“She Can Play Ball: Rhetorical Power in Elizabeth Oakes Smith’s ‘The Dignity of Labor’”¹

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Instead of calling out like a good brother, You can do it if you only think so, [men] often discourage [us] with school-boy brag: Girls can’t do that, girls can’t play ball. But let any one defy their taunts, break through, and be brave and secure, they rend the air with shouts.

Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*

Mary Kupiec Cayton’s 1987 essay “The Making of an American Prophet”² is one of the finest early applications of the kind of reception theory that reminds us how the publication of ideas is never a sufficient mark of an idea’s passage from the writer’s intention to the public mind—that while we may begin with what the audience heard, the real challenge for the critic is to understand the context in which what was heard was understood, and thus what possible effect a writer (here Ralph Waldo Emerson) may have had on his or her audience. In her essay, Cayton first demonstrates how Emerson’s early and more radical transcendentalism was first disseminated, with the rise of the popular press, beyond the religious, political and intellectual context that shaped it, then she describes how the origins, values, and purposes of the middle-class Lyceum audience had been “prepared” to hear his lectures. In the end, by comparing the texts of Emerson’s lectures with evidence of their reception in newspaper reviews in Cincinnati Ohio from the early 1850s, she presents compelling evidence of how the preponderance of lyceum audiences fell far short of catching his drift; for Cayton, the audience’s confusion derived principally


from the fact that Emerson’s “compelling images drawn from everyday life could be understood in a practical, materialist way as well as in the metaphorical, idealist sense in which Emerson probably intended them,” and in Cincinnati, folks were nothing if not practical.

I reference Cayton’s fine work because I plan to use both its general form and some of its substance in my analysis of “The Dignity of Labor,” a lecture by Elizabeth Oakes Smith, who stood on the same platform and behind the same rostrum a few weeks later in the Cincinnati lecture season, and whose reputation in that city might well have been every bit as large for much of her audience. That these facts may come as a surprise to some today presents me the challenge of what Sharon K. Harris has recently named “post-recovery,” our need to “continue” the work of re-introducing forgotten women writers to a broad audience even as we “push ourselves to pose more challenging questions about individual texts.” To those unfamiliar with Oakes Smith, the value of this paper may be archival if nothing else. Further, however, I hope to contextualize Oakes Smith’s lecture in ways that explain the conditions of her pioneering success as a female lyceum lecturer in 1852, along with the implicit critique of transcendentalist abstraction in her work during her lecture career.

3 Like the rest of Oakes Smith’s lectures, “The Dignity of Labor” was never published. Citations here are to a complete MS held in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia. While the MS shows physical evidence of repeated use in her delivery of the lecture sometime in the 1850s or 60s, it is notable that by 1852, Oakes Smith reported to her husband that she had begun to lecture ex tempore. This paper is based on the written text, marginal notes on that text and reviewers’ records, acknowledging that we will never know exactly what Oakes Smith said from the platform during any given performance of this lecture.

Bankrupt from her husband’s land speculation during the Panic of 1837, Elizabeth Oakes Smith was already the mother of four when she arrived in New York and set to work alongside her husband as a poet, essayist, and fiction writer in 1839. In 1842, her poem “The Sinless Child” was copied by journals on a national scale, leading to two collected editions of her poetry\(^5\) and myriad invitations from editors of magazines and Gift Books for her work. By 1848, her literary celebrity had completely eclipsed that of her husband. New England newspapers reported not only the publication of her latest novel, but also her most recent hiking trip up Mt. Katahdin in her home state of Maine. Her correspondence with friends reveals a short-lived delight in her material success, and yet as her sons grew up and her husband grew more sedate, she felt increasing pressure to turn her writing to account as the family’s principal wage-earner; moreover, her letters show a growing impatience with the exigencies of writing in modes that fit the reputation produced in her name by male editors and publishers in the burgeoning literary marketplace. Just as Melville dreaded “going down to posterity as the man who lived among the cannibals,” Oakes Smith wrote to a friend how she dreaded being “regarded as a mere magazine writer of mawkish stories and sentimental poetry.” \(^6\)

Through the 40s decade, in essays like “Characterless Women” for Graham’s in 1841, in the unrepentant, radical heroine of her novel The Western Captive in 1842, and in stories such as “The Defeated Life,” which eerily prefigures Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Oakes Smith demonstrated a developing

\(^5\) The Sinless Child and Other Poems (New York: Wiley and Putnam; Boston: W.D. Ticknor, 1843) and The Poetical Writings of Elizabeth Oakes Smith (New York: J.S. Redfield, 1845)

\(^6\) Elizabeth Oakes Smith to Benson Lossing, March 1, 1851, MS held in UVa.
feminist consciousness, yet it was not until 1850, deeply resentful of the editorial community's mocking coverage of the first National Woman's Rights convention, that Oakes Smith became openly political. In November, she began a series of articles for Greeley's New York *Tribune* entitled *Woman and Her Needs,* which developed many of the themes of Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (from which text she may have drawn her title8), focusing specifically on the institution of coverture in marriage. When Greeley first refused to pay her for this effort (which occupied her until the following June), and then refused to print letters sent to the *Tribune* in defense of her ideas, Oakes Smith experienced a true sense of alienation—both as a laboring writer and as a woman—which inspired her to make the move beyond “belle letters” to the lecture platform, where her interaction with her audience would be relatively less mediated.

