"Onward!" New Paths of Inquiry for the Future of Oakes Smith Studies

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The beginnings of Elizabeth Oakes Smith's return to American cultural consciousness might be traced to her inclusion in John T. Frederick's article "Hawthorne's "Scribbling Women"" published in the _New England Quarterly_ in 1975. Though she does not merit the detailed resentment reserved for the five best-selling women writers who eclipsed Hawthorne's success in the 1850s, she is dragged in as an accomplice to these women, who, acting as both authors and editors, flooded the market by "taking in each other's washing." True, Oakes Smith held several editorial positions that enabled her to publish the work of other women writers, but Frederick only cites her strangely as the editor of _The National Magazine_ "shortly after the appearance in it of Hawthorne's 'The Snow Image,'" and then quickly moves to dismiss her 1854 novel _The Newsboy_, which in his words "richly deserved the scathing criticism it received in _Putnam's Magazine_ for February 1855"—deserved it, so the subtext runs, precisely _because_ it "went through twelve editions" in its first year. If an American woman writer's popular success was a mark of failure from the point of view of formalist modernism of the 1970s, certainly such popularity—and perhaps such censure—has become a badge of honor from the point of view of a very different system of literary value today.

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1 This paper was delivered for a panel entitled "Elizabeth Oakes Smith: A Bicentennial Re-Introduction" at the third International Conference of the Society for the Study of Women Writers, Philadelphia PA, on November 10, 2006. Many thanks are due to those who made this first-ever panel solely dedicated to the work of Oakes Smith possible, including my fellow panelists, Angela Ray, Becky Jaroff, Holly Kent, and the organizers of the conference for their vision in finding a space for us.


3 Frederick 236.

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It is probably true that Oakes Smith’s name was equal—at least in terms of familiarity—to that of any of the “scribbling women” in her day. The question remains why Oakes Smith’s full or even partial recovery as a once-again recognizable figure on the American literary landscape has been so long in coming. Unless we wish to adopt Frederick’s kind of thinking, we have to imagine that Oakes Smith, like Stowe or Fern, was enormously popular in her time not because she wrote trash for a gullible set of readers with more money than they knew what to do with, but because her work offered a very large number of people ideas that stimulated their minds, supplied convincing answers to difficult questions of the day, and otherwise provided what Kenneth Burke called “equipment for living.” Taking this latter position, one of the primary tasks facing Oakes Smith scholarship is to account for the historical paradox between Oakes Smith’s almost hyper-visibility in the 1840s and 50s (to the extent that P.T. Barnum stole her name for an advertisement of one his New York Baby Shows)\(^5\) and her total disappearance from and very slow recovery in latter-day literary history. Angela Ray’s paper for us today may suggest the beginnings of a theory accounting for this phenomenon in her contextualization of Oakes Smith’s career speaking in the American lyceum, where unpopular (radical) positions were often converted to and sold as entertainment (and thus easily forgotten as such), but such a pronounced “rise and fall” in the public eye might demand that we recognize a more radical difference between Oakes Smith and those with whom she shared the antebellum public stage.

\(^5\) Barnum’s New York “Baby Show” of June, 1855 generated editorial debate for over a month in the Tribune and elsewhere. Oakes Smith was listed as one of the contest’s judges without her knowledge or consent.
In my remarks today I want to suggest an explanation specific to the "authorship" of Elizabeth Oakes Smith, both in her time and in ours.\(^6\) Of what has her authorship consisted? Of what does it consist today? In discussing these issues, I don’t mean to return us to the terms of the tired "death of the author" debate in French theory. For some time now theorists of women’s authorship and autobiography have argued that French theory’s claim for the "death of the author"—or in simple terms, the end of the kind of reading where the author is conceived as the "origin" of the text—has never made sense for the study of women’s literature. In historical practice, the autobiographic dimension of a woman writer’s expression, her reflections of and on her lived experience as a woman under patriarchy, offers us today a significant part of both the political and cultural value of her work. Thus what post-structuralist theory found obnoxious and somehow "limiting," feminist theory finds essential. And yet I would argue the particular terms of the relationship between author and text in dispute here might offer us a new way to look at the birth and death of nineteenth-century women authors. Recall what Barthes and Foucault were out to deconstruct—that "singular relationship" between author and text, where the name and the tradition that authorized it preceded and determined the text’s status or meaning. As Gilbert and Gubar argued in the 1970s, women’s "authorship" was impossible without a tradition to authorize it. But could the relationship between author and text work both ways? In an attempt to recover the "authenticity" of women’s experience expressed in writing but within a patriarchal tradition, could feminist theory reinstate this "singular relationship" by deriving or invoking a woman writer’s authorship from the material remains of her texts? That is,

