**THE DIGNITY OF LABOR (1852)**

A Note on the Text

Written in 1852 as the second in Oakes Smith’s second lecture series, “The Dignity of Labor” was likely her most consistently successful lecture and one she continued to deliver at least until the late 1860s. There is no evidence that the ~~MS~~ manuscript transcribed in this edition aligns with the lecture as originally written. Evidence exists of at least three different versions of this lecture: two complete manuscripts owned by Alderman Library and a review of the lecture in the November 19, 1852 edition of the *New York Times* that might indicate a third version, though Oakes Smith’s letter to Seba Smith from Ohio dated April 10, 1852, indicates that ~~even~~ by the time she began delivering “The Dignity of Labor” she had begun to leave her prepared texts behind to speak extemporaneously on a regular basis. Wide discrepancies can be noted between many undated reviews of the lecture Oakes Smith pasted into scrapbooks and either manuscript held in the University of Virginia archives, though it is possible more careful research in digitized newspapers might yield something of a match for one or the other. The copy used in this edition is from the older of the two in the collection, bearing darker marks of acid from Oakes Smith’s perspiration on the lower right corners and marks at the top of the first page in pencil. The more well-preserved manuscript in the UVA collection is bound in fine string. It bears the marks of performance but is clearly a “fair copy,” with a more regular chirography.

“The Dignity of Labor” [1852][[1]](#footnote-1)

The earliest records of human intelligence are the records of a Worker. The first revelation of a God, reveals to us a God of work; hence the dignities of work are as old as is the universe, great as is the greatness of God. When all the heavenly hosts had sung together the chant song of their creation and had swung each into its allotted sphere, then was first heard the prelude to the song of the working man. Man is in harmony with himself and with the external world only as he reflects this divine working type; this diligent seeking to make the wilderness blossom as the rose, The Great Creator has left the crude materials for toil upon every mountain path and silent valley: rivers for his creature man to bridge, and oceans for him to stud with swelling canvas and make resonant by the propelling steam of his floating bulwarks of commerce.

The whole world is made provocative of his invention

He must call down from the chaos of rude matter the shapeless elements out of which he creates all this magnificent world of Art, which to my mind is even more wonderful than that of Nature. I can conceive of an Infinite Begin evolving from his own greatness of power, all the great universe of beauty, from the insect of a day, up to the stupendous worlds, which move in solemn majesty through the stillness of night, and the conception is only accordant with the idea of a God; but when I contemplate the production of a Ship, from the gnarled limbs of a forest tree; when I behold a Steamer, a Locomotive, and consider the amount of intelligence required to build such a structure—recall the rude ore to be dragged from the bosom of the earth, consider the toil of the forge, the sinewy blows of the blacksmith; the application of science, the skill of the Artisan; the inspiration of the architect; the imagination of the Artist, all essential before the wonderful work is complete, I confess I am filled with amazement and awe as if the very work of a God were opened before me.

The Comet is no more wonderful than the Locomotive. Yonder planet in the heavens with its moons and satellites, which we call Jupiter, is no more wonderful in its harmony of adjustment, and its evidence of design than the trim frigate with swelling canvas; her polar needle, her anchors and her life-boats. Thus does the builder of a Ship, as a good worker, approach in dignity to the builder of a planet. The same intelligence, the same forecast, the same adaptation of means to an end, are required in the one as in the other, differing only in degree.

In the material world you perceive that power, art, beauty, progress, are 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; he soars upon the wings of aspiration, and the poem, the drama, and history enlarge the sphere of thought, and enhance the pure pleasures of a refined civilization.

In all this, it is asked, what has woman done? Where is the invention she has made? The palace she has designed? Where are our female Legislators? Our women Salons? Our women Shakespeares and Miltons?, for if we except these two, there are none greater than our Joanna Bailies, our Elizabeth Brownings. Alas! Echo answers, where!

We admit this frankly, and generously. There are none. We are proud of the noble triumphs of our brothers. We glory in the excellence of his work and would not abate one iota of his praise.

Women have not built the cities, the navies, nor equipped the armies of the world. We have Mothered your Shakespeare and Milton and Washington, but we have none such in the feminine Gallery.

