“The Daughter of a New Era”: Antebellum Feminist Discourse in Elizabeth Oakes Smith’s *Bertha and Lily*¹

Holly Kent, *Lehigh University*

When asked by her skeptical suitor, Ernest Helfenstein, what, exactly, a world of complete gender equality might look like, the feminist heroine of Elizabeth Oakes Smith’s 1854 novel *Bertha and Lily; or The Parsonage of Beech Glen, A Romance*, replies confidently. Once the world has been freed from the curse of gender oppression (which, she affirms assuredly, will undoubtedly occur soon), Bertha asserts that women “will live in nearer relations with the Divine, than it is the nature of the *more material masculine element to do*; she will be more serene, more holy, more peace-loving—she will tend more exclusively to the beautiful. She will do great things, but in a womanly way.”² The issues which Bertha and Ernest’s dialogue raises—of whether or not women could, indeed, achieve complete equality within American society, and whether or not the abolition of gendered separate spheres would lead to the destruction of gender itself—were of vital importance to feminists in the antebellum United States. Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, woman’s rights activists such as Oakes Smith debated what, exactly, a world of complete gender parity might look like, whether womanhood was a fixed essence or a fluid social construction, and what meanings femininity might have in a truly gender egalitarian world.

Although scholars have long examined these debates about gendered spheres and identities within the antebellum woman’s rights movement, few have considered the significant contributions which feminist novelists such as Oakes Smith made to these discussions. A prominent, prolific, and well-respected woman’s rights activist, lecturer, and author during her own lifetime, Oakes Smith’s considerable contributions to antebellum feminist thought have only recently begun to receive the thorough and sustained scholarly attention which has long been given to colleagues such as Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In this paper, I will seek to contribute to the ongoing reevaluation of Oakes Smith’s contributions to antebellum woman’s rights discourse by examining how her most explicitly feminist novel enters into contemporary debates about femininity, identity, and the social construction of gender. While *Bertha and Lily* initially appears to espouse a conservative gendered order, in which women contribute to the public world primarily through their influence over men, the novel in fact offers a far more complex and nuanced vision of gender and activism. Throughout the novel, Oakes Smith insists on the necessity of women breaking out of the straitjacket of antebellum womanhood, while simultaneously exploring the possibility of locating a femininity which can liberate, rather than confine, women.

---

Throughout the speeches made at woman’s rights conventions, and the editorials and articles published in leading woman’s rights periodicals during the 1840s and 1850s, antebellum feminists discussed the question of what impact the radical reforms which they were proposing would have on their society. Would the liberalization of marriage and divorce laws, greater female access to education and the professions, and increased female participation in politics (as conservative critics warned) create a topsy-turvy world in which “masculine” women would forsake their homes, their skirts, and their modesty in favor of the public sphere, leaving men behind to struggle with the (ostensibly rightfully feminine) tasks of housework and child care? While woman’s rights activists were universal in their rejection of such conservative critiques of their movement, they were far from agreed about how feminist reforms would, in fact, reshape existing cultural notions of gendered separate spheres, and women’s and men’s rightful roles. While some activists whole-heartedly embraced the ideal of a post-gender world, in which nothing but an individual’s tastes and capabilities would determine their occupations and pursuits, others insisted that, although current laws and stereotypes imposed unfair limitations on women, divine decrees and biological imperatives nonetheless played a role in shaping women’s and men’s experiences of marriage, parenthood, and participation in public life.4

Bertha and Lily, Oakes Smith’s fourth novel, was her first to take such issues, and the “Woman Question” more generally, as its central theme. Alternately narrated by her woman’s rights activist heroine, Bertha, and her (initially traditional and conservative)

4 For more on these debates within the antebellum woman’s rights movement, see Nancy Isenberg, Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Natasha Kraus, (De)constructing womanhood: The 1850s Woman’s Rights Movement and Discursive Politics (Diss.: University of California, Berkeley, 1999).
hero, Ernest, *Bertha and Lily* traces Bertha’s growth as a feminist thinker, and the conversion of Ernest from a rather ordinary, conventional, and morally lazy young man into a fiery preacher and ardent woman’s rights advocate. Indeed, much of *Bertha and Lily*’s 336 pages is taken up with conversations between Bertha and Ernest about the need for radical feminist reform, and excerpts from Ernest’s diary about the unsettling (and, ultimately, liberating) ideas which Bertha has introduced him to. Although its long passages about the pitfalls of marriage and the flaws inherent in contemporary ideals of womanhood sometimes cause *Bertha and Lily* to resemble a woman’s rights tract more than a novel, it also boasts a lively and engaging (if, at times, dizzyingly complicated) plot. At the beginning of the novel, Bertha returns to her hometown after a lengthy, self-imposed exile, dropping dark hints to the reader about the terrible sin and sorrow which drove her away from her home many years before. As she begins her new life, she becomes close friends with the local minister, Ernest, his charming (but cynical and shallow) cousin Julia, and two mysterious orphan children, Lily and Willy. Hints about the strong likeness and close affinity between the unearthly Lily (who often communicates with the spirit world) and the profoundly spiritual Bertha (who, like Lily, is often described as “angelic” and “divine” by the novel’s other characters) are explained when a mysterious stranger, Nathan Underhill, arrives in town. Nathan reveals that he seduced Bertha in her youth, and then abandoned her and their daughter, Lily, whom Bertha was then forced to give up.\(^5\) After making this revelation, Nathan then conveniently dies, Ernest disavows his former attraction to the frivolous Julia, declares his love for Bertha (whose sexual past, it must be noted, does not trouble him in the

