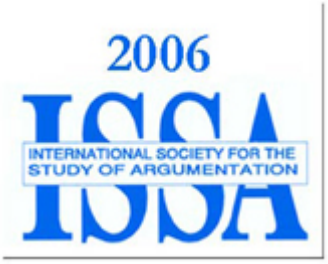
ISSA Proceedings 2006 – Arguments For Popular Audiences: Early U.S. Woman's Rights Advocacy In The Lyceum Lectures Of Elizabeth Oakes Smith



At the midpoint of the nineteenth century, controversies roiled the United States. In the aftermath of the annexation of Texas, the Mexican-American War, and the California Gold Rush, Americans debated the recently named doctrine of manifest destiny. In books, journals, and public speeches, abolitionists and proslavery advocates challenged and defended the morality and legitimacy of slavery and its extension into western territories; nativist Protestants expressed fears of European immigrants, particularly Catholics from Ireland and Germany; and temperance activists continued their decades-long efforts to control or abolish intoxicating liquors. At a time of profound change in transportation and communication technologies, in patterns of migration, and in customs of work and leisure, Americans also argued about gender roles. This paper explicates one site for the production of arguments about gender, the popular public lecture, and illuminates the rhetorical challenges faced by those who rejected a necessary correlation between biological sex and individual capacity.

Although many women and men had long advocated women's equal access to education, their right to control property, and their right to speak publicly about moral causes, it was at a public meeting in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 that a more formal, more coherent movement on behalf of American women began. This new woman's rights movement emerged directly from the organized efforts for the abolition of slavery, as abolitionist women had repeatedly found themselves restricted from public action owing to their sex. Adherents of the new woman's rights movement called for women's legal, political, religious, educational, occupational, and social equality with men.

Arguments both for and against an expansion of American women's opportunities

circulated in the media of the time – in newspapers and magazines, in conversations and sermons and legislative addresses, in poems and novels and popular lectures. Opposing arguments were powerful, often expressed by individuals with considerable cultural and economic capital. For example, in the early 1850s a prolific Methodist clergyman, Daniel Wise, published an advice manual for young women, clearly articulating a common belief in gendered realms of action. He wrote, "Everything has its appointed sphere, within which alone it can flourish. Men and women have theirs . . . . Man is fitted for the storms of public life . . . . Woman is formed for the calm of home" ([185-], pp. 91-92). Wise continued with a warning to women: "She may venture . . . to invade the sphere of man, but she will encounter storms which she is utterly unfitted to meet; happiness will forsake her breast, her own sex will despise her, men will be unable to love her, and when she dies she will fill an unhonored grave" (p. 92). Similar attitudes were heard on public lecture platforms. Richard Henry Dana Sr., a Harvard-educated poet and critic, asserted in a popular lecture in the 1840s that a "law" of sex difference grounded appropriate roles for men and women and that the acceptance of women's public action would destroy the future of humanity, creating "a race of moral and mental hybrids" (n.d., 19). Although the educational reformer Horace Mann publicly supported increased opportunities for women's education in the 1850s, he forecast pernicious consequences if women became involved in political strife (Ray 2006, p. 191). Such examples illustrate the argumentative obstacles faced by those who would support contrary positions: not only did the premise of natural or divinely created gender roles present a refutative challenge, forcing one either to argue against nature and God or to reinterpret natural phenomena and scriptural precedent, but a woman who chose to engage in public argument on this question also faced a profound problem of reception: her act of adopting the persona of an arguer could be seen to provide evidence for her opponents' claims. Rhetorical scholar Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has described the woman public speaker as an oxymoron, and that figure of paradox was rarely embodied as starkly as in the mid-nineteenth century (1973, 1999).

Early U.S. woman's rights advocates faced such challenges in a variety of ways, often offering biblical evidence to refute claims of women's inferiority or generating political arguments based on principles of liberal democracy and especially on the nation's founding documents. Many performed femininity in conventional ways, through dress and comportment, seeking to refute the prevailing assumption that, as activist Paulina Wright Davis described it, "all

women's rights women are horrid old frights with beards and mustaches" (1852b). Rhetorical strategies varied depending on the specific purpose, the audience, and the context, of course. Early activists attempted to create movement ideologies and rally adherents to those principles, and they addressed state legislatures to present grievances and to call for legal redress (Campbell 1989, 1:1-69, 2:33-186). Woman's rights supporters also sought to sway public opinion, to express alternative visions of gender roles, to allay fears, and to inspire new ways of thinking and acting. In the early days of the organized movement, a few woman's rights activists traveled throughout the country – especially the Northeast and what is now called the Midwest – addressing audiences in public halls, churches, and commercial lecturing venues like lyceums and literary societies. Only a few women became popular lecturers before the Civil War, for the strength of social pressures opposing women's speaking in public was profound. Social norms dictated that women's voices on public platforms could be heard reading or singing the words of men, but women speaking in instructional and argumentative modes were often deemed unnatural (Ray 2006).