“Can we wonder that many reformers think that measures are not likely to be taken in behalf of women, unless their wishes could be publicly represented by women?” asks Margaret Fuller in 1845. “But how to gain this platform,” she continues in a less idealist vein, “or how to make it of reasonably easy access, is the difficulty.” In a paper on Oakes Smith’s lyceum lectures at our 2006 conference, Angela Ray traced this difficulty in the marks of “contradictory pressures” bearing  

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7 Oakes Smith’s series ran in ten parts, from November 21, 1850 to June 19, 1851.
8 Immediately before the well-known “Miranda” section of Fuller’s essay is a paragraph Oakes Smith seems to have prised upon for her own work:

What Woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home. If fewer talents were given her, yet if allowed the free and full employment of these, so that she may render back to the giver his own with usury, she will not complain; nay, I dare to say she will bless and rejoice in her earthly birthplace, her earthly lot.
on women like Oakes Smith who had to meet the normative gender expectations of her audience—both in the content of her lectures and in her comportment as a lecturer. As for the latter, Oakes Smith’s “fashionable and feminine” appearance, which served to mollify her “direct, authoritative style of speech conventionally associated with masculinity,” was for Ray a strategic choice, and not, as Thoreau remarked after meeting her, a sign that Oakes Smith was a “woman in the too common sense after all.”

Strictures in terms of content, Ray argues, can be noted in her lectures’ “argumentative tension and occasional logical contradiction,” one moment arguing against the whole notion of separate spheres, the next relying on the “cultural commonplace of a woman’s innate superior spirituality.” Yet if in some of Oakes Smith’s lectures a rhetorical strategy of advance/retreat might have disguised the true radicalism of her suggestions or forestalled criticism, the very positive reception of the most uniformly radical of her lectures, “The Dignity of Labor,” can hardly be explained in these terms.

To understand the wide acceptance of this work (indeed, the only one she delivered well into the late 1860s), we need to revisit the now better known origins and purposes of the lyceum, at least to its role, in Cayton’s terms, of the “formation

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10 Thoreau heard Oakes Smith lecture before the Concord Lyceum December 31, 1851 and recorded in his journal his impressions of his meeting with her after the lecture. He represents Oakes Smith’s “common” femininity and his own forced chivalry with a reference to the fact that when he took a walk with Oakes Smith, he carried her lecture, wrapped in her handkerchief, in his pocket, and that his pocket “exhaled cologne to this moment.” Considering it had only been a few hours since their meeting, one wonders what Thoreau knew of cologne at the time.
of its audiences” as part of an emerging urban commercial class.\textsuperscript{11} Often paid for by successful merchants, lyceums and young men’s organizations offered, in Ray’s words, a stable means of “moral, intellectual and practical self-improvement,” consolidating the young business class of a city by introducing them to one another” and providing them a training ground for skills in debate and public speaking. \textsuperscript{12}

And it was precisely in terms of the “familiar discourse patterns” this context provided that audiences would understand what Emerson or Oakes Smith was saying. But if ideally the purpose of this venue was to “inculcate the values of the college-educated elite among the broader public,” it would be difficult not to assume that for most audience members (for her we might separate the real from the ideal), such self-improvement and self-culture had an end, and that end was material advancement, social attainment, in a word power—all values concomitant with strengthening national myths of upward mobility and manifest destiny. Once we recognize these values as the context in which Emerson’s and Oakes Smith’s lectures were heard, it should be understood that their acceptance, in the public mind, would create completely divergent results: a recognition of such values in the work of Emerson, as Cayton observed, might constitute a misunderstanding; an acceptance of such values in Oakes Smith’s work, where those values could be seen actualized in women’s rights to gainful work and political enfranchisement, would be tantamount to an acceptance of sweeping social change. Oakes Smith’s writings—not to mention her experience in the Panic of 1837—suggest to us a keen awareness of the pitfalls of capitalism run amok; my argument would be that Oakes Smith realized

\textsuperscript{11} Cayton 604.
\textsuperscript{12} Cayton 607.
that for now, what my colleague Tim Libretti has called an “equality of exploitation” would greatly ameliorate, in most cases, women’s condition.

In its earliest version at least,13 “The Dignity of Labor” opens with a seemingly transcendental view of the spiritual grounds of all human labor: “The comet is no more wonderful than the locomotive,” Oakes Smith intones, “the builder of a ship, as a good a worker, approaches the dignity of the builder of a planet. The same intelligence, the same forecast, the same adaptation of means to an end are required of the one as the other, differing only in degree.” Quickly, however, Oakes Smith moves first to a material equivalent more consonant with her audience’s “common sense.” “In the material world you perceive that power, art, beauty, progress are all involved in the career of the intelligent worker. He subdues the external world, and navies appear upon the sea, and Cities arise upon the land; he evolves his ideas, and Governments are formed” etc. etc.—only to arrive at the challenge the rest of her essay will consider: “In all of this, it is asked, what has woman done?” or more pointedly for those of us who know of Oakes Smith’s frustrations with the limits of the literary marketplace, “Is there no better work than to write books?”