\(^5\) For instances in the text in which Bertha and Lily are described as “divine” and “angelic,” see Oakes Smith, *Bertha and Lily*, 71, 98, 124, 142, 160, 187, 230, 278. For examples of Lily’s communion with the “Child Angel,” see ibid., 83, 97, 108-109, 114, 119, 135, 179, 182, 222.
least), and the novel ends with Ernest, Bertha, Lily, and Willy happily preparing for life together as a family.

As this brief outline of the novel's plot indicates, Bertha and Lily engages with many of the central debates taking place within the antebellum woman's rights movement concerning notions of female chastity and sexuality, inequities in male-female relationships, and societal restrictions on female liberty. Although significant amounts of the text are devoted to all of these subjects, Bertha and Lily is perhaps most concerned with exploring how contemporary notions of womanhood impeded women's ability to realize their full potential. Throughout her writings and speeches from the 1850s, Oakes Smith considered this question, rejecting the concept of gendered separate spheres, and advocating the creation of a new and non-limiting type of femininity. While she continued to affirm that certain traits were inherently feminine, Oakes Smith nonetheless firmly rejected her society's tendency to limit women to one particular set of characteristics or one specific sphere of activity. "I will not," Oakes Smith affirmed in an 1851 speech, "adopt the cant as often uttered in regard to the tenderness or the gentleness supposed to be the only attributes of womanhood."

6 That women often were nurturing and benevolent, Oakes Smith did not dispute: where society erred, she asserted, was in supposing these characteristics to be the only qualities of value which women possessed. Frustrated by the world's tendency to judge women strictly in terms of how well they conformed to Victorian ideals of womanhood, in Bertha and Lily, the feminist heroine asks exasperatedly "[w]hat is it to be virtuous.... [d]oes virtue exist in but one quality; or

---

6 Elizabeth Cakes Smith, "Womanhood," December 31, 1851, 15. I am grateful to Timothy H. Scherman for providing me with a copy of his transcription of this lecture.
is it the combination of many?” Bertha (and Oakes Smith) answered this question by insisting that feminine virtue did not lie in thoughtlessly conforming to the nineteenth century’s narrow and limiting ideal of femininity, but rather in seeking to realize all of one’s capabilities and talents, regardless of societal disapproval.

Indeed, aspiring towards the traditional ideal of femininity, Oakes Smith argued, actually lead women away from virtue. “Make a woman nobly free,” she wrote in her 1851 tract Woman and Her Needs, “and she is the companion of Sages and Philosophers…confine and dwarf her, and she is subtle and dangerous, both to herself and others.” Oakes Smith developed this theme throughout Bertha and Lily, arguing that limiting women to the domestic realm of home and family distorted women’s naturally noble natures, creating, as Bertha noted despairingly, “all the coqueteries of woman, all the wheedling and managing…so many outrages and impositions upon the holiness of our humanity.” Ernest agrees with this assessment, maintaining that under the current system of rigidly differentiated gendered spheres, woman was denied the opportunity to be an intellectually engaged and spiritually aware individual, becoming instead “a puppet, a doll, a slave, a sensualist.” Even Ernest’s conservative cousin Julia (whose sole ambition in life is to settle down to a conventional life of wife- and motherhood with a wealthy husband), admits that “[a] girl-child always makes me sad” because “[t]he world holds so little in store for them.” “I see nothing in the present state of the world,” Julia admits gloomily, “but for women to marry, have large families, talk, gossip, read

