

Elizabeth Oakes Smith's remarks to the National Woman's Rights Convention at Syracuse, September 8, 1852¹

My Friends, do we realize for what purpose we are convened? Do we fully understand that we aim at nothing less than an entire subversion of the existing order of society, a dissolution of the whole existing social contact? Do we see that it is not an error of today, nor of yesterday, against which we are lifting up the voices of dissent; but it is against hoary-headed error of all times; error born onward from the first footprints of the first pair ejected from Paradise - intermingled in every aspect of civilization down to our own times? In view of this, it does seem to me that we should each and all feel as if anointed, sanctified, set apart as to a great mission. It seems to me, that we who struggle to restore the divine human to the world, should feel as if under the very eye of the Eternal Searcher of all hearts, who will reject any sacrifice other than a pure offering.

We are said to be a few, disaffected, embittered women, met for the purpose of giving vent to petty personal spleen, and domestic discontent. We repel the charge - and I called upon every woman here to repel the charge. If we have private griefs (and what human heart, in a large sense, is without them), we do not come here to recount them. The grave will lay its cold honors over the hearts of all here present, before the good we ask for our kind will be realized to the world. We shall pass onward to other spheres of existence, but we trust the seed we shall here plant, will ripen to a glorious harvest. We "see the end from the beginning," and rejoice in spirit. We care not that we shall not reach the fruits of our toil, for we know in times to come, it will be seen to be a glorious work.

Bitterness is the child of wrong; if anyone of our number has become embittered (which God forbid), it is because social wrong has so penetrated to the inner life, that we are crucified thereby, and taste the gall and vinegar, with the Divine Master. All who take their stand against false institutions are in some sense embittered. The conviction of wrong has wrought mightily in them. Their large hearts took in the whole sense of human woe, and bled for those who had become brutalized by its weight, and they spoke as never man spake in his own individualism, but as the embodied race will speak, when the full time shall come. Thus Huss and Wickliffe, and Luther spoke, and the men of '76.

No woman has come here to talk over her private griefs, and detail the small coin of personal anecdote; and yet did woman speak of the wrongs, which unjust legislation - the wrongs which corrupt public opinion - the wrongs which false social aspects have fastened upon us - wrongs which she hides beneath smiles, and conceals with womanly endurance- *did* she give voice to all this, her smiles would seem so hollow, and her endurance so divine, that her brow would be

¹ Copied from *The Proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention, Held at Syracuse September 8th, 9th and 10th 1852*, printed in Syracuse by J.E. Masters, accessible via Hathitrust.org at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.rslfbl&view=1up&seq=9>. Some punctuation has been regularized.

It was to this Convention that Paulina Wright Davis and Elizabeth Oakes Smith arrived in dresses deemed by Susan B. Anthony too fashionable to represent the cause. Others reminded Anthony that not all present were required to dress as simply as Quakers, but Anthony prevailed, and Lucretia Mott was quickly appointed instead of Oakes Smith as President. Davis and Oakes Smith were nominated as Vice Presidents along with Clarina H. I. Nichols of Vermont, Gerrit Smith of New York, and Sarah Miller, of Pennsylvania.

encircled with the halo of a saint.

But we are not here from a petty personal motive. We have not left our firesides for any purpose inconsistent with its sanctities. Were we ambitious, we should seek a field less obnoxious to public opinion – did we desire notoriety, as is so often said of us, in a bad sense, this is not the field in which to win it, for here the one is lost in the many. No, it is only a deep, holy sense of good to be done for our kind that has compelled us from the sanctities of home, that we may here say what our pulpits dare not utter, God's truth altho' it is; and that we may challenge our Legislators to an account of their stewardship.

We are but a handful, it is true, to resist the combine forces of prejudice and oppression; and we now say, if any one of our number dreads the contest, let him, or her, go out from amongst us *now*, for we that remain are prepared to stand like the band at Thermopylae of old. Let this Syracuse, already known as the watchword of freedom, be our Thermopylae, and here let us enter our solemn protest, and prepare to bide the issue. Let us protest against Law in which we have no voice; against Legislation in which we are not represented; against a Democracy in which half of the people are denied the rights of citizenship. I call upon every woman here to enter her solemn protest against a country claiming to be free, and yet denying to her the rights of a citizen.²

Men gravely tell us we are unfit for the positions to which we aspire – they say we are unfit for legislators and therefore we must not vote, while the squalid emigrant who can neither read nor right, is admitted to a privilege denied to the American matron. Because women cannot all of them do that which only the wisest of men are capable of doing, must we therefore do nothing? Because we haven't the heads of gladiators and pugilists, must we be denied the use of what little brain we do happen to possess? This reminds me of an anecdote of a poor Scotch woman who was telling about the rising in the north, for prince Charles, in which a certain Highland Lord lost his head: "To be sure," she added "it was nae much of a head, but ye ken it was all the world to the puir man."