rather than discard or disperse the “author” in romantic terms—centred, male, originating—a feminist twist on even this “singular relationship” would conceive of this relation as dialectical. In this view, it cannot be a question of “which came first, the author or the text,” but rather always a question of how views of the author—even and perhaps especially those purveyed by the writer herself—shape the reception of the text, and how texts, in turn, change our image of and expectations for the writer’s authorship, authority, and even authenticity of her experience. More simply put, if a writer’s status as an “author” can inform or produce our readings of her texts, likewise texts, having been lost and found, may in turn re-produce the status of “author” for a forgotten writer.

Of course to see women’s authorship in this light explains John T. Frederick’s article, if not his mention of Oakes Smith, in material terms. In 1975, the literary values of formalism—unity, complexity, irony—were not in need of defense. At the same time, Frederick and others who knew something of the history of nineteenth century literary culture could not ignore the empirical facts, the myriad printings, the profits for publishers (if not always the women writers) and the cultural prominence of their work. So many were available in their time that thousands of copies have survived into the 20th and 21st centuries—waiting quietly in library stacks. And their importance was not only historical but material. Evidently no one had thought to burn all these books, so it remained for Frederick and others to make sure whoever happened to read them knew how to read them—to frame their texts as trivial so that the women who wrote them would appear so as well. Perhaps it was because Oakes Smith’s novel could still be found in some university libraries in one of its original printings that she found her way
into Frederick’s attack, or perhaps he had noticed the 1974 reprint edition of Oakes Smith’s *Woman and Her Needs.*

As it is, Frederick’s throw-off comment on *The Newsboy*, seemingly calculated to banish Oakes Smith’s name again and forever into the dustbin of history, might be compared to a man shoveling snow off an iceberg. At her death Oakes Smith left behind seven novels, scores of poems and short stories, at least one play, hundreds of pages of prosewriting in the form of political and social commentary, philosophical inquiry, sketches and editorial matter, and probably a dozen lectures. Thousands of pages of her manuscript writings, including business and personal correspondence, scrapbooks, diaries and manuscript versions of her lectures, almost all of it unpublished work, now make up fully eight shelf-feet at the Alderman Library and the New York Public Library alone, and hundreds of other Oakes Smith manuscripts are held in libraries across the country—in a word, beneath her name a mountain of text bears witness to woman’s life and experience in nineteenth-century America. And yet despite its mass, the disparity between the material forms of Oakes Smith’s enormous output and the dominant institutional modes of cultural registration and transmission in the first half of the 20th century gave Oakes Smith’s authorship little weight indeed. Only three of her novels were published in any genuinely perdurable form; the vast bulk of her literary output—much of her poetry, all her essays, criticism, lectures, and political and social commentary were either published in cheap (and widely accessible) pamphlet editions or in newspapers and journals, many of which, even in the first decades of the twentieth century, had been lost or removed from general circulation. By profession, Oakes Smith

8 *The Salamander* (1848), *Bertha and Lily* (1854), and *The Newsboy* (1854) were originally published and reprinted through the 1850s in hard-cover, illustrated editions.
had addressed herself most of all to the material issues of her day, and had published in ways calculated to reach a mass audience. If by her death in 1893, Oakes Smith’s popularity had long passed, her books out of print or otherwise dispersed in newspaper and journal archives and masses of manuscript left to her grand-daughter Geraldine Oaksmith, at the dawn of the twentieth century, neither dialectical pole of Oakes Smith’s authorship was active. Without a live tradition to authorize her name, and without the particular kinds of texts in circulation that might stimulate the reverse invocation of her authorship I mentioned earlier, Oakes Smith was a dead author.

