

2004

## Plain Style, or the High Fashion of Empire: Colonialism, Resistance and Assimilation in Adam Smith's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres

Lori Branch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Branch, Lori (2004) "Plain Style, or the High Fashion of Empire: Colonialism, Resistance and Assimilation in Adam Smith's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 33: Iss. 1. Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol33/iss1/33>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

Lori Branch

Plain Style, or the High Fashion of Empire: Colonialism,  
Resistance and Assimilation in Adam Smith's  
*Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*

Adam Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* have attracted relatively little critical attention since their discovery in 1958 in an unpublished student notebook from Glasgow University, 1762-63. The few critics who have addressed the *Lectures* have generally spoken to their place in the history of ideas of English pedagogy, where their framing concepts remain even today in high school and college composition classes which stress plain, practical style focused on logic, persuasion, and factual description.<sup>1</sup> Smith's influence on rhetorical pedagogy came through his student and later colleague Hugh Blair, who borrowed Smith's lecture notes in 1759 to prepare his own *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, which comparison shows to be in large part verbatim appropriation of Smith with expanded examples from literature to support his points. Blair published his version of *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, and this book achieved wide popularity throughout the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries and sustained an astonishing number of reprints in Britain and America, with Charles Kneupper even calling it "a blue-

---

<sup>1</sup>All citations of Smith's *Lectures* are from Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. with Intro. by J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis, 1985). Henceforth Smith. I owe a debt of gratitude to Janet Sorensen of Indiana University for her generous feedback on an earlier version of this essay.

print for the 20<sup>th</sup>-century American Department of English".<sup>2</sup>

Readings of Smith's *Lectures* which emphasize their resonance with contemporary ideas of English education can tacitly imply an acceptance of those ideas; the *Lectures* can easily seem part of the Enlightenment improvement of education, and the persistence of their ideas, like the persistence of Smith's economic ideas from *Wealth of Nations* in day-to-day American life, would seem to attest to their inherent common sense. Nowhere are such assumptions more explicit than in the *Library Classics* textbook edition of the *Lectures* which I have used in this article. The publication-data page informs us that "Liberty Classics is a publishing imprint of Liberty Fund, Inc., a foundation established to encourage study of the ideal of a society of free and responsible individuals." The implication is clear: Adam Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* is a timeless classic, literally bound up in the eternal universal notion of human freedom, both embodying that ideal and further its circulation.

A text is never so transcendentally timeless, though; it has its origin in a particular material and ideological history. As such, the appropriation of a text as classic is never so simple, and never ideologically innocent, either, for it erases that historical context in order to allow the contemporary context alone to determine the content of the text. In so doing, it simply replicates its own ideology under the guise of reading the transcendent meaning communicated by the text. It is my contention that contemporary criticism has yet to recover the particular historical context of Adam Smith's *Lectures* and, as such, it has erased the meaningful dialogue between the past and present which such a recovery might engender. Thus in this essay I seek to recover the particular historical context of Smith's *Lectures*, enabling a reading of them that does more than replicate their or our ideologies of reading and writing and that allows the past to recover its strangeness.

Situated in their historical context, the *Lectures* represent not abstract theorizations of good writing but rather an attempt by Smith to navigate the volatile political and economic context of internal colonialism which Michael Hechter has argued existed between England and Scotland in the eighteenth century after the 1707 Act of Union. Adam Smith's classic articulations of exchange in *Wealth of Nations* and what I contend are its ethical and linguistic corollaries—moral sentiment in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the English plain style in the *Lectures*—mark a colonial subject's attempts to reconcile both colony and colonizer by the promises of the mutual advantage of peaceful economic interdependence and cultural exchange. In one sense, the *Lectures* seem to create a potential space for resistance to English cultural hegemony by pointing to the performativity of Englishness and Britishness; after all, the

---

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Lois Einhorn, "The Most Significant Passage in Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 17 (1987), 290.

*Lectures* themselves comprise a how-to course for young Scots in adopting a certain British cultural nationalism, which students ostensibly sought to use for their own gain and purposes. However, the plain style which Smith also holds up as common sense—a rhetoric based on fluidity and ease of one-time reading—replicates values of efficiency and interchangeability in the service of profit that ultimately inscribe Scots into an English system of cultural value, driven by market concerns: values and ideologies that actually efface even Smith's own resistance to it. Far from expressing a simple, unified truth about rhetoric and exchange, Smith's *Lectures* embody and articulate some of the most pressing problems of exchange and globalization even today—whether, for instance, the common-sense linguistic interchangeability he posits allows the fair communication of difference, or effaces it, and to what extent it is possible to resist the values of the market from within.

The 1707 Act of Union incorporated England, Wales and Scotland into Great Britain and situated Scotland as a unique third term during the rise of European cultural and political nationalism in the century that followed. Neither an original, historic nation-state like England or France, united by an ancient monarchy and legitimated by the narrative which kingdom produced, nor a land like Italy or the German-speaking states which had to try desperately to compete via their own nationalisms, with the uneven distribution of wealth and power which the developing capitalism of other countries imposed on them, Scotland in the years following the union was on the brink of catching up, as it were, or of just having caught up to the status of stable, established nation, thus bypassing a nationalistic self-defense against capitalism. Tom Nairn writes that Scotland “not only ‘made it,’...it also produced the general formula for ‘making it’”; Scotland was “a prodigy among the nations indeed” which “had progressed from fortified castles and witch-burning to Edinburgh New Town and Adam Smith, in only a generation or so.”<sup>3</sup>