What then? because our bones and sinews are of a softer character, never designed to subdue the material world, are we to be left without praise? Is there no better work in the world than to write books?

Truly, most truly, the feminine element, or as it is more truly designated by the world spiritual, is the highest, the greatest, and the last manifestation of God to man.[[2]](#footnote-2) What we call woman was designed to be the last and best work of God; and this element, symbolized in the rose and the lily, the lamb and the dove, in its best state, is represented in the man who approaches to the womanly in character, and the woman, who approaches to the manly.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We are scarcely emerged from the childhood of the race—scarcely one in a million has grown to the full size of man or woman, and we have not emerged from that state where might makes right; consequently, woman, being physically more delicate, has been easily jostled into the background. But poor as has been our career, limited as have been our opportunities, we have been the greatest element afforded the world—we have been its inspiration. Without woman, just as she is, weak if you will; but always in her inmost soul, struggling for what is pure and holy **[is there a comma after “holy” in original?]** tender and good; longing for the beautiful, penetrating the unseen; blind, superstitious if you will; but always religious; for God’s last touch of earthly creation was laid tenderly upon her head, without woman just as the world has found her, there would [be] no poetry or eloquence—no legislation, no literature, nor music nor art, of any kind.

She may have fallen far short of what was designed in and through her, but bad as she has been, weak as she has been, there would have been nothing but chaos, flood, and death in the world had not her influence counteracted the material tendencies of the other sex.

In the long ages she has had all the drudgeries of toil, without its dignified results. Let the negative praise then be awarded her, that by her care of the lesser necessities of the world she has left more to achieve the greater.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the savage state of Society all servile toil devolves upon the woman, and I recollect once having been paddled across Penobscot river by one of the head men of the tribe, who moved with the stateliness of a king. He did not feel his dignity invaded by performing this office for one whom he regarded as a great medicine woman, but he would not launch the birch canoe, and bring the paddles himself; he gave a signal, and the women went out and did this. And yet as proof of some advance in civilization, even beyond the men of the Union, we must not forget that the Indian Confederation of the Iroquois were perhaps in this country, the earliest assertors of the equal dignity of the sexes; though all nations, especially those of the Teutonic race, have regarded women as representing the religious, or the mystical, and accordingly throughout the world, the Sibyls, the Vestals, and the Arurus[[5]](#footnote-5) have been treated with distinguished honor.

Amongst the Iroquois, a woman whose Son had reached the honor of Chief, which was elective, was at once, the Mother, I mean, was at once received into the national Council. The edicts of the Confederation, were issued in the name of the “Old men, and wise women.” These wise women were exempt from toil, except that of the mind.

I think the people of our country have been more unwilling to acknowledge the equality of women than any other people, because in Monarchies and Empires women often fill the throne, while in a Republic she has only an indirect influence, unless she be admitted to the elective franchise. A Republic is not paternal, and the grievances of the people are not relieved by the fatherly sentiment of the ruler; you all know you seek redress at the ballot box. Here you bring your principles, your influence, your wealth, all the results of your labor and your intelligence to work out your emancipation at the ballot box; and here, if woman ever hopes to redeem her sex from the servility of toil, and the degradations of vice and ignorance and poverty, she must claim to be represented; here where our brothers go for redress of their grievances, we must go also.

Democracy is the political phase of Christianity. As Christianity excludes all idea of sex in a moral point of view; places man and woman side by side in the presence of the Great Auditor, bound by the same moral code and subject to the same penalties, with a terrible clearness of equality; so does Democracy in its legislative shape present man and woman side by side, without distinction of sex, with a like clearness of equality.

Thus it is that we stand upon the solid basis of our humanity, as one half of the genus homo, and claim, that in a Republic, Man’s freedom is woman’s freedom also. Man’s social immunities are hers; man’s civil rights and political dignities are a part and parcel of her inalienable birth-right also. Till this be acknowledged amongst us, till we ignore sex in our political and commercial relations, till woman has a voice in the laws that govern her, till she cast a ballot for the one who is to represent her interests, there can be no method of redressing her wrongs and giving dignity to her position in the body politic.