As I mentioned at the outset, Oakes Smith’s re-birth into modern American cultural consciousness occurred as part of the general break up of the male canon in the 1970s and 80s, or at least the general movement made her particular re-birth possible. And yet the particular shape of Oakes Smith’s authorship, as it began to coalesce in the 1980s and 90s and grows more complex today, remains largely indebted to the work of Mary Alice Wyman at Columbia University in the 1920s. In two published books, *Selections from the Autobiography of Elizabeth Oakes Smith* in 1924 and *Two Pioneers: Seba Smith, Elizabeth Oakes Smith* in 1927, Wyman put back into cultural circulation texts that testified to Oakes Smith’s existence even while they sketched out, at least for literary historians, the social and professional contexts in which Oakes Smith’s name was not only recognizable but prominent. Of course, since the literary value system expressed by Frederick in 1975 had not changed much since the nineteen-twenties, it is

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not surprising that Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. dismissed Wyman’s work (and hence Oakes Smith’s proper authorship) 48 years earlier in the same journal, lamely joking in the mere seven lines dedicated to Oakes Smith’s portion of the biography that she was both a “woman’s righter and a woman writer” who the world has “little to gain” from remembering.10 But more important than Scheslinger’s opinion was the material fact, especially for the selections from Oakes Smith’s autobiography, of Columbia University Press’s publication of these uncollected manuscripts in book form. Until the writing of Leigh Kirkland’s critical edition of the autobiography as a dissertation project in 1994,11 and for most Oakes Smith scholars to this day, Wyman’s Selections has been basic to the stories we tell about Oakes Smith and her work. If we don’t have the microfilm version of the manuscript itself, we cite Wyman’s Selections, but whatever we’re writing about Oakes Smith, her own words about her life are central.

Still, even if Oakes Smith scholarship is greatly indebted to Wyman’s work, I would suggest a continued reliance on the autobiography as the primary textual basis of Oakes Smith’s authorial image would work to limit Oakes Smith’s authorship in precisely the way French theory was worried about. By this I don’t mean we should fret about “opening up” Oakes Smith’s text to the possibilities of difference, but that if a feminist reworking of the “singular relationship” that constitutes an “author” would posit the text’s reciprocal reflection of that identity—we need to make sure we account for the full variety and development of Oakes Smith’s texts over the seven decades of her career in our critical recovery of her authorship. Oakes Smith’s autobiography makes up only a

fraction of her enormous literary output, and thus whatever it contains as a representation of Oakes Smith and her work in the last three decades of her life, it would be a mistake to allow its particular authorial image—reflective more than active, spiritually directed more than materially engaged, defensive more than expressive—to pre-determine our reading of the variety of texts available for the derivation of Oakes Smith’s present-day authorship. In light of the need to de-center the autobiography as a kind of “master” voice or voice-over guiding our reading of her work, another major project for the future of Oakes Smith scholarship appears to be the archival retrieval of new biographical details, not only from correspondence, journals and diaries in Oakes Smith manuscript collections but from other media reporting her activities, to supplement our understanding of the facts of Oakes Smith’s life.\(^\text{12}\)

Incomplete as it may be, Wyman’s work in the 1920s put Oakes Smith back into circulation, establishing a material textual presence for a new “tradition” to find in the 1980s and 90s. Using Wyman’s work in the early 1980s, Cheryl Walker transformed Oakes Smith from a marginal and forgotten figure to one precisely traditional, featuring Oakes Smith in her book *The Nightingale’s Burden* as one of a small set of women whose life-patterns constitute a “composite biography” of American women poets of the nineteenth century.\(^\text{13}\) Over the following two decades, Walker herself, in a published anthology collecting several Oakes Smith poems, and scholars such as Yopie Prins,

\(^{12}\) A ready example of biographical evidence nowhere included in Oakes Smith’s autobiography is a series of letters written between Oakes Smith and her husband in the early 1830s, now held in the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia, which indicates a much warmer relationship between the two than Oakes Smith would record later in life.