It was in this milieu that Elizabeth Oakes Smith began to deliver popular lectures supporting an expansion of women's opportunities and responsibilities.**[i]** Oakes Smith was unusual among woman's rights advocates of the early 1850s, having come to public advocacy not through a formal association with the abolitionist movement but as a popular poet and novelist. A native of Maine with a Puritan and Unitarian heritage, Oakes Smith was married at age sixteen to Seba Smith, a writer and newspaper editor twice her age, and she reared four sons who lived to adulthood. Oakes Smith began publishing poetry and articles in the 1820s, but it was only after Seba Smith's failed land speculations combined with the economic panic of 1837 that she began to publish prolifically. During the 1840s she became a well-known author, and her poem *The Sinless Child* of 1842 was admired by Edgar Allan Poe and likely provided the inspiration for Harriet Beecher Stowe's character of Little Eva in her antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Oakes Smith also published novels based on Indian folklore and spiritualist belief. In 1839 she had heard the controversial Scottish heiress and freethinker Fanny Wright lecture in New York and was captivated by Wright's platform manner, style, and radical ideas. During the 1840s Oakes Smith was increasingly drawn to public advocacy, and from November 1850 to June 1851 Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* published a series of ten articles by Oakes Smith collectively titled *Woman and*

Her Needs, which circulated as a pamphlet in 1851 (Belasco 2001; Nickels & Scherman 1994; Scherman 1998, 2001).

A literary celebrity, Oakes Smith in 1851 extended her advocacy beyond the printed page and onto the rostrum. She began arranging speaking engagements in lyceums, churches, and other public venues. This new career proved remunerative for Oakes Smith and her family, although several friends in the New York literary and journalistic community, who had supported her as a poet and novelist, condemned her for her public lecturing (Smith 1852, 1879). She was the first woman to speak at many lyceums, including, in December 1851, the Concord Lyceum in Massachusetts, which boasted the membership of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Amos Bronson Alcott (Cameron 1969, p. 165). She toured the Northeast and the Midwest during the 1850s, giving lectures with such titles as "Womanhood," "Manhood," "Our Humanity," "Woman, Considered as Inferior to Man," "The Dignity of Labor," "Cleopatra," and "Madame Roland." She continued publishing novels and poetry and also wrote plays. In 1854 she published two sentimental novels, *Bertha and Lily* and *The Newsboy,* the former a feminist treatise that developed the themes of her woman's rights lectures, and the latter a story that depicted the plight of young orphaned boys in New York slums.**[ii]** *Bertha and Lily* was praised by Susan B. Anthony, who wrote to Oakes Smith, explicitly identifying the novel's persuasive potential. Anthony wrote that *Bertha and Lily* would "do a glorious work for women" and that it should be published in "a form so cheap" that it would not fail to find audiences across economic classes (Anthony 1854).

At one point in *Bertha and Lily*, the character Bertha – who has acquired a profound spirituality through hard experience – arranges the construction of a special temple, filled with flowers, and delivers public lectures there. Bertha's lectures address women and men, young people and old, and they emphasize the intersection between the practical, natural, and spiritual. To women, she "taught . . . botany, horticulture – she suggested new modes of industry, improvements in housekeeping – in dress. She gave them higher subjects for thought, and encouraged them to question her" (Smith 1854, p. 245). In Oakes Smith's fictional vision, the public lecture is a site for learning to improve one's life and intellect, and although the ideal here is filtered through a romantic sensibility, its emphasis on practical learning for self-improvement and an apprehension of divine wisdom coincides with the idealistic goals espoused by lyceum promoters of the 1820s

and 1830s (Ray 2005, pp. 14-33, 68-72).

The realities of commercial performance in the 1850s, however, meant that Oakes Smith's public lectures treated different themes than did the fictional Bertha's. Whereas Bertha, who did not have to seek fees from her audience, could presume her authority to teach, the nonfictional Elizabeth Oakes Smith found it necessary first to challenge the conventions for gendered performance. The generic expectations of the popular lecture in the 1850s emphasized a lecturer's ability to perform well, captivating an audience through dramatic physical presence and thoughtful content, and also carefully controlling controversial themes. Common topics were tales of exotic travel, philosophical reflection, literary and political history, and national identity. Explicitly partisan or sectarian topics were typically proscribed, and successful lecturers who produced social critique often did so within frameworks that supported conventional belief. The popular lecture was understood to be more instructional or expressive than argumentative. At the same time, the successful lecturer articulated ideas in ways remarkable enough to ignite thought well after the event had ended, and the rhetorical ideal of the lecture platform as free and open meant that audiences did not expect always to agree with views espoused (Ray 2005, p. 111).

