smith then claims that the violence of counterrevolution was due to those forces who “resisted” liberty (“the thousands that have bled/resisting her) and that those who sacrificed their lives for liberty are now gone and that most “revert awhile/to the black scroll that tells of regal crimes/committed to destroy her.” Here, “regal crimes” is reminiscent of the phrase “legal crimes” from Book One. This passage can thus be read as a conflation of revolutionary politics, gender politics, and the personal. This is certainly not characteristic of epic's formal conventions, but resonates more poignantly with England's current political and cultural situation.

Smith is somewhat surprising in her sympathy for Marie Antoinette (“I mourn thy sorrows, hapless Queen”)—but her evocation of motherhood unites all women and suggests that the counterrevolutionary forces are destroying the next generation. Smith writes of Marie Antoinette as a “wretched mother, petrified with grief” for the loss of her son, who Smith characterizes as the “most unfortunate imperial boy.” Smith asserts that Marie Antoinette has done penance for her faults of propensity and that the current violence against her is inhumane and unjust. Smith thus aligns herself with Marie Antoinette, not because of Antoinette's regal extravagance and lack of empathy towards her desolate subjects, but because of her position as a woman and mother who is consumed by counterrevolutionary violence. Smith writes of her own experience, that she wants, “to save [her] children from the o'erwhelming wrongs/that have for ten years been heaped on me.” This personal allusion fits within the motherhood paradigm she creates in the figure of Marie Antoinette.

Not only does Smith evoke Marie Antoinette as a mother figure for sympathy, but she also tells the tale of a woman on the mountaintop who dies in the brutality of war. Like Marie Antoinette, the woman is a mother who is “true to maternal tenderness;” she tries to save her infant from the “storm” (note the recurrent counterrevolutionary metaphor.) The mother sacrifices herself to save her child, who is “the last dear object of her ruined hopes,” the only object left suggestive of the promise of Liberty: the mother and her child “perish both.” Through her representation of mothers (a noble exile from Book One, Marie Antoinette, and a commoner), Smith demonstrates the destructive masculine ethos of war. The mothers here are not portrayed as being protected by chivalrous men; they are not at the hearth or the home, instead they are being destroyed.

At first, Smith gendered war as a masculine realm, but she also cites the transformation from men to “prowling monsters.” Smith writes: “. . .and makes/ man lose his nature rendering him more fierce/ than the gaunt monsters of the howling waste.” Man is thus no longer human, but rather something other, something more horrifying than haggard-looking beasts of a wild and desolate region. Later, she writes, “woes such as these does man inflict on man. . .depopulate her [England’s] kingdoms, and consign/ to hears and anguish half a bleeding world!” Here, she returns to the masculine/feminine binary, suggesting that men create war with other men, thereby “depopulating” England, which significantly, is gendered female. Men thus are depicted as monsters and also as the agents of devastation. A “bleeding world” as gendered feminine evokes an image of a mother miscarriaging, and thus men are initiating self-inflicting wounds—engendering an apocalypse. The lines, “With savage fangs, to tear her [Liberty’s] bleeding breast;/ Restrain that rage for power that bids a man,/ himself a worm. . .” also supports this point. Power induces men to destroy Liberty (the release of bondage or imprisonment.) Smith calls men

a “worm,” vermin low to the ground, naked, creeping and objectionable. There is nothing chivalric about men going to war in this image.

And yet, Smith ends “The Emigrants” on a hopeful note:

May lovely Freedom in her genuine charms,
Aided by stern but equal Justice, drive
From the ensanguined earth the hell-born fiends
Of Pride, Oppression, Avarice and Revenge
That ruin what thy mercy made so fair!

Here, Smith prays that Freedom with the aid of Justice might be able to rid earth of the “hell-born fiends” (the arch-enemy of mankind, or the devil). She then transcends gender with the last line: “Reign of Reason, Liberty and Peace!” suggesting an ideal resolution where the war of the sexes has ended. No Reign of Terror, but a Reign of “Reason, Liberty and Peace.”

Betsy Bolton observes in her essay, “Becoming the Evil We Deplore: Charlotte Smith’s Cautionary Nationalism,” that “when she [Smith] observes injuries in others, she promptly draws attention to a parallel injury of her own.” I absolutely agree and I see this observation not as evidence for egotism, but confirmation of an intense compassion not only for the emigrants, but also for women. To me, Smith uses the emigrants as a jumping off point for her own feminist fight for women, the bringing together of revolutionary politics and gender politics. It seems to me that Smith did not fail in employing the epic form of the male canon. Instead, she created an impassioned, politicized declamation.