Virginia Jackson and Mary Louise Kete\textsuperscript{14} have added new dimensions to the authorship of Oakes Smith as poet. With a headlong, ecstatic tone actually reminiscent of Oakes Smith’s best polemics, Kete’s article on Oakes Smith’s breakout poem, “The Sinless Child” is especially notable. While in 1978, in a survey of the fiction of nineteenth-century American women novelists, Nina Baym had found in “The Sinless Child” a “fastidious view of human experience,”\textsuperscript{15} by the year 2000, Kete was arguing for Oakes Smith as “a full participant, with. . . Emerson, . . . Thoreau and . . . Fuller, in the work of articulating the parameters of the American Romantic movement” (246). Noting how twentieth-century critics would posit a “disjunction between Oakes Smith’s early ‘sentimental’ works and her later role as a women’s rights activist, Kete uses Oakes Smith’s poem to deconstruct the boundaries between “romanticism and sentimentalism, American women’s writing and American men’s writing,” and in the process, begins a cultural conversation that might include other Oakes Smith texts demonstrating figurations of female “transcendental” subjectivity, most notably her novel \textit{The Western Captive}. Still, beyond “The Sinless Child,” and Oakes Smith’s “Ode to Sappho,” which supplies the subject matter for Prins’s work, little has been done with the Oakes Smith poems Walker collected into her 1992 anthology. Further study connecting these and many other poems Oakes Smith published in her lifetime to the themes of her other work (to say nothing of simply identifying their dates of publication) remains important work to be done.


\textsuperscript{15} Nina Baym, \textit{Women’s Fiction} (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978) 262.
Over the past decade, in separate articles, Caroline Woidat and Jane Rose have brought new attention to Oakes Smith as a novelist, concentrating on her use of Native American settings to produce what Sharon Harris has called “exploratory novels” that ‘expand readers’ horizons for female behavior as they posit alternatives to conventional roles,” and retrieving works like Oakes Smith’s novel Bertha and Lily for their strategic claims for the expansion of woman’s sphere. Focusing principally on The Western Captive—published the same year as “The Sinless Child”—Woidat gives excellent support for Kete’s argument against the division between Oakes Smith’s “sentimental” authorship and her more “mature” feminist activism. While both Rose and Woidat still seem to rely principally on the autobiography for their image of Oakes Smith’s authorship, extending these analyses to produce new views of Oakes Smith’s specific use of Native American settings much later in her career in a pair of Beadle’s dime novels, Bald Eagle in 1867 and The Sagamore of Saco in 1868, would add a new, “popular”—even pulp—identity for Oakes Smith that complicates both the “spiritual” figure we know from the autobiography and the serious romantic pioneer presented in Kete’s work.

Of course, today’s panelists bring new texts, new genres, and new relations between Oakes Smith’s life and work to us, and those from the perspectives of three different disciplines. It is important to see all three of them situate Oakes Smith in the context of critical and historical debates over women’s rights, status, and authority in

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17 What follows are brief responses to the other papers on the panel, Angela Ray’s “Performing Womanhood: The Lyceum Lectures of Elizabeth Oakes Smith,” Rebecca Jaroff’s "Thy Lips Are Powerless to my will": Voicing Rebellion in Elizabeth Oakes Smith's Old New York, or Democracy in 1689," and Holly Kent’s "The Daughter of a New Era: Antebellum Feminist Discourse in Elizabeth Oakes Smith's Bertha and Lily." Click on any of these titles to access them in .pdf format.
nineteenth-century culture, for it is precisely in a dialogue with better known figures (Stowe, Stanton, Fuller, Fern) that Oakes Smith studies might add to our understanding of the nineteenth-century American women’s tradition. While those before her have constructed facets of Oakes Smith’s identity as a poet and novelist, Angela Ray has given us a complex view of Oakes Smith the activist lecturer and entrepreneur. Contextualizing Oakes Smith’s feminist lectures as she delivered them within the confines of the popular and commercially minded medium of the lyceum circuit, Ray’s argument for the effects of the “contradictory pressures that impinged on [Oakes Smith’s] rhetorical choices” reminds us of her need not merely to publicize her life but to actively shape it for the purposes of reaching audiences beyond those who might attend conventions on woman’s suffrage. Moreover, Ray is careful to identify the stark differences between Oakes Smith’s projection of herself—both in her autobiographical account and in Bertha and Lily—from the historical woman stepping onto a hardwood public stage in her mid-forties.