For Scotland, “catching up” was as much a subjective sense of catching up with England as it was any objective development, and the more objective economic advancements came at the cost of acknowledging English cultural hegemony and becoming “English” in myriad ways. This process of Anglicization was carried out largely by lowland Scots who already shared many cultural similarities with the English—language (though with a heavy accent), Protestantism, agricultural practices, a parliament, and the absence of clans—and who had lived in mutual aggravation with the neighboring highland society for some time. Hechter suggests that for lowlanders, “the political significance of cultural identification was simple,” since only “political stability” would at-

---

<sup>3</sup>Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London, 1977), pp. 110-11, 109.

tract English capital investments in Celtic territories.<sup>4</sup> Scots had to “convince English investors that the political climate was safe for their profits” (Hechter, quoting R. H. Campbell, p.115). But more than safety for English pounds was at stake. Before they could be allowed to participate in relatively free and equitable commerce with England, Scots had to show on every cultural level that they were entering into an English system of value and that they accepted both the notion of exchange and the English authority that set its terms of value.

Increased contact with those English ideas of value spawned what T. C. Smout in *A History of the Scottish People 1560-1830* has dubbed a Scottish “revolution in manners,” noticeable by the 1720s in conduct books such as Adam Petrie’s *Rules of Good Deportment* (1720) and reaching its apex in the 1760s.<sup>5</sup> Exposure to English luxuries led to rising economic expectations among Scots, but the constant assertion of English cultural superiority in everything from architecture and furnishings to food and drink was at least equally responsible for Scottish desire to mimic English ways. Smout writes:

There was no doubt that even highly educated Scots felt themselves backward, boorish and uncouth in the company of the wealthier squirearchy of England with whom they came increasingly in contact. Few landed Scots doubted that England began with a more polite and more desirable civilization than their own, or that it was a duty of patriotism to match and even to outshine the southerners’ model whether it was in teacups, in good tone or...in farming (Smout, pl. 291).

The painful disparity between English good taste and Scottish boorishness seemed especially apparent in clothing. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, for instance, even upper class Scottish daughters and maids did not always wear shoes, and a woman might own only three or four fine gowns in her lifetime. More and more, however, English fashion dictated that both sexes wear shoes at all times and that they own several changes of stylish clothing, creating a steady stream of stylish hand-me-downs for servants to wear as well (Smout, pp. 286-8). By 1800 the Scottish gentry not only enjoyed far more comfortable lives than a century before, “surrounded as they were by nicer and more abundant material possessions,” but as if playing out Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism, “they also reckoned themselves much nicer and politer people than their forefathers” (Smout, p. 289).

If clothing was an especially public sign of one’s Englishness or Scottishness in the years following the Union, so was one’s command of English. Pressures on lowland Scots towards Anglicization demanded not only that they

---

<sup>4</sup>Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975), p.114. Henceforth Hechter.

<sup>5</sup>T. C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People, 1560-1830* (London, 1970), pp. 285-301. Henceforth Smout.

speak grammatically correct English, but that they render their accent and vocabulary as undetectably Scottish as possible:

Educated Scots began to be concerned with eliminating obvious Scotticisms in speech and writing. The Scottish lawyers had much difficulty in being understood in the House of Lords. The adjective 'Scottish' tended to be used as a synonym for rudeness in England, and the leading sectors of Scottish society hastened to educate their children south of the Tweed so they might pass as Englishmen (Hechter, pp. 115-165).

The social and economic incentives to enter British society mobilized an energetic educational movement in Scotland aimed squarely at helping Scots youth assimilate themselves and pass into the lucrative commerce of the British Empire.<sup>6</sup> The middle of the eighteenth century found especially the lowlands earnestly invested in the educational process of "making it" in an ever more English-dominated economy and as part of that domination by virtue of a Britishness it was anxious to master and express.

It was into this moment, on the cusp of mounting and increasingly successful Scottish efforts at passing into British culture and economy, that Adam Smith was born in 1723. The school which he attended as a boy in the thriving export town of Kircaldy had been built by the town council in 1723 expressly as part of the process of Anglicization, attested to by its emphasis on math and science, on Protestant religious orthodoxy, and especially on fluent expression in English. In 1737 at age 14, Smith enrolled at Glasgow University where the active assimilation of English ideas placed the study of Locke and Newton alongside that of Aristotle and Descartes. Eventually Smith would also be awarded a Snell Exhibition fellowship for study at Oxford in a program explicitly designed to assimilate bright Scottish males to English manners and religion in hopes of their influencing their countrymen on their return to Scotland.<sup>7</sup> Compared to the bustling Scots university system, Oxford seemed to Smith stagnated by aristocratic ennui, and it was actually earlier at Glasgow that he had encountered what would prove a deeper assimilationist influence on his life and writings, the thought of Scottish-born professor of moral philosophy Francis Hutcheson.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>See also page 290 as well as chapter XVIII of Smout's *History* for a detailed description of education in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Scotland.

<sup>7</sup>See Ian Simpson Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith* (Oxford, 1995), for Smith's youth and education in Kircaldy, pp. 19-29; for his education at Glasgow University, pp. 29-39. Henceforth Ross.

<sup>8</sup>See Ross, pp. 40-59, which are devoted particularly to his education under Hutcheson and its effects on his future work.