If this has not been acknowledged in the world, if the idea of equality has been contemned or ignored, it must be borne in mind, that man as yet has hardly come to a knowledge and an understanding of his own, God-imparted bill of rights, dearly earned as his freedom has been, by centuries of toil, tortures unspeakable, and the shedding of oceans of blood. While Man has manfully toiled, and dug in the red trenches of Freedom, woman [merged?] in the caste of sex, vain, fickle, and imbecile has never been a true, noble Helper in the world.

But there is a price in some shape to every good or evil in the world, and if women claim a right they must take up with the conditions it involves. They must earn their rights by paying the price by which they are purchased. Men have had the lion’s share of power, not from a desire to oppress woman, but because they gave a full equivalent for all their privileges, and hitherto our sex have not aspired to possess these, and have not given any equivalent for them.

Men claim the right to Legislate, because their industry has paid the expense, and their brains have supplied the ideas of Legislation, while it would be preposterous for us to claim that we have done much if anything in this way, and our great hope is in the need which the country begins to feel for us. Our Brothers themselves begin to feel that they cannot get along without us.

But if we really mean to reach the true power which of right belongs to us, we must not merely respond to this call, we must make hands and brain do yeoman service; we must accumulate wealth, and we must evolve ideas, for in these are bound up the elements of power.

You perhaps are not prepared to look upon the dignity of Labor as involving political power, and may consider it as chimerical—as mere abstraction, but remember that abstract truth is the truth, and that when people begin to discuss an abstract right, it needs no prophet to predict, that in the course of time the right will be acknowledged, made practical, and become a part of the Constitution and laws.[[6]](#footnote-6) The people will soon be educated up to the ideas a woman should carry her own vote, and hold any office she may be qualified to fill.

The mere idea of a vote is nothing—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. We wish to lift the sex from its vices and its beggaries, which can only be done through the ballot box.

We find women degraded by vice and rendered ferocious by despair, incarcerated in prisons which their taxes help to build, and under the penalties of laws, which they have had no voice in making, and we must meet these facts and devise a remedy.

Perhaps you ask, is there no sphere peculiarly designed for woman? A sphere which she is guilty and unwomanly if she forsake? I reply by the laws of her being as one half of the genus homo, her sphere cannot be divergent from that of the other sex. The functions of maternity are limited to only a short period of life, leaving long years for general usefulness, and that the wisest, that best part of a true life.

I will define the sphere of woman in a few brief words.

The measure of capacity is the measure of sphere to either man or woman.

This definition leaves each sex legitimately in the sphere of work, the capacity for which, of whatever kind, is the only limit of exercise. Each will enlarge the sphere of action according to the capacity of doing so.

Perhaps you ask, would you have woman forsake the household, ignore the family, leave home with its elegant dependence to launch upon the sea of adventure?[[7]](#footnote-7) Would you have her compete with man in the rougher avocations of life? Would you place her upon the judicial bench, in the pulpit? In the dissecting room, at the plough and the anvil? Upon shipboard and railway?

To this I reply—a womanly woman will do her devoir in a womanly way. I would have her do just what she is best adapted to do. Anything is better than fashionable idleness and frivolity. I would give her the incitement of labor by making it honorable and remunerative. Already those questions are answered in exceptional cases. Madam Dacier[[8]](#footnote-8) a hundred years ago felt bound to disarm the masculine critics by almost servile humility when she presumed to translate Homer, now a woman may talk in Greek and Hebrew and nobody thinks the worse, and perhaps some none the better of her for it.

Nobody calls Grace Dashing or Florence Nightingale masculine, and if they did it would not much matter. There was a Mrs. Bailey a few years ago, who navigated her husband’s ship from Rio de Janeiro to San Francisco; opposed all the time by the mate of the ship, who wished to stop the voyage; but the courageous woman was a skillful navigator, and carried a sound head—she commanded the ship, and nursed her husband with wifely care through the delirium of fever, and carried her ship into port in gallant style, to the great pride of her husband, and the relief of the Underwriters.[[9]](#footnote-9) We need more just such women. The sphere of a woman can no more be defined than that of a man can be defined.

