

**CFP: American Literature Association Conference, May 2024:
Elizabeth Oakes Smith in Relation**

Due date: Jan 15, 2024

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[A recent blog post on the Oakes Smith Society's website](#)* asks us to reconsider Nina Baym's dismissal of Oakes Smith in *Women's Fiction* (1978, 1993), where Baym described Oakes Smith as "not a team-player," and the work that established her fame, "The Sinless Child," a political "dead-end."

Fortunately, Oakes Smith's contemporaries in the feminist movement of the mid-19th century and later academic critics working in the wake of Baym's early pronouncements have found neither to be the case, but looking more closely at Baym's language, this panel asks as to contemplate what it might have meant for any woman writer to be a "team player" in the mid-nineteenth century US? Shared experiences with other women? Shared goals? A shared rhetoric or strategy? Must it involve contemporaneous interpersonal relationships? What sort of criticism of other women (something Oakes Smith never avoided) would disqualify one from being counted a "team player?"

The Oakes Smith Society welcomes papers considering all manner of ways in which Oakes Smith was seen in her day, or might be seen in our day, *in relation* to other women writers of her time—as pre-cursor, as co-worker, or even in her criticism of particularly privileged women whose influence delayed the emancipation of women in the US. The following examples may provide graduate students and others less familiar with Oakes Smith's career some points of departure:

- The Feminist as Prophet—as Ashley Reed has argued in [Heaven's Interpreters](#) (2020), Oakes Smith was part of an extensive tradition of women embracing the role of prophet to assert their cultural authority. While the relation between Eva, the child heroine of Oakes Smith's "The Sinless Child" (1842, 1845) and Harriet Stowe's Little Eva from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), has been suggested, nowhere has a detailed comparison been elaborated. More broadly, echoes between Oakes Smith's rhetoric of prophecy in her treatise [Woman and Her Needs](#) or her novel *Bertha and Lily* and the writings and speeches of women from Maria Stewart and Harriet Jacobs to Olympia Brown and Elizabeth Stoddard might be explored. In a related vein, how might Oakes Smith's [Shadowland, or The Seer](#) participate in the spiritualist tradition that gave Hattie Wilson fame and income in her later career?
- Formal and Generic Innovations—while scholarship has found no specific bio-critical relationships between Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Gilman scholars and others already aware of the formal relationships between Oakes Smith's ["The Defeated Life"](#) (1847) and the diary structure of "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892)

may be surprised to read a utopian pre-cursor to Gilman's *Herland* (1915) in Oakes Smith's "[The Amazons of Mexico](#)" (1877). Indeed, what examples of utopian fiction in the US were available to Oakes Smith in the 1870s, and how might we explain her adoption of the genre?

- Women and Labor—from the time of *Woman and Her Needs* and the beginnings of her career as a lecturer (principally in "[The Dignity of Labor](#)" (1852)), Oakes Smith made women's equal opportunity to gainful employment the key to the emancipation of her gender and the recuperation of the "sanctity of marriage." Alcott scholars and others might find Oakes Smith's career-long arguments repeated and expanded not only in Alcott's novel *Work: A Story of Experience* (1870) but likewise in the details of Alcott's struggle for income as a woman writer in earlier decades. A similar study might consider Oakes Smith's arguments in relation to *Ruth Hall* and the career of Fanny Fern.
- Team Transcendentalist—scholars such as Tiffany Wayne, Dorri Beam, Mary Louise Kete and to some extent Elissa Zellinger have argued for the inclusion of Oakes Smith's work in the progress of transcendentalist thought, but the interpersonal dimensions of Oakes Smith's relationships with key figures in the movement have yet to be fleshed out. If Thoreau's journal reflections on his conversations with Oakes Smith were none-too-promising on December 31, 1851, the evening she delivered her lecture "Womanhood" at the Concord Lyceum, is there an archival record (journal, diary, newspaper) of what other transcendentalists Oakes Smith name-checks in [her late lecture on Emerson and his circle](#) (1884) may have thought of her work?

Inquiries or Abstracts of 250 words should be emailed to Secretary of the Oakes Smith Society, Rebecca Jaroff, at rjaroff@ursinus.edu or President of the Society, Timothy H. Scherman, at t-scherman@neu.edu by January 15.

*Many of the links in this CFP invite scholars to consider the development of the [Elizabeth Oakes Smith website](#), along with the appearance of the first volume of [Elizabeth Oakes Smith: Selected Writings](#) in 2023 and the arrival of the second volume early in 2024, all of which afford established scholars and their students at all levels the opportunity to incorporate Oakes Smith's work into current critical debates and revise literary histories already established.

The Oakes Smith Society invites you to use ([or order!](#)) these new resources and become part of this major 19th century woman's recovery—for our ALA panel and beyond.