According to Ray’s argument, Oakes Smith’s answer to the question of what woman has done—“nothing,” or she has helped men do their work, to achieve their place in the Universe—could be read as the sort of compromise a female lecturer

13 The Oakes Smith papers at the University of Virginia contains what seems to be pages from at least three versions of the lecture, only one of which is complete. The condition of this copy (including several notations written over what had been a clean manuscript copy) seems to reveal it as the earliest version to which we have access.
would have to make in addressing a dominantly male audience. It becomes clear, however, that while later in the lecture she does ask women to assume greater responsibility for their “onward” progress, the fact that women have been passed over in the race’s achievements of power is read as a social injustice. Indeed, without the indictment of a more expansive sense of their work in the world, Oakes Smith argues, women have no real personhood: “A woman is not expected to live, but to marry and have her existence swallowed up and annihilated in that of another. The law barely tolerates a woman; ranking her with infants and idiots—she is nothing without a husband, and less than nothing with.”

Of course Oakes Smith “had work,” so to speak; in fact, much of the lecture is devoted to a catalogue of examples of individual working women and whole classes of working women (artists, factory women, authors, printers, post-masters) that establish their participation in the nation’s economic life not as an ideal to be hoped for but as an established fact. But neither labor, nor even the vote, is held up as an end in itself, but rather as a means to the dignity of opportunity, aspiration, material self-reliance and ultimately, power: “the mere idea of a vote is nothing,” Oakes Smith tells her audience—“it is the power which is behind it at which we aim, the power to redress our own wrongs, and the power to aid our brothers in redressing theirs.”

With the admonition that “we are on the verge of revolution” in the social order, Oakes Smith ends her lecture with a more specific list of reforms that women are destined to lead in the nineteenth century:

I believe that woman must awake to her mission to redeem the world—to reorganize society upon a more human basis, to render
governors more protective to the governed, to do away with the legal
taking of life—to prevent the effusion of blood amongst the nations
of the earth by war, and to raise herself out of the dust of sexual
degradation.

She can do all this only as a vital member and voting Citizen of
the Republic.”

No review I have seen of “The Dignity of Labor” calls attention to the
difference between the list of traditionally progressive reforms that ends the lecture
and its more radical demand for the end of separate spheres. To reviewers, the
lecture “made sense”—both for the materiality of its claims, and perhaps more
important, for the fact that it couched those claims in terms of their own and their
readers’ positive valuation of the expansion of economic opportunity and potential
for upward social mobility. Not retiring from but embracing this rhetoric meant for
reviewers and their readers that this girl could play ball, and they rewarded her for
it with more than mere courtesy. Frequently reviewers used the term “calculated”
to describe Oakes Smith’s deftness in expressing her radical opinions in a form her
audience could credit. “Radical as they were,” remarked one Philadelphia reviewer,
Oakes Smith’s lectures “were yet admirably adapted to remove the prejudices and
conciliate the favor of candid and conscientious conservatives.”¹⁴ Others valued her
attempt to open the minds of both men and women to a keener sense of woman’s
equality in aspiration: noting how the lecture provided a “comprehensiveness of

¹⁴ Scrapbook, Oakes Smith Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections
Library, UVa.
scope to the meaning of the word labor as "few of the stener sex have every thought of, a reviewer in the New York Independent praised the lecture for its “expansion of views, a breadth of thought...calculated to elevate and expand the souls of her hearers, [and] to arouse them to a greater exertion for noble ends.”

Paradoxically, it may appear to some that by casting her argument in terms of the values of her commercially minded lyceum audiences, Oakes Smith was sacrificing precisely the “independence” from the market her departure from literary or “artistic” pursuits had allowed. But if the market, in the form of popular press and support for the lyceum circuit provided the platform or means for the public dissemination of ideas, an independence from that market could only mean a dignified marginalization or exile—at worst, irrelevance. Oakes Smith’s goal was not independence but the acknowledgement of a woman’s appropriate place beside men in the marketplace, even if that equality was, for the moment, equal exploitation by capital. Flatly impatient with a transcendental rhetoric that concerned only “principles,” leaving the particulars to sort themselves out, in Fuller’s formula, Oakes Smith believed, to cite the final paragraph of her lecture, “that the equality of the sexes must be acknowledged before the better time will be inaugurated.”

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15 Scrapbook, UVa.
16 Margaret Fuller, Woman in the Nineteenth Century, 1845. The key sentences referred to here read “If principles could be established, particulars would adjust themselves aright. Ascertain the true destiny of Woman; give her legitimate hopes, and a standard within herself; marriage and all other relations would by degrees be harmonized with these.”