One man is content to hold his neighbor’s plough, or a Lady’s for according to his sphere of refinement—he “whistles as he goes for lack of thought,” or he writes little verses to little women, with little hands and feet, and little smiles, and little dimples, and little brains, just after his own little measure. This is his noblest work, and he is content.

Another man will do all this very early in life if he does it at all, and then he will be off like Columbus seeking for new worlds; or like Galileo inventing new methods to penetrate the hidden stars; or like Raleigh searching for Eldorado. He will think to compete with the Poets; to describe humanity with a Dickens; or vie with Kant and Edwards in metaphysic subtlety. He must be a worker, if his ambition go no higher than to be President of these United States in this day of bad morals, and worse Statesmanship.

So it is with woman—her talents are even more diversified. One is content to knit and sew, whip the children, and scold the servants, or make soap and puddings, all excellent things, in their way, but not the highest, which another may do there, and at the same time discourse like Madam de Staël, or write like Charlotte Brontë.[[10]](#footnote-10) The same God, who never repeats himself, whose infinite resources of infinite beauty forbids the making of two leaves upon the same tree exactly alike, has forbidden identity of character in the creation of the human race, and these multitudinous shades demand every variety of use, and hence men and women however placed in the world have a right to individual assertion, spheral enlargement.

Much of our modern talk about the sphere of woman is not only preposterous but imbecile. Women have so advanced to the foreground in the arena of action that they flaunt their vices and crimes to the world, and like that incarnate fiend, Mrs. Cunningham, are more than a match for Drs., Lawyers, and Judges upon the bench.[[11]](#footnote-11) The restrictions to which society subjects them seems to have goaded them to malignity, whereas had these fierce women had some accepted sphere of action they might have escaped the commission of crime.

Our Legislators never talk of a woman being out of her sphere; when she commits a crime they assume that this sphere is incident to her equally with the other sex. They do not talk twattle in the case, upon the tenderness and delicacy of woman, but she is rudely seized by rude officials—consigned to a prison—her lawyer, her Judge, and her Jury are all of the other sex, and her final executioner is a man. Truly when I consider woman as a criminal my sense of justice is so outraged that she seems to me more like a victim than a culprit.[[12]](#footnote-12)

She should have a voice in the making and in the administration of laws which may be so fatally visited upon herself. If she is in a Republic she should be a law maker, and a law administrator, that she may be equally, and justly represented in the body politic; that she may control her property, own her own person, and protect herself and others when involved in the meshes of adverse circumstances.

Further, women by dint of industry, by inheritance or otherwise, have become the holders of a vast amount of property in the aggregate of the sex, and this property is taxed in the same ratio with property owned by the other sex.

Now as the whole basis of our war of Independence assumed that taxation without representation is tyranny, and as we are supposed to have continued and adopted this principle, and to have incorporated it into the spirit of our institutions, it follows that women, if for no other reason than to help our Brothers to consistency, ought to exact for themselves, representation, or decline taxation. If taxation without representation be tyranny to man, it is nothing less to woman.

As the laws now exist in many States, a man may make over his estate to his wife, and thus escape the payment of his honest debts. I wish these women, who are thus made cat’s paws of, had the wit to hold on to this property, claim representation through it, and thus help on honest doings in the world.

It is an axiom in these modern times, that Governments exist by the consent of the governed—now one half of our adult population and not the least half in point of intelligence, have given no such consent, and cannot rightfully be held to allegiance.

You say that every male member of the Republic, twenty one years of age, is entitled to the rights of Citizenship, meaning the right to vote, and you call a woman a Citizen, while you deny her this right, which is a farce and an anomaly. I contend that the term Citizen comprises all persons of sound mind, and mature age, without distinction of sex or color. But the Negro of the State of New York, is not admitted to Citizenship, except as he is the holder of property to the amount of 250 dollars. He is disenfranchised by the color of his skin but becomes a Citizen by the holding of property.