I trust this will not be a mere talking Convention. We have talked long enough. For years brave women have talked and have appealed to us who are younger in the work, and have encountered nothing but contempt and odium. We are stronger now. I have been to the North and the West, and must go to the South, and find thousands ready to respond, if they knew what to do. Again, I say, let us have done with so much talk, and let us act. Let us take our right.

It was a great point gained in our humanity, when woman felt herself able to speak at all, and make her grief known. Of all the miracles of Jesus, that in which he rebuked the *dumb* devil, is the one most to our mind. But too much talking, buries the subject under the weight of words. The Lacon³

² The fourteenth amendment to the Constitution, ratified nearly sixteen years later in July 1868, granted citizenship to "all persons born or naturalized in the United States," along with equal protection under the law. For reasons this amendment has not led to equal rights for women in the United States see—beyond any of the zillion legal sources debating the issue—Heidi Schreck, *What the Constitution Means to Me* (2017).

³ Demetrius Lacon, Greek philosopher 2nd Century B.C.

is brief, pithy, and home to the purpose. Your great talkers are poor actors – their enthusiasm evaporates in words; they grow charmed with their own eloquence, and let occasion slip by.

I hope this Convention will be an acting Convention. * * * ⁴

Let us pledge ourselves to the support of a paper in which our views shall be fairly presented to the world. At our last Convention, in Worcester, I presented a prospectus for such a paper, which I will request hereafter to be read here. We can do little or nothing without such an organ. We have no opportunity now to repel slander, and are restricted in disseminating truth, from the want of such an organ. The Tribune, and some other papers in the country, have treated us generously, but a paper to represent us, must be sustained by ourselves. We must look to our own resources— We must work out our own salvation, and God grant it be not with fear and trembling. Women must henceforth be the redeemer, the regenerator of the world. We plead not for ourselves alone, but for humanity. We must place woman upon a higher platform, and she will raise the race to her side. We must have no more outcasts - no more judicial murders - no more Helots⁵ in the land. Frail, miserable women, and murderous men, must disappear before the pure gospel of divine love which we design to preach. The newspaper and the lecture room have become greater than the pulpit - more effective in stirring up human hearts to great movements. Let us pledge ourselves to the support of these, in the work in which we are engaged. We must work more diligently than in times past, that our sons may be fitted to nobler humanitarian purposes. We must help to cleanse the venality of the ballot box, and help also to free our Legislative halls, not only from injustice, but rowdiness. Yes, we have look at to the pulpit, but in vain; and now in spite of St. Paul,⁶ we must ourselves preach. We have looked to Legislation, and now, despite our Solons,⁷ we must vote.

Do not mind the pratings about woman's sphere. Our Brothers know woman makes any sphere she chooses to fill, lovely. The maiden may be fair; the mother holy and tender; but the mature woman, grand in her serene wisdom, giving the law, not only to her household, but to the country also, is more than this – she is beautiful, august.

Again, I say let us not talk, but act. We should have a literature of our own, a printing press and publishing house, and tract writers, and tract distributors, as well as Lecturers and Conventions. We must show to the world that we are in earnest; and yet I say this to a race of beggars, for

⁴ Asterisks mark an ellipsis in the record of speeches at the Convention. As noted at the end of the printed record, “large portions of written Addresses, well worthy of publication [the printer] has been obliged to omit—while, as there was no Phonographic Reporter, the extemporaneous speeches are mere fragments of the original.”

⁵ Helots were serfs or slaves in ancient Sparta.

⁶ St. Paul's letters to the church at Corinth are the usually used as evidence of his view toward women, but his patriarchal attitude is also available in 1 Timothy 2. See 1 Corinthians 14: 33-35, “As in all the congregations of the Lord's people. Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

⁷ Again Oakes Smith's reference is to classic antiquity. Solon was an Athenian statesman and poet remembered his attempts to correct moral decline in ancient Greece. “Solon” is used generically to refer to any member of a legislative body—in Oakes Smith's time, necessarily male.

women have no pecuniary resources. Well, then, we must work, we must hold property, and claim the consequent right to representation, or refuse to be taxed.

Our aim is nothing less than an overthrow of our present partial legislation, that every American citizen, whether man or woman, may have a voice in the laws by which we are governed. We do not aim at any idle destruction, but while we would *pull down* our present *outworn* and *imperfect* structure of human institutions, we will help to reconstruct it, upon a new and broader base, which shall hereafter show a perfect and harmonious Temple.⁸

⁸ Bertha, the heroine of Oakes Smith's *Bertha and Lily*, preaches likewise in a classically designed "temple" that literalizes Oakes Smith's figure here.