---

7 Oakes Smith, Bertha and Lily, 159. For more on the nineteenth century feminine ideal (for white, middle and upper class women), see Barbara Welter’s classic article, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” American Quarterly 18:2 (Summer 1966): 151-174.
9 Oakes Smith, Bertha and Lily, 26.
10 Ibid., 201.
11 Ibid., 79.
cheap books, leave little slips of paper at the houses of women employed like themselves, and then die.” By narrowing women’s horizons to this purely domestic realm, society thus made it impossible for women to fully realize their intellectual and spiritual gifts; ensured that, as Bertha affirms, “[t]he world has known few women of full life, form, soul.” The only limitations which women ought to acknowledge, Bertha asserts, should be those which were rooted, not in societal definitions of women’s proper sphere, but rather in women’s own innate capabilities. “The measure of capacity is the measure of sphere to either man or woman,” Bertha declares, “[woman] should no more shrink from responsibility, from mental or moral greatness, than her Brother.” Ernest echoes this sentiment, vowing that his (remarkably gifted) adopted daughter, Lily


shall waste no power. She shall have the space to be what God designed her....I will help her to all learning—to all culture that shall aid the completion of this exquisite creation. She shall be an artist, an orator, a ruler...just as her faculties impel. I will not dare limit what God has made limitless.

Yet despite Oakes Smith’s rejection of the ideology of separate spheres, and the imposition of any restrictions upon women’s capabilities, she nonetheless argued that there “is a Woman’s sphere, harmonious, holy, and soul-imparting; it has grades, its laws from the nature of things and we must seek for it.” While Oakes Smith’s “woman’s sphere” was determined solely by women’s capabilities, these capabilities were, she indicated, profoundly shaped by gender. In making her arguments that women ought to have equal opportunities with men, Oakes Smith nonetheless argued that women were by no means identical to men; to the contrary, she suggested, women possessed unique

12 Ibid., 80.
13 Ibid., 227.
14 Ibid., 83.
15 Ibid., 182.
16 Oakes Smith, Woman and Her Needs, 6.
virtues and distinctive characteristics which men did not. “[T]here is a finer essence,” Bertha affirms, “allied to the feminine organization, which will always flow like silver threads of harmony, intersecting with her whole career.”17 This fine, feminine essence, Oakes Smith indicates, is perhaps most evident in women’s superior sensitivity to the spiritual, and their more powerful connection to the divine. Woman, Oakes Smith asserted confidently in Woman and Her Needs, “is a step nearer [the Angels] than her material lord and master. The Angels recognize her as of nearer affinity.”18 Oakes Smith reinforces this point throughout Bertha and Lily, consistently emphasizing her title characters’ affinity with the angelic, the unearthly, and the divine. Bertha frequently receives dazzling, divinely-inspired visions of humankind’s utopian future, and Lily continually communes with the “Child Angel,” a benevolent, unearthly presence who (to Ernest’s frustration) only she can see and hear. (It is perhaps worth noting that, unlike Ernest, Bertha can sense the Child Angel’s presence, and vividly recalls having had visitations from a similar spirit when she was a young girl.) While there are certainly female characters in the novel who do not possess Bertha and Lily’s high level of spiritual awareness, Oakes Smith nonetheless creates a stark dichotomy in the novel between her (initially) cynical and worldly male hero and her pure-minded and spiritual female heroines. While Ernest (who, as a minister, might be supposed to have a close and intimate tie to God) struggles to know the divine will, both Bertha and Lily experience an effortless connection to the realm of the spiritual, a connection which, Oakes Smith, indicates, is due in large part to their (naturally purer) female natures.

17 Oakes Smith, Bertha and Lily, 83.
18 Oakes Smith, Woman and Her Needs, 5.
Yet although Oakes Smith lays great stress on her heroine’s remarkable connection to the spiritual realm, much of Bertha’s time in the novel is spent, not pursuing her own career as a visionary feminist activist, but rather inspiring Ernest to realize his potential as a reformer and minister.\textsuperscript{19} Although she “seriously advocates the admission of woman into the pulpit,” the intensely spiritual Bertha devotes her energies, not to seeking a ministerial role for herself, but rather to ensuring that Ernest uses his pastoral influence to further the cause of female equality.\textsuperscript{20} While Oakes Smith devotes only one page to a discussion of Bertha’s work as a woman’s rights activist, she dedicates significant portions of the text to Bertha’s efforts to inspire the (initially indolent and apathetic) Ernest to greatness as a liberal reformer. Bertha herself seems to place more importance on the task of converting Ernest to the cause of reform than she does to pursuing her own career as an orator and author. In one of their many discussions about the respective duties of women and men, Bertha solemnly informs Ernest that “every woman must answer to God for the soul of some man.”\textsuperscript{21} Sounding uncomfortably similar to the conservative thinkers whose ideas she is arguing against, Bertha here affirms that one of women’s primary duties is to ensure the good principles and the good conduct of the men they love.