Many of Oakes Smith's popular lectures of the 1850s partook of the conventions of the lecture of philosophical reflection, and they echoed themes that she had developed in *Woman and Her Needs*. These lectures included "Womanhood," "Manhood," "Our Humanity," "Woman, Considered as Inferior to Man," and "The Dignity of Labor." Unlike other early woman's rights advocates such as Clarina Howard Nichols, Oakes Smith did not typically claim authority through the use of evidence from personal experience (cf. Campbell 1989, 1:13, 2:123-144). Although literary scholars regularly note parallels between Oakes Smith's own life and the generalizations about marriage, education, and work in her poems, novels, and lectures (e.g., Walker 1982, p. 76; Rose 2001, p. 210), it is important to note that when Oakes Smith wrote or spoke publicly as an advocate, she rarely adopted the persona of the specific "I." Rather, the speaking persona, especially of the lectures, was more often a preacher or a moral force, offering alternative representations of gendered humanity. The speaking persona, that is, was unapologetically assertive. For example, in her lecture "Womanhood," Oakes Smith expressed the purpose of reaching women auditors: "I am here . . . in the hope that by envying the ultimate of which we are capable, [women] may be

roused from flout and imbecility, from pettiness and discontent, into some sphere of true nobleness. We lack the incitements of an aim, the stirring of magnanimous thought, the loftiness of aspiration" (Smith 1851b). The goal of creating women as an audience (Campbell 1989, 1:13), offering women a means of understanding themselves as capable of ambitious action, was thus articulated straightforwardly, and Oakes Smith performed a blend of gender conventions by presenting a form of direct speech conventionally associated with masculinity in the voice and body of a woman. Oakes Smith apparently dressed and comported herself on the public platform in ways that contemporaries among the white Protestant middle and upper classes interpreted as conventionally feminine (Belasco 2001, p. 277; Wyman 1927, p. 194; Scherman 1999). Such a mix of performed conventions of gender enacted the argument that she made repeatedly about the non-natural status of gendered spheres (cf. Campbell & Jamieson 1978, p. 9).

Indeed, an attack on the doctrine of separate spheres was a major theme in Oakes Smith's popular lecturing. Repeating a phrase that recurred throughout her published and unpublished work, Oakes Smith in both "Our Humanity" and "The Dignity of Labor" asserted an individualistic basis for an appropriate sphere of action: "The measure of capacity is the measure of sphere to either man or woman" (Smith 1851a, n.d.; cf. Smith 1850; 1854, p. 83; 1879). In "Dignity of Labor" Oakes Smith described individual capacity as an aptitude for certain types of work: "Men sell us hose and shoes, and fit gaiters to women's ankles, and like these employments, it is in keeping equally for women to be Conductors upon railways." Offering examples of women astronomers, ships' captains, gold miners, farmers, and philanthropists, she illustrated her assertion that a wise and beneficent God, "whose infinite resources of infinite beauty forbids the making of two leaves upon the same tree exactly alike," similarly created women and men in multitudinous variety (Smith n.d.). Oakes Smith claimed gender not as a natural dichotomy but rather as a rhetorical construction, not only by identifying women who adopted so-called masculine roles and by describing men who adopted so-called feminine roles (in "Dignity of Labor" she said, "Some men like the needle and some women like the hoe" [Smith n.d.]). But she also asserted that "the fullest types" of humankind blended masculine and feminine qualities. In "Womanhood" she identified Jesus as an example, along with Plato, Aspasia, and England's queen Elizabeth (Smith 1851b; cf. Ray 2006, p. 212n77). Further, Oakes Smith emphasized this blending of qualities through the image of marriage, promoting an ideal of a marriage of equals and then employing that ideal as a

synecdoche for a sacramental joining of male and female principles, men and women persons, in a collective, public effort for social, material, and spiritual betterment.

It was in expressing an ideal of a new type of womanhood that Oakes Smith's blending of gendered conventions foundered on the shoals of linguistic possibility. In imagining a new form of womanhood as a Noble Woman, she adapted the familiar image of woman as queen, a representation that implicitly circumscribed the figure of the ideal woman within the upper class (cf. Rose 2001, p. 222). In envisioning a transformed public realm, free of political corruption, the squalor and humiliations of poverty, and the egotism of wealth, Oakes Smith imagined the agent of change as a womanly healing angel, echoing a common image purportedly describing women's natures (Smith 1851b). Similarly, in "Dignity of Labor," Oakes Smith unabashedly equated "the feminine element" with spirituality and masculinity with strength and material progress, although the lecture did claim that the principles coexisted within individual men and women (Smith n.d.). Her description of "the woman perfect in all attributes" – a creature who was, said Oakes Smith, still forthcoming – can easily be read as a form of the conventionally pure, pious True Woman: "clear, calm, courageous in thought, virginal in sentiment, and spiritual in the highest" (Smith 1870-1887; cf. Ray 2006, p. 201; Richards 2004, p. 157). Yet Oakes Smith's epitropic acceptance of the terms of antebellum gender conventions were rendered ironic, as she expanded the sphere of the True Woman so that the new Noble Woman reached fulfillment through public action (Rose 2001, pp. 222-223).