This insight is not lost on Holly Kent in her paper today, where she outlines the ways in which Oakes Smith’s Bertha and Lily “enters into contemporary debates about femininity, identity, and the social construction of gender.” Noting, as Nina Baym and other literary scholars have before her, the novel’s “troubling” portrayal of a heroine fairly described as “the savior of misguided men and the diffuser of angelic influence,” a figure more appropriate to an adherence to the ‘cult of true womanhood’ than any radical critique, Kent also reveals in Oakes Smith’s Bertha a character who is not satisfied to have her virtues defined for her by men, whose feminine example is not passive but active, and who refuses to acknowledge the limits of “separate spheres.” Kent is right to
identify in these two types of characterization “two very different types of feminist activism” that Oakes Smith employed in her work—“the visionary and the pragmatic,” though as Ray’s argument suggests in the context of Oakes Smith’s lectures, these could also represent rhetorical approaches meant to capture variously liberal and conservative reading audiences. In fact, in both her lectures and editorial work, Oakes Smith commonly used both attitudes in a single piece: one to break down her audience’s resistance, the other to draw the reader to a more radical position.

If in her brief mention of *Bertha and Lily* in *Women’s Fiction* Nina Baym identifies the use of a “fallen woman” as heroine the one genuine radical stroke in Oakes Smith’s writing, Rebecca Jaroff seems to have found Bertha’s match and more in the heroine of what may be Oakes Smith’s only surviving play, *Old New York*. At her worst, Elizabeth Leisler, unlike, say, Sedgwick’s Magawisca, remains just as firmly caught in the strictures of patriarchal rule as if she were not a literary invention at least relatively “free” from historical precedent. And yet as Jaroff makes clear, it was hardly Oakes Smith’s purpose to dramatize such a character as evidence for the inevitability or the propriety of the existing order. Finding in her a “darker, more realistic” woman than Bertha, Jaroff reveals in Elizabeth Leisler Oakes Smith’s demand that we bring the desperate madwoman out of the attic and display her center-stage.

The sentimental poet, the romantic transcendentalist, the activist and feminist rhetorician, the pulp-fiction writer, the proto-realist (for we must remember *The Newsboy*)—these are but a few of the facets of Oakes Smith’s more complex authorship emerging over the past decade and in the papers we’ve heard here today. What might be most remarkable about the ‘re-birth’ of Elizabeth Oakes Smith in her bi-centennial year
is that it has happened almost entirely without a literary infrastructure. Even with the advent of e-texts and powerful databases, Elizabeth Oakes Smith's material product is still too difficult to access. And thus beyond our efforts to continue our critical dialogues over the meaning of the texts from which Oakes Smith's authorship will derive, beyond our need to discover, verify, and publish new details of Oakes Smith's biography, especially for her later years, perhaps the highest priority for the future of Oakes Smith studies is the publication of a series of critical editions of Oakes Smith's major works for scholarly use, both in teaching and research. Perhaps it will be us, or one of our students, who will explain why Oakes Smith's popular novel *The Salamander* of 1848 was so popular with its audience; or how Oakes Smith's interest in spiritual visitation, articulated in *Shadowland*, or *The Seer* in 1853, provides a sub-current in nearly all her major works; or why *The Newsboy* has been misread (especially by Horatio Alger), or how Oakes Smith negotiated the duties of mother and breadwinner in the her years on the lecture tour. In any case, the time is past to lament the "loss" of this fascinating woman from the 19th century. As she so often said herself, our work is clear before us.

"Onward!!"