Bertha clearly takes her own responsibility for Ernest’s soul quite seriously, devoting a significant amount of her considerable energy to transforming the idle, conventional pastor into a fiery, radical reformer. Throughout the novel, Bertha insists on the necessity of transforming one’s principles into action, frequently lecturing the (self-confessedly lazy) Ernest on the need to not only acknowledge the oppression of

\textsuperscript{19} Oakes Smith, \textit{Bertha and Lily}, 322; 333.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 190. Italicizes Oakes Smith’s.
women, but also to work to stop it. These lectures are indisputably necessary to
galvanize Ernest into action since, as his shrewd cousin Julia notes, "Ernest dreams amid
the actual; Bertha lives the actual."²²

Yet despite the fact that the novel stresses Bertha’s superior ability to translate her
words into action, the text nonetheless suggests that Ernest’s metamorphosis occurs less
because of what Bertha says and does than because of what she is. Ernest is ultimately
less impressed by Bertha’s impassioned arguments than he is by her ability to diffuse “a
divine presence—an atmosphere of pure...divinity” about her.²³ It is because “Bertha
was,” so Ernest declared, “in my thought like an inspiring angel" that he felt “a yearning
desire to do some excellent thing in her behalf....long[ed] for the gift of song, of oratory,
of some new or great thought, some grand scheme for human good.”²⁴ Even when he
acknowledges the power of Bertha’s words, rather than her mere presence, Ernest
insistently casts her, not as a rational and independent-minded philosopher, but rather a
passive mouthpiece for the divine. Reflecting on the chaos which Bertha has wrought in
his life, Ernest muses in his diary that, since meeting her, “I find so many prejudices and
opinions of mine...melting away under [her] intuitive truths...I begin to think a clear,
true woman, one of God’s oracles, whose utterances are to be treated most reverently.”²⁵
While Ernest here gives Bertha sole credit for reforming his views and principles, he
nonetheless represents her, not as a independent thinker, but rather as an oracle who
gives voice, not to reasoned, intellectual discourse, but rather to “intuitive truths.” For all
the praise lavished on Bertha’s remarkable intellect, Bertha and Lily indicates that it is its

²² Ibid., 54.
²³ Ibid., 152.
²⁴ Ibid., 319; 62.
²⁵ Ibid., 60.
heroine's intuitive voicing of God's truths, rather than her use of skillful reasoning, which convinces Ernest of the justness of the woman's rights cause.

Yet troubling as Oakes Smith's presentation of her feminist heroine as a savior of misguided men and diffuser of angelic influence is, her depiction of Bertha and Ernest is in fact more complex than it initially appears. It is important to note that "Ernest Helfenstein," the name which Oakes Smith chose for her hero, served as her own pseudonym for numerous pieces which she published during the 1840s. It seems possible, therefore, that in tracing Ernest's development as a feminist activist, Oakes Smith is reflecting upon her own conversion to the woman's rights cause, and her own efforts to claim public authority, and create a career for herself as an author and orator.26

The divide between Bertha and Ernest may have also been an attempt on Oakes Smith's part to represent, in these two characters, two very different types of feminist activism: the visionary and the pragmatic. While Ernest's journey in the novel centers around his learning to put his new feminist principles in action (specifically, by becoming a woman's rights lecturer and minister), Bertha's focuses on her fully embracing her vision of a feminist utopia, in which the long-neglected feminine principle will finally be embraced and respected. In her own career as a woman's rights activist, Oakes Smith embraced both of these "brands" of feminism, agitating for concrete reforms such as changes in marriage laws, and also writing speculative pieces about the potential which women possessed to bring about a new, gender egalitarian paradise on earth.

In writing Bertha and Lily, Oakes Smith made a significant contribution to debates taking place in the antebellum woman's rights movement during the 1850s,

---

26 I am grateful to Timothy H. Scherman for sharing his reflections on Oakes Smith's use of the name "Ernest Helfenstein" in Bertha and Lily with me.
concerning the justness of separate spheres, the nature of femininity, and the most
effective ways for woman's rights activists to achieve their goals. The novel at once
reinforces and challenges contemporary constructions of gender, simultaneously rejecting
the doctrine of separate spheres, and embracing notions of gender difference. While
Oakes Smith's descriptions of an essentially pure and spiritual womanhood may at times
seem to uneasily echo the rhetoric of more conservative nineteenth-century thinkers, her
faith in femininity as a radical transformative force which would create a world of
complete gender equality where "woman will know of no disabilities in which man does
not share" was a very radical faith, indeed.²⁷

²⁷ Oakes Smith, Bertha and Lily, 82.