Now I would not have color, sex, nor poverty work any disability in this right of being an acting, vital member of the Republic. I would gladly have every vote an intelligent vote, but this the spirit of the age condemns[;] therefore [I] would have the individual selfhood to be represented: good or bad, male or female, black or white, rich or poor, if they have committed no crime, shall claim a right to be heard and felt in the Country and Government that claims to own them.[[13]](#footnote-13)

As we women now stand in the country, our property swells the revenues of the Government, and when the census is taken our numbers augment our representatives in Congress, but the men sent there are rarely to our mind, and we believe do not represent our interests in Congress half as well as we could represent them ourselves.

Many object to a woman’s voting on the ground that it would interfere with the interests of the family. This objection does not come from the working classes, but from those pretentious idlers, whose dissipated wives squander their thousands at Washington and Saratoga, to the detriment of their families, and the ruin of their morals.

A woman could as easily drop her vote in the ballot box, as she drops a letter in the P.O.. The principle objection however, is the absence of precedence the idea is new and men must be educated up to it, and as for women they are doing a great many things in the world far more coarse, and far more dangerous than the casting of a vote.

Again, good, conscientious men solemnly believe the polls to be too noisy, and too corrupt for us to visit. This is a melancholy truth and may be caused by the absence of the sex at these gatherings, for let me tell you, if a ballot box were provided for us, and the women seen to approach with decorous manners and becoming smiles, vote in hand, the men would soon follow our example, and each go to the polls with a rose-bud in his button hole, and looking and behaving his very best.

Women will hardly be admitted to power in the body politic unless fully able to give an equivalent for what they receive, in shape of influence, ability and wealth, therefore I urge them to work understandingly and with forecast.

If admitted to political power I do not apprehend greater abuse than what already exists—there is an inherent conservatism in women, which grows naturally out of that protectiveness which springs from the maternal instinct. Her vote would simply enlarge, or duplicate the ballot box. It is true—party men might sue for her vote, but that would be less degrading than the present method, by which a man marries a woman because he wants her money.

Were the sex more in earnest, and less cowardly, they would tell less about their rights, and take them—they would be asked to prate about wrongs, which it is in their own power to redress if they will.

Already we are a power in the country did we but know it, and we are fast approaching a period of equal rights.

We have about two thousand women engaged in authorship, either as Editors or book-makers, and their works are read with greater avidity than those of the other sex. Many of these scant the idea of political equality for the sex, because they do not perceive the groundwork of our wrongs, and the only mode of redress.

One of these women told me she believed so far in my doctrines that she had got divorced from her husband because he did not support her. Now this was an assumption, and an impertinence also, for I do not believe much in divorce in any way, but I do believe in mutual forbearance, and equally rights, and if a man cannot support the wife, why I see no reason why she should not support herself and him too, if able to do so.

If he cannot be the husband, for the term is Saxon, and signifies the bond of the house, or that which binds the house together—if he cannot do this, why, let the woman do it, be the husband. The one best able to work efficiently, should be this, and that is not always the man.[[14]](#footnote-14)

We have about five hundred women Artists, and if we included porcelain painters, and photograph colorists, we have a great many more. We have five thousand Actresses—twenty thousand factory women—twenty thousand Teachers in schools; as many more shop keepers and book keepers. There used to be five hundred engaged in the U.S. Mint, but that was before the advent of Greenbacks—about three hundred are in the Treasury Department, two hundred in the Dead-letter office. Several thousands are practical printers—three hundred P[ost] Masters. A thousand are practicing medicine—five or six Lecture, about as many are studying law, two are Registers of Deeds, and a vast number carry on farms and manufactories.

These are more than a million of women unquestionably working honorably, and competing with men for the honors and the wealth of the Country. All these work at great disadvantage, because their labor is controlled more or less by male capitalists, and the vast army of working women, who are employed in the more menial avocations, are still more disabled by the smallness of their wages.

Thousands of women would gladly work, for the sake of themselves and their children, but lack the requisite courage and capacity. Let these remember that God helps those who help themselves. Women cry a great deal too much, and help themselves too little.