Hutcheson belonged to that strain of philosophical naturalism which stressed the centrality of passions to human nature and rational inquiry into the emotional nature of the soul as the path to virtue. In a broad sense naturalism had its medieval European roots in Aristotelian scholasticism, but in England it had been most widely popularized by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and later by John Locke (1632-1704).<sup>9</sup> Locke was tutor to the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), whose optimistic neo-Platonic philosophy found concrete historical roots in his desire (and earlier that of his grandfather, the first Earl of Shaftesbury) to quell the religious fanaticism and violence of Restoration England by establishing a more universal, less divisively religious basis for peace and English fraternity. Factious political realities motivated Shaftesbury's philosophical quest to free ethics simultaneously from religion and form the Hobbesian notion of virtue as egocentrism, largely by aesthetizing virtue as a state of spiritual beauty naturally present in and perceived by the soul.<sup>10</sup> His passionate belief in tolerance and in the essential benevolence of humanity was taken up and defended by Hutcheson in his 1725 treatise, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue...In Which the Principles of the late Earl of Shaftesbury are explain'd and defended...With an Attempt to introduce a Mathematical Calculation in Subjects of Morality*. In Britain it was perceived, writes Ian Ross, that in this work:

Hutcheson had made an original contribution to philosophy by turning Shaftesbury's hint concerning the existence of a moral sense into a genuine theory to explain our moral judgments as arising from natural feelings of approval and disapproval about motives and actions with respect to their tendency to promote well being. The theory becomes a form of utilitarianism, summed up in the famous phrase: '*that Action is best, which accomplishes the greatest Happiness for the greatest Numbers*' (*Inquiry*, 1725: ii.164). So stirring a slogan gained wide currency...in Smith's second year at Glasgow University, when he was Hutcheson's student and was inspired, as Dugald Stewart wrote, to direct his studies systematically from his youth to 'subjects of the last importance to human happiness' (Ross, p. 51).

In this and Hutcheson's subsequent popular work, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections with Illustrations upon the Moral Sense* (1728), appear the main lines of argument concerning moral psychology

---

<sup>9</sup>See V. M. Hope, *Virtue by Consensus: The Moral Philosophy of Hutcheson, Hume, and Adam Smith* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 12-22, for a concise and imminently readable situation of these authors in the revival of naturalism in their day. Henceforth Hope.

<sup>10</sup>See Hope, pp. 23-49 for a helpful reading of Hutcheson's moral philosophy in relation to Shaftesbury and to various theological debates of his day.

which would later be advanced by David Hume and Adam Smith, both Hutcheson's students, and also by Hume's Irish-born student Edmund Burke.

Just as Shaftesbury's optimistic naturalism can be said to have its historical genesis at least partly in the desire to integrate the violent religious fragmentation of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England, the influence of Shaftesbury's naturalism and aesthetized, sentimentalized ethics on an entire generation of Irish and Scottish philosophers beginning with Hutcheson can be accounted for to an even greater extent by their attempts to negotiate cultural and economic assimilation with England. The embrace of commonly held sensibilities as the basis for human society and ethics—and rhetoric—which arguably reaches its height in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and which also figures prominently in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, marks both an attempt to appease an England hostile to Scots cultural adaptation and ascendancy at mid-century and the means by which colonial subjects like Smith and others embraced the English capitalistic economy and actually created its fullest articulation.

England during the time of Smith's education at Oxford and his tenure as professor at Glasgow and Edinburgh was growing hostile toward Scots success in the English system which, ironically, Scots had been forced to catch up to from a position of relative disadvantage. Linda Colley paints a colorful picture of England's strained relations with its increasingly successful northern neighbor. What Colley describes as "runaway Scottophobia in England after 1760"<sup>11</sup> found its hypostatization in John Wilkes, a "rake on the make," liar and scoundrel who made his fortune tapping into the mainstream of English prejudice against Scots (Colley, pp. 105-17). The Wilkites' populist English patriotism of the early 1760s came complete with every sort of nationalist propaganda: drinking songs, anti-Scottish cartoons, tirades against Scotticisms' pollution of plain English, flag-waving of past highland violence and perpetual Jacobite threat, and even a sort of conspiracy theory that would eventually blame the American Revolution on contamination with Scottish ideas.

After the Battle of Culloden put a nearly genocidal end to the Jacobite Uprising of 1745, Parliament enacted legislation such as the Disarming Act and the Heritable Jurisdictions Act, which forbade the wearing of tartan and substituted royal for clan authority, in order "to undermine the cultural, political and economic distinctiveness of the Scottish Highlands" (Colley, p. 119). Only after this process was well underway did George III and his ministers begin to see Scotland "no longer as the old enemy, and no longer either an alien province to be left gingerly alone or viewed with unrelenting suspicion" but as "useful, loyal and British" (Colley, p. 119). Not only did Scots become

---

<sup>11</sup>Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London, 1992), p. 105. Henceforth Colley.



members of Parliament, they began to be awarded important positions in the government and military, and in amazing numbers. In this context, Wilkes, despite his uncouthness and much-noted physical ugliness, found an eager English audience. His “noisy Scottophobia” and insistence on Scots as “unchangeably alien” to true Englishness, writes Colley, offered “reassurance that plucky Englishmen could win through and maintain their identity amidst the confusions and challenges of the post-war world” (p. 113). In other words, Wilkes assuaged English fears of Scottish interchangeability and possible domination in British society by bolstering the nationalist belief that Scots were not truly interchangeable with Englishmen, and that Englishmen, as the true currency or standard of value in the empire, would and must always be able to control political and economic exchange, and to their own advantage.