The obstacles faced by woman's rights advocates of the 1850s, combined with the expectations for popular lectures as more didactic than argumentative and the exigencies of producing performances for fee-paying audiences, help explain the form of Elizabeth Oakes Smith's lyceum lectures. The rhetorical figure of epitrope recurred repeatedly, in concessions to the terms and occasionally to the claims of opponents (Jasinski 2001, pp. 547-549). Oakes Smith established common ground with conventional belief by accepting the relevance of appropriate spheres of action, determined by God and nature, but she reframed the basis of the spheres argument by denying the relevance of biological sex in such a determination. Rather, according to Oakes Smith, a divinely ordained individual capacity – individual aptitude, skill, and talent – established spheres for action. Such a position resonated with Emersonian self-reliance, Protestantism's emphasis on

the priesthood of the believer, and Enlightenment notions of natural rights. At the same time, however, Oakes Smith laid claim to a feminine superiority in moral and spiritual matters, accepting one of the basic premises of the convention of spheres and undercutting her own assertions about ungendered individuality. The struggle to adapt gendered conventions for the purpose of reformist advocacy, and to present revolutionary notions in familiar language, resulted in complexities, inconsistencies, and confusion in the work of Oakes Smith and other antebellum U.S. woman's rights advocates.

The influence of Elizabeth Oakes Smith's feminist efforts is not easy to gauge. Her contemporaries interpreted her lectures variously (see Wyman 1927, pp. 193-208). Thoreau confided to his journal that he found her lecture "Womanhood" "suggestive" only because "a woman said it," and, as for her personally, he wrote that "she was a woman in the too common sense after all" (1992, p. 233). Woman's rights advocates, conversely, celebrated Oakes Smith's having given voice to women on lyceum platforms (Stanton, Anthony, & Gage 1889, p. 231). Paulina Wright Davis described Oakes Smith as less radical than many activists but nevertheless "a great treasure" who "never offends a hundred where she converts one" (1852a). Some women actively sought the inspiration offered by Oakes Smith's lectures: as a young girl, Christine Ladd-Franklin, later a psychologist who theorized color vision, was taken to an Oakes Smith lecture by her mother, Augusta Ladd, who favorably described the theme, writing that women belonged "every place where a man should be" (Furumoto 1992, p. 176). In our own time, Oakes Smith's work has been largely forgotten, although her poetry and fiction are increasingly receiving treatment from literary critics (e.g., Douglas 1977; Jackson & Prins 1999; Nickels & Scherman 1994; Richards 2004; Rose 2001; Walker 1982, 1992; Wiltenburg 1984; Woidat 2001). For rhetorical scholars, studying the popular lectures of Oakes Smith and other early woman's rights advocates offers the potential to expand our knowledge of the repertoire of rhetorical styles practiced by early women public speakers in the United States, and to illuminate the complexities of linguistic and performative strategies designed to propose fundamental change to popular audiences within a context in which overt argument was culturally proscribed. Oakes Smith's work calls attention to questions that remain salient for discourses of social reform that seek a balance between finding common ground and asserting fundamental change: most notably, how much of an opposition argument can be adopted before one's own position is compromised?

In the early 1850s Oakes Smith carved out a space for herself as a professional and demonstrated a capacity to embody the philosophical lecturer. By enacting the claims that she espoused against the separation of occupational spheres by sex, she performatively challenged the assumptions of gendered behavior, offering an image of gender hybridity that was considerably less threatening – for good and for ill – than that imagined by many of her contemporaries.

NOTES

[i] Born Elizabeth Oakes Prince, she became Elizabeth Oakes Smith upon her marriage. She often chose to publish under the name Elizabeth Oakes Smith or E. Oakes Smith, and she had the names of her sons legally changed to Oaksmith (Kirkland 1994, p. 15). This paper adopts her preferred practice by identifying her surname as Oakes Smith. Because libraries catalog her work under the name Smith, however, the references follow that convention.

[ii] The term feminist is anachronistic in this context, since feminism prior to the 1890s simply denoted "the qualities of females" (Oxford 1989). The term is used here in its twentieth- and twenty-first-century sense, signaling Oakes Smith's advocacy of women's equal access to social, legal, and political opportunities.

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