Fathers are to blame for much of the imbecility and helplessness of women. They train their sons to a career in life—educate them to a business, the Arts or a profession, and incite them to an honorable ambition, while girls are educated only for marriage, as if the Alpha and Omega of a woman’s life were to get a husband.[[15]](#footnote-15)

I have found our public benefactors putting their wits to work, to devise methods of work for us, so that we may not go out of our sphere, like stray lambs into the mouth of the wolf. They discuss the degradations of women, and establish right missions, when the only help for us is to acknowledge our equality and give us suffrage, and then we can help ourselves, and lift ourselves from the dust. While we are received in the world only in the sphere of sex, misery, degradation and poverty will be rife with us; give us a chance to make laws which we best know we need, and woman will arise to higher self-respect, and men would be compelled to respect us, and would have to mind their own P’s and Q’s also.

The difficulty of procuring work supposed to be adapted to women is certainly very great because every avenue of light labor is monopolized by men, or those who call themselves such, but there is a greater difficulty behind this, which consists in the smallness of wages paid for the work of women. She is never paid more than half or two thirds as much for her labor as the same amount, and of no better quality, would command by the other sex, and this is the secret of her poverty, her discontent and her degradation.

It is folly to talk about work suitable for women. Let men and women do just what they are best able to do. If a man feels he is more competent to sell bonnets and laces, than to work a farm or go to Congress, I would not dispute him, I dare say he is right, but do not complain, and expostulate because a woman may be made of better material, stronger and wiser, and manlier, [and] prefers to farm or hold an office, to make a stump speech or “run the machine,” *but* give each of them a chance to do their best, a[nd] pay according to the amount, and not according to sex.

As men are monopolizing the light work, why, women must take the heavy.[[16]](#footnote-16) Some men like the needle and some women like the hoe. I do not see that Mrs. Capt Peck, relict of Peck deceased, is any more out of her sphere than the man who sells me pins and needles, and bonnets. 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. I could wish to send our manly men to manly avocations; I would send the whole army of fops and popinjays, who dodge work whenever they can, on to farms, and into workshops, and then adjust the question of spheres.

Admit a woman to the right of suffrage and she assumes dignity, and will spurn mere dependence upon the other sex for a support, which is the basis of her degradation.

Let Girls be trained to support themselves, just as boys are trained to a trade or a profession, and it would soon be regarded as indecent to marry for support. Our laws and public opinion are both at fault in these things, based as they are upon the expectation that every woman is to be supported by some man.

Men are ignoble, who pass their lives without results—who fail to procure an honest living by trade, commerce, art, literature or a profession—the whole world is open before them, the right of choice, the hope of achievement, and when they overcome the world, freight the seas with their golden argosies; span the earth with railways; index the skies with temples; flood the great human heart with noble aspirations and heroic deeds, we applaud them as benefactors and heroes; and this is to live—this is to work out the design of God in our creations; and a life akin to this our women should lead—holding the vanguard of truth—inspiring and ennobling life, and freighting it with aspiration.

We are too tenacious by half of our poor ineffective lives, as if the world will care sixpence whether we are alive or dead when we do no good in it. A grave stone is the most melancholy thing in the world—recording a birth and a death and nothing intervening.

Women have hitherto lacked incitement in our Republic—the Protestant Church deprives them of the honors which the Roman Catholic Church once afforded them—they could not be elected to rule as women were born to reign in monarchies, and we have no aristocratic titles to give us eclat in courtly processions, hence, as our Republic awarded us nothing, gave us no office, and denied us suffrage, thus denying us the chance to protect ourselves and our interests, and negativing [*sic*] ambition, women have been thrown back upon the poorest and demoralizing kind of ambition—that of being distinguished for beauty, for fine dress and diamonds, and being able to live in idleness and luxury.[[17]](#footnote-17)

A woman’s life in our Republic, where suffrage is denied her, is shorn of all dignity and glory and reduced to the primitive one of sex and family. Now a noble woman will make her life noble under every disadvantage, but the weak woman must have incitement and emulation, or she is lost.

Give us the elective franchise if you would save the Republic. If the one woman in a thousand like the one man in a thousand be qualified to hold an office, let there be nothing in public opinion, and nothing in our laws to prevent it.