Adam Smith’s invisible hand comes sharply into focus, then, as a particularly Scottish effort to appease English fears against Wilkite-inspired Scottophobia: Englishmen could rest assured that a wise, benevolent invisible hand ensured that the mysterious moment of exchange between English and Scots—a moment that was repeated countless times every day and that could potentially destabilize any and every aspect of the hegemonic English status quo—would actually always be fairly controlled, which to English ears meant to no detriment to English advantage. And indeed, this is just the argument Smith made in 1779 when Frederick Howard, 5th Earl of Carlisle, anxiously asked his advice on offering free trade to Ireland; Smith assured him that while free trade would obviously help the Irish, it would do so to the benefit, and not at all at the expense, of the greater British nation.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, Smith’s economic project also served to console anxious Scots who were forced daily and scrupulously to discipline their speech, manners, and clothing and for whom such trade-offs might at any moment become short shrift if exploited by English control. They too needed guarantees of equitable exchange in cultural and economic commerce with England. In a letter to his publisher, William Strahan, in April of 1760, Smith expressed his anxiety that the newly published *Secret History of Colonel Hooke’s Negotiations in Scotland in favor of the Pretender in 1707* would arouse English sentiment against Scotland by resurrecting its Jacobite past, but he made clear that he sympathized with his Scottish forebears because, in the Act of Union, they were entering into a contract and exchange whose outcome was frighteningly unsure:

Nothing, however, appears to me more excusable than the disaffection of Scotland at that time. The Union was a measure from which infinite good has been derived to this country. The Prospect of that good, however, must then have appeared very remote and very uncertain. The immediate effect of it was to hurt the interest of every single order of men in the country.... No wonder if at that time all orders of

---

<sup>12</sup>See John Rae, *Life of Adam Smith* (New York, 1965), pp. 350-52. Henceforth Rae.

men conspired in cursing a measure so hurtful to their immediate interest. The views of their Posterity are now very different; but those views could be seen by but few of our forefathers, by those few but in a confused and imperfect manner (Smith, p. 150).

The chancy deal of the Union yielded immense profit to Scotland and in a way became Smith's strongest argument for capitalism and free trade. And this infinite good he articulated in straightforwardly economic and imperial terms: the "trade to the Plantations was, indeed, opened to them" (Smith, p. 150). The Union was a trade-off—an exchange of initial discomfort for increased future opportunities, of assimilation to English manners and speech for acceptance into the English economy and for the luxuries and status which acceptance brought—and one that was still being negotiated every day in the often tense relations between self-conscious Scots and suspicious Englishmen, both shaped by political interests and a volatile press.

Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* are profoundly engaged, then, in the project of assuring Scots of the fairness and ultimate good to be derived from continuing to enter into cultural assimilation and economic commerce with England. Speaking not to Englishmen who need primarily to be assured, in terms of the *Wealth of Nations*, that what benefits the individual Scot will benefit Britain as a whole, in the *Lectures* Smith seeks to teach his fellow Scotsmen how to make themselves exchangeable in English culture by one of the most difficult and unavoidable marks of Englishness—language—and to convince them that they are not translating themselves into particularly English terms but, in the discourse of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, into universal terms of morality and sentiment which all human beings can partake in equally and fairly. Smith's position, brilliantly negotiated between Scottishness and Englishness, is significantly still always Scottish: a view of English culture and value systems by an outsider, by one who was able to articulate the theory of exchange and free trade best and most convincingly perhaps because he approached it both from the outside, with fresh eyes as it were, and as one who himself had made it in the system from without. Read in this light, not as a pre-determined English classic securely within a stable tradition of rhetorical truths and English ideals, the *Lectures* recover their pastness and appear indeed strange to us, revealing the historical and economic rather than abstract and universal roots of modes of teaching English rhetoric that invented English as a profession and continue in many ways to govern its pedagogical practices today.

In *Ends of Empire*, Laura Brown centers her reading of Pope on a provocative recursive mediation on his famous couplet from *Essay on Criticism* (1711): "True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest, / What oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Exprest." Dressing was a natural and even almost automatic trope for rhetoric in this period, she writes, and the recurrent

"dressed/expressed" end-rhyme of the era had the status of what Hugh Kenner calls a normal rhyme, which "convinces its readers that it represents a connection natural and inherent to 'the workings of a normal mind.'"<sup>13</sup> In addition, dress and fashion became the eighteenth-century prototype for commodification and the commercialization of English culture (Brown, p. 112). Smith's *Lectures* display his great familiarity with Pope as with a host of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English poets and rhetoricians, and so it is no surprise that in the first recorded lecture Smith likens good English to good taste in clothing.<sup>14</sup>

Our words must not only be English and agreeable to the custom of the country but likewise to the custom of some particular part of the nation. This part undoubtedly is formed of the men of rank and breeding. The easiness of those persons' behaviour is so agreeable and taking that whatever is connected with it pleases us.... For this reason we love both their dress and their manner of language. On the other hand many words as well as gestures or peculiarities of dress give us an idea of some thing mean and Low in those in whom we find them.... We may indeed naturally expect that the better sort will often exceed the vulgar in the propriety of their language...by the association we form betwixt their words and the behavior we admire in them. It is the custom of the people that forms what we call propriety (Smith, pp. 405).

Brown comments on the passage from Pope's *Essay on Man* on different "styles" as a sustained analogy to dress and fashion (Brown, p. 127-8), and a vast amount of Smith's two-hundred-page *Lectures* constitutes a similar analogy. One of the recurring tropes in his discourse of language as fashion and clothing is that of words "suited" or "fitting" the ideas they wish to express. For instance, in his pragmatic approach to rhetorical ornament, Smith says that figures "give no beauty of their own, they only are agreeable and beautiful when they suit the sentiment and express in the neatest manner the way in which the speaker is affected" (Smith, p. 33). In the "dressed-expressed" equation, words and figures of speech also evoke the image of interchangeable suits of clothing which a speaker or writer wears according to the occasion: "the same sentiment may often be naturally and agreeable expressed and yet

---

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Laura Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca and London, 1993), pp. 108-109. Henceforth Brown.

<sup>14</sup>The first lecture in the manuscript is actually numbered as the second lecture in Smith's course because the student's notebook does not include the opening lecture. In his introduction to the *Lectures*, J. C. Bryce speculates that the opening lecture likely attempted an overview of the method and subject matter of the course, particularly the elements of classic rhetoric which would not be covered (Smith, pp. 13-14). In quoting from the *Lectures*, I occasionally make corrections in spelling and punctuation which Bryce forgoes in his effort to maintain the integrity of the manuscript.

the manner be very different according to the circumstances of the author" (Smith, p. 34).

Smith's use of the dressed/expressed idea differs significantly, however, from Pope's and other early-eighteenth-century writers' use of it. Daniel Defoe in *An Essay upon Projects* (1697) and Jonathan Swift in *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712) both speak of good English in terms of style, dress, and expression, but only in a larger discourse of wishing to correct and standardize it permanently. Both Defoe and Swift speak of bad English not simply as bad taste but as a criminal act, in which "coining" new words becomes tantamount to counterfeiting<sup>15</sup> and in which shortening spoken words approaches the economic piracy of clipping coins and so violating the country's gold standard<sup>16</sup>; the solvency, sovereignty, and cultural purity of the English nation is at stake in each speech act, and so speech acts, both Defoe and Swift suggest, ought to be strictly governed by a language academy on the French model.

For Smith in the passage quoted above, however, English does not appear to be the gold standard of linguistic or of literary value, to be set in weights and measures by a royal society or immutably determined in a grammar. Good English is fundamentally more like clothing: it is style, which people best learn not by rules but by seeing and hearing and so developing a natural taste for it. Again, Smith's view of the economic and cultural interchange of Great Britain is not abstract or objective, but that of an outsider looking anxiously into the English system of exchange, trying to analyze it, to navigate it, and to help his Scottish students navigate it. From this vantage, standard English was nothing sacred as it was for Defoe, Swift and other English writers. Proper English was merely determined by custom, and the same natural sentiment that made a young Scots student admire the gentility of the well-to-do would cause him to imitate their language as well. Proper English was but part of the revolution of manners going on even as Smith lectured in his own perfectly de-Scotticized voice. Just as Scots students could put on shoes and fashionable waistcoats the better to circulate in British society, so too with the same honest pragmatism they could put on standard English. The very existence of the *Lectures* and the frequency with which Smith redelivered them would seem potentially to point to Englishness—the pride of the Wilkites and what Colley sees as the great construct and secular religion of Enlightenment Britain—as a construct and to have threatened at any moment to reveal its transcendent superiority as a carefully tailored costume.

---

<sup>15</sup>See Daniel Defoe, *An Essay upon Projects* (Menston, England, 1969), pp. 236-7.

<sup>16</sup>See Jonathan Swift, *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*, in *a Letter to the Lord High Treasurer* (London, 1712), pp. 15, 21-29.

This pragmatic view of culture must have been imminently acceptable to students in Glasgow and Edinburgh, because they flocked to the course year after year. Not only was there apparently nothing humiliating about the cultural copy-catting of English vocabulary, style, and accent, but Smith's interpretation of London English—of the element of English culture held so sacred by Wilkites and southerners who made conformity to it a passport to British society—as nothing more than fashion which the ambitious young person could easily acquire was potentially subversive. To imply that Englishness was up for sale in local self-improvement courses, as it were—in other words, that it was performative and not part of a mysterious inner virtue that legitimated England's domination of other nations in war and trade, that it was not a timeless and unchanging essence but a shifting nexus of culture *à la mode*, that it was perhaps something one did (and hence could learn to do), not what one was—would seem to have created a space for potential resistance to the narrative of Britishness and empire that marched triumphantly across the eighteenth-century globe.

A Scot who can linguistically “pass” as an Englishman becomes analogous to the disruptive figure of the cross-dresser whose success at passing points to the performativity of whatever social category (gender, class, nationality) of which he passes as a member.<sup>17</sup> The active discouragement of speaking Scots or of infecting English with Scotticisms, social realities to which the *Lectures* allude, would seem automatically to figure Scots as a rival system of cultural value. What could have seemed wrong, then, with performing Scottish nationalism, if Englishness was just performativity dressed up as norm?

The *Lectures* seem to suggest other potential sites of resistance as well. Smith's study of poetry, for example, was not simply a practical or economic endeavor. One of his early biographers refers to it as his “addiction,” and by all accounts he could recite numerous favorite passages by heart (Rae, pp. 34-5). His love for poetry seems to have extended far beyond its use value, its worth in cultural exchange, and he specifically lamented the aesthetically dulling effects of commerce on language. The constant exposure to unfamiliar languages occasioned by trade, he argued, caused beautiful, complex, languages such as Greek and Latin, with their intricate conjugations and declensions and subsequent eloquence and freedom of word order, to become simpler in word forms but more clumsy and determined as to word order, yielding the

---

<sup>17</sup>For extended analyses of cross-dressing as resistance, see Marjorie Gerber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York, 1992), Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), and Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York, 1995). To my mind, Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry is of noteworthy but limited use in elaborating the way the *Lectures* rather ineffectually point to the constructedness of British cultural value; see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, 1994), pp. 85-92.

less sonorous, less beautiful (though more well-suited for trade) modern vernaculars such as English (Rae, pp. 12-14). The market economy, in other words, seems to Smith to rob language of its beauty, diversity, and particularity. Why shouldn't such reservations have led educated Scots in large numbers to challenge the cultural imperialism by which England remade nearly every aspect of Scottish culture into its own image and made this seem acceptable, normal, and even desirable to Scots themselves? Why not cultivate the study of Scots, create a canon of Scots literature in place of the English one Smith was exporting to Scotland? The performativity of cultural nationalism to which Smith's outsider's view of Englishness unmistakably points opens the rhetoric of cultural nationalism to all of these critiques.

But Smith was far from a free agent for Scotland; he was negotiating between two cultural systems in a way meant—in his mind and to his audiences—to be fair and agreeable to both. To navigate between competing cultures and histories, Smith embraced an economic conception of abstraction and exchange value which he articulated in the broadest possible terms, extending it to ethics and culture as well. Seeking to negotiate a British cultural norm satisfactory to Englishmen as well as to Scots, Smith did not stop at comparing proper English to fashion. In fact, he insisted that the merit or dignity of learning English literature and rhetorical style was that English literature is *not* merely arbitrary or parochial. Rather, Smith constantly and explicitly defended English literature and the proper English style as common sense, as embodying shared sentiment, sensibility, and practicality—true values which all rational people share. It is here that his potentially subversive position weakens and central tensions in the text appear. Smith suggests that the plain style—brief and rational in a unifying, expressly Newtonian sense—should be adopted because it is natural common sense, and yet these thirty *Lectures* amount to a seminar on how to write this ostensibly natural language. Moreover, even the style analogy carried tense valences in the 1760s; barely over a decade before, the British Parliament had made manifestly clear that there was more to fashion than changing one's clothes when it forbade the wearing of Highland tartans and kilts under penalty of imprisonment. A Highland Scot adopting English dress under these circumstances could hardly achieve the transgressive status of a cross-dresser; in this context, could London English ever be just another suit of clothes that fits a Scot as well as any other?

On the surface Smith asserts in the *Lectures* that standard English naturally suits the common sense of his audience. And yet, the *Lectures* comprise a sort of diet of literary texts and a regimen of reading and rhetorical exercise which actually change the Scottish subject's cultural perceptions of the plain English style and its attendant logics to that of a natural fit. The mode of reading literature taught by Smith links the particularity of individual literary texts to universal morality via sentiment, specifically sentiment which is democratically transcendentalized by its status as common sense; the body of

English literature to which he refers is the high fashion of empire. To be common, however, this transcendent moral value must be capable of being abstracted from a poem in the form of a prose maxim or prepositional truth. As the *Lectures* show, this mode of reading simultaneously and tautologically determines what texts qualify as good literature—valuable in terms of their currency exchange as sentiment and common sense—and perpetuates that sense as common and transcendent thereafter.

The idea of the “plain style” lends itself especially well to the replication of economic, imperialist sorts of reading and ideology. In one of his most telling descriptions of the good style or “perspicuity,” Smith says that good writing should flow over us like the blissful waters of Lethe, literally washing us in the author’s sense:

A natural order of expression free of parentheses and superfluous words is likewise a great help toward perspicuity; in this consists what we call easy writing which makes the sense of the author flow naturally upon our mind without our being obliged to hunt backwards and forwards in order to find it. Bollingbroke especially and Swift have excelled most in this respect; accordingly we find that their writings are so plain that one half asleep may carry the sense along with him...if we happen to lose a word or two, the rest of the sentence is so naturally connected with it as that it comes into our mind of its own accord (Smith, pp. 6-7).

If good writing puts us to sleep, then bad writing is something we must be awake for:

On the other hand Writers who do not observe this rule often become so obscure that their meaning is not to be discovered without great attentions and being altogether awake.... Short sentences are generally more perspicuous than long ones as they are more easily comprehended in one view; but when we intend to study conciseness, we should avoid the unconnected way of writing which we are then very apt to run into, and at the same time is of all the most obscure... [The plain style] is very improper for Orators or public speakers, as their design is to rouse the passions, which are not affected by a plain simple style, but require the attacks of strong and perhaps exaggerated expressions.... What are generally called ornaments or flowers in language, as allegorical, metaphorical, and such expressions are very apt to make one’s style dark and perplex’d (Smith, pp. 7-8).

Here and elsewhere Smith tells us plainly that a good text can be read through quickly one time, for content, in a useful and efficient manner, and he flatly advises against reading authors who can’t be read in this way. If this economic rhetorical style—this market- and empire-friendly mode of reading—is about accumulating an ever-increasing number of new facts and truths, and also about transmitting a system of cultural value, then it must mask what Michel de Certeau calls its litanies, its repetitive belief mechanisms, and it does this by

constructing recursive reading (which texts that might challenge common sense would likely necessitate) as indicative of a slow mind and a bad text.<sup>18</sup>

Smith asserts that good style deals more in simple reason than in convoluted passions, and that if passions occasionally seem to take control of a good text, it is because they do so naturally, in accord with common sense—and tautologically too, since for these passions to be so strong and irresistible, they must constitute a legitimate use of force, so to speak (Smith, p. 18). Much of what classical rhetoric sought to systematize into elaborate rules, such as *dispositio* or arrangement of arguments, is left unanalyzed in Smith precisely because he considers style to be inherent in common sense; if a proposition is right and persuasive, it will naturally order itself (Smith, p. 148). A person whose thoughts are in good order, for example, simply won't write in long sentences that require us to slow down and read them over and over (p. 23), and we may logically deduce that someone who writes long or difficult sentences *de facto* doesn't make sense and shouldn't be read. Brown, in her reading of dress and commodity fetishism, writes that "later in the eighteenth century, when the process of commodification is more advanced, [the] cultural concern to penetrate the mystery of the commodity is largely lost" (p. 120). Smith seems to be speaking from just this point in the commodification process, when relations between things replace relations between people and human beings themselves can come to be defined as objects; he literally equates a person's style of language with his character-value when he says that "the style of an author is generally of the same stamp as their character" (p. 35). In the effort to articulate a cultural currency that can circulate between Englishmen and Scots, and built on the assumption of the objective abstractability of moral sentiment which Smith was so invested in, rhetoric—specifically the plain style—becomes character.

This logic of exchange, equivalence and interchangeability colors Smith's concept of literary and linguistic value at every level. In contradistinction to classic rhetoric's high esteem of the worth of tropes and figures for conveying powerful ideas, he goes to great lengths to impress on his students that words and figures are not powerful of themselves, but rather that the transcendentalizing force of sentiment and common sense lends power to individual expressions which embody it (Smith, pp. 25-6). Acceptable texts must stand up to logical dissection by embodying this logic of exchange in the crucial sense that they must have an interchangeable, exchangeable, summarizable meaning. And thus this constitutes another argument against poetic metaphors; Smith scolds poets from Shakespeare to Milton to Pope—all of whom he admired and many of whose poems he knew by heart—for lapsing into the irrationality

---

<sup>18</sup>See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 177-89.



of poetic figures. Speaking of James Thomson's poem *The Seasons*, Smith says rather humorously:

Thomson has several slips of this sort, though much fewer than Shakespeare. There are, I believe, three or four in the first lines of his *Seasons*. In the first line Spring is addressed as some genial quality in the air, but in the next it is turned into a person and bade *descend, to the sound of music*, which I believe is very hard to be understood, as well as the next, "Veiled in a shower of dropping roses." What sort of veil a shower of roses would make, or connection such a shower has with the Spring, I can not tell. These lines which I believe few understand are generally admired and I believe because few take the pains to consider the author's real meaning or the significance of the several expressions, but are astonished at these pompous sounding expressions (Smith, p. 31).

It is not surprising that Pope is Smith's favorite and most often quoted poet, because his verse is so easily summarizable into an axiomatic prose meaning, and in its terse couplets it is often already an assemblage of axioms or maxims. In a term incorporating both literary and economic value, Pope's verse is maxim-izable; it efficiently maximizes its meaning per word and is easily translatable into maxim. It is because of poetry's resistance to exchange that Smith's love for poems seems largely overridden by a suspicion of it comparable to Plato's in the *Republic*. Poetry is only good when it makes sense the first time around, when its "harmony and regular movement...commands our attention to much that we are never necessitated to Repeat the same thing over a second time." But poetry is generally time-consuming and difficult to read (p. 135), and thus the practicality of prose recommends it as the default setting, as it were, of important rational human communication, for Smith considers "what [it] is that induces one to write in verse rather than prose" (p. 117). Reminiscent of Socrates' caricature in the *Gorgias* of skills like cooking as "knacks" rather than true arts, Smith tropes poetry as a knack like story-telling; its excesses and irrationalities are acceptable only when the story is safely removed from us in antiquity or in foreign lands, for example, and when it is clear that its relation to prose is one of inferiority. Smith makes just such an acknowledgment when he speaks of "pawning stories," making clear that such poems and stories do not constitute a legitimate exchange of maxim-izable truth content (pp. 118-19).

In a very real way then, the problem with poetry is that it is not capitalistic enough. It resists being exchanged into axiomatic truth and thus marks the dangerous site of potential resistance to the logic of exchange as a whole. The ambiguities of poetry entail a mode of reading at odds with the capitalist reading practices Smith is trying to articulate, for

Prose is naturally the langue of business; as poetry is of pleasure and amusement. Prose is the style in which all the common affairs of life, all business and agreements are made. No one ever made a bargain in verse (Smith, p. 137).

Intelligent Scots might read poetry in their leisure time, but even then only poetry that conforms to common sense and the logic of capitalism. They also will write primarily in efficient, economical common-sensical prose; if strong emotions should happen to overcome a speaker or writer, he might perhaps "choose rather" to "borrow" the strategic benefits of verse without ever leaving the realm of common sense (Smith, p. 117). By teaching students how to write and speak proper English in the plain style, Smith has dressed them in the high fashion of empire as it were, because his method for teaching rhetoric includes teaching a mode of reading as well, and one that is infused with the exchange logic of empire at the deepest levels, serving to perpetuate that logic. In Smith's *Lectures* we see a striking example of the way that the greatest power in capitalism becomes precisely the ability to influence what feels natural—what seems like common sense, good taste, high fashion—to large groups of people. What comes to feel natural in the *Lectures* is English language, culture, and economic values of profit, efficiency and exchangeability; what ceases to be natural are any values, whether Scottish or aesthetic, opposed to them.

I contend that this is why Smith's thinking on rhetoric and belles lettres could be, through Hugh Blair, massively appropriated by British educational institutions, just as his economic theories were and continue to be appropriated in Anglo-American society. The potential for resistance in Smith's clothing analogy is undercut by his embrace of an exchange concept of value in the understandable attempt to negotiate the ethical, economic, and linguistic dissonances of empire with the harmonies of universalizing common sense. The abstracting power of exchange lies exactly in its ability to efface particularities: particular reservations about commerce's effect on language, particular tropes that would create a space for resistance, and even particular contradictions in the arguments that yield the exchangeable aphoristic truths of capitalist society itself. David Marshall reveals a similar pattern at work in the theatricality of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, describing Smith's morality as an ethics of constantly being both spectator and spectator (vis-à-vis the "impartial spectator"), one that assumes that the genuine, complete sympathy of the audience is what human beings ultimately need and thrive on.<sup>19</sup> This collective, affective idea of mutual human valuation goes hand-in-hand with the logics of exchange. When a person's place in society is fixed, as in feudalism or the medieval great chain of being, "true emotional sympathy" is little important; what matters is respect looking up the chain, and perhaps genteel benevolence looking down. But once social mobility or interchangeability is posited, then the ultimate term of human value naturally becomes the esteem of the subject in the eyes of the crowd, or of the moral market economy, as it were. Smith's

---

<sup>19</sup>David Marshall, "Adam Smith and the Theatricality of Moral Sentiments," *Critical Inquiry*, 10 (1984), 608.

sympathy is simply a relatively positive appraisal of the value of the Other, in which the Other is posited as an object of exchange whose worth is abstractable into—and eventually simply is—its external symbols of that work, such as styles of language or clothing. The impartial spectator—the higher court to whom we can appeal if the market misappraises us—is to morality what the invisible hand is to economics: the fantasized guarantee that the appraisal of value and the exchange will be fair. Like the easy Lethe-like comfort of reading rhetoric that affirms our common sense, the impartial spectator and the invisible hand are also the exchange system's legitimation, its self-authorization; they mask the ever-present potential of a wrong exchange, a misvalue, a lie, a clipped coin.

The exchange concept of value presents the nearly irresistible temptation to equate abstract valuation with true signification, with epistemology of ontological worth, whether of products or people. Therefore it is especially adept at erasing, in the moment of literary exchange—whether summary, transmission, canon formation—as in the moment of economic exchange, that which *resists* abstraction and exchange, such as Smith's hints at cultural nationalism's performativity and his sense that the market economy robs language of its beauty, diversity, and particularity. Moments in the *Lectures* when Smith speaks of the beauty and sublimity of strange language (Smith, pp. 25-6) eventually are drowned out by the dominant voice expounding the commonsense of plain prose style. Incredibly, Smith was being appropriated in this way before his death and immediately afterwards, even by his Scots colleagues and students. Dugald Stewart, his pupil, long-time friend and first biographer, covered Smith's love for poetry in a coat of pragmatic whitewash even in his earliest versions of Smith's *Memoirs*, claiming that "his passion for letters served only to amuse his leisure and to animate his conversation" and calling his leisure not devoted to refining the many editions of *Wealth of Nations* a "waste" and "dissipation" of his spirits away from "labours more profitable to the world and more equal to his mind" (qtd. in Rae, p. 333).

Read in their specific historical context, Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* speak to us at once of the problems and of the immense power of the ideas of exchange and cultural nationalism which their author attempted to negotiate. In so doing, they not only engender new readings of the economics we have inherited from their author, but they provoke a dialogue about the rhetorical economies which, perhaps strangely, are his legacy to us as well. Smith's troping of good language as fashion may oppose the more absolutist claims for the English language made by other writers such as Defoe and Swift, but his text's potential resistance to English cultural hegemony ultimately stalls out, for to speak of languages and cultures as interchangeable suits of clothing is already to be within a system of exchange. The logics of exchange at work in the *Lectures* produced an economics of reading that prevented the *Lectures'* caveats about exchange from being circulated into the

common parlance of English education. Ironically, the powerful discourse of exchange value, which Smith endorses only half-heartedly, erased his particular qualms about that discourse, enabling him to be appropriated, indirectly via Blair and directly via the monolithic *Wealth of Nations* (which displays its own fears about capitalism), as the great whole-hearted defender of imperial capitalism and English-speaking cultural hegemony even today.

Dialogue with the *Lectures* and their history should prompt careful inspections of the ways our reading practices negotiate the discourse of exchange value and knowledge production which legitimate our academic pursuits in the eyes of the state institutions that fund these pursuits. In attempting to expose the particular histories which transcendentalizing readings of the English literary canon have effaced, we are always confronted with the temptation to abstract the value of these same texts into particular axioms about history, politics, and economics, thereby opening our own reading practices to the same charges of reductionism we launch against earlier criticism. Michael Hechter writes that it was when the mid-nineteenth century produced "widespread evidence of increasing Anglicization plus English attitudes towards the backwardness of Scotland"—or we might say, when what was promised to be fair exchange guided by the invisible hand began to seem like English sleight of hand—that Scottishness began to be articulated in nationalist and anti-English terms (Hechter, p. 116). Even in well-meant practices aimed at doing justice to oppressed classes in the past and present, further injustices to texts may be done if we limit their value to certain types of political and economic currency, and, as heirs of our reading practices, like fifth and sixth generation post-Union Scots, future students may feel shortchanged by our system of literary value and challenge it with practices that may fail or succeed at better doing justice to texts. The *Lectures'* entanglement with the temptation of exchange value on the economic, ethical, and literary levels urges us above all to keep in mind the radical incommensurabilities of language and of the Other as we try to do justice to the Other in particular textual instances.<sup>20</sup>

*University of Iowa*

---

<sup>20</sup>I wish to thank Heidi LaVine for assistance in preparing this article.