A woman may choose to command a Ship. I see no reason why she should not be trained to do so if she likes, as a woman did for thirty years on the coast of England, without encountering a single accident. The severest trial of Mrs. Capt. Peck, upon the “raging [ ]” was once in the mutiny of her crew—but the stout woman was equal to the occasion, and she seized her mate by the collar and dropped him overboard. I have known of many women who divided the care of the ship with their husbands, and one of the best teachers of navigation in Maine was a woman. I have already spoken of Mrs. Bailey.

I know of a Girl at the West, who worked two years at the anvil to mitigate the labor of an invalid Father. This was true, womanly work, for the ruggedest toil may be by sentiment.

Women have indirectly done more of the world’s work than is generally acknowledged, for few of us have been executive, we have done the work often where men have reaped the benefit, as they do now in the lower price for our work, even when we do more, and do it better than they do. I have known Clergymen who preached sermons written by their wives, and showed wisdom by so doing. Indeed, our brains have been so many supernumerary powers, like the reserved corps on the battle field to be used when necessity requires.

The philosophy of the small wages paid for the work of women may be all resolved into the nature of the marriage relation, the wife being considered more honorable than the spinster, and being supposed, though it is by no means the case, exonerated from the labor of earning her bread. A man receives the higher pay for work, because it is expected he will marry and support a wife. A woman is paid much less because it is presumed her toil is only temporary, and she is expected to marry and not support a husband.

“Where do you live now, Bridget,” a gentleman asked of an old servant whom he met in the street. “La, Sir,” she replied, “I don’t live at all now—I am married.”

This is the truth by the shortest cut. 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. She is an appendage, an adjunct to the man [who] owns her while he lives, and she does not recover her individualism when he dies but is regarded as his relict—what is left of him, and on her tomb stone she figures as the relict of her former owner.

These are many current ideas which have evidently proceeded from the brains of women: inventions may some of them be traced home to her; as she did the heavy work in the barbarous ages, it is natural to suppose that all early methods to lessen toil were invented by her.

The Invention of shot is an illustration. A woman dreamed that she saw her husband standing upon the top of a very high tower, where he poured smelted lead through a seine which fell into water below, thereby producing perfect globules of shot.

She told this dream to her husband, who tried the experiment and found it to work to a charm; and now every shot tower in the country looks to me like a monument commemorating the discretion of that wise woman. Had she offered the plan as an invention of her own, he would have scanted the idea, “what did she know about war!” but as a dream he hailed it as a revelation.

This willingness of women to be absorbed in the career of their husbands would be very beautiful were it not a covert falsehood, and did it not strike a death-blow to the industry and energy of the sex—keeping woman always subordinate and dependent, and leaving them at last without resource, the aged widow and the Spinster succorless.

The small wages of women reduce the just price of work, and swell the exchequer of our monied men, for women work more hours, and for less pay than men will submit to. But I foresee that the cupidity of trade will work out the redemption of women. They are now employed because they work cheap and because of their greater dexterity, and the result is that now the workingwomen are combining to protect their own labor, and repel the extortions of capital. They will in time hold the power in their own hands, and the man or woman with a trade will be honored and respected, and be the one most likely of all others to become rich, and powerful, and they will here as in Europe hold a monopoly of some branches; and in the process of time these women, commanding a vast number of working people, flush with money also, finding their trade endangered by bad legislation will rise and put their own shoulders to the clogged wheels of Government, and will seize upon the rights you refuse to yield them, and woman will take her share in Legislation, helping it by wealth and ideas.

Perhaps our Brothers do not fully estimate the progress already made by women in exact ideas. Mrs. Bradstreet, who claimed a large estate in the City of Utica, pled her own case in Court some years ago, and John Van Buren declared her the best real estate Lawyer in the country.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Harriet Martineau and Mrs. Weber both of them Spinsters, are excellent scientific Farmers.[[19]](#footnote-19) Miss Mitchell of Nantucket is one of the best Astronomers of the age, and received from the king of Denmark, the prize for the discovery of a new Comet.[[20]](#footnote-20) Miss Herschel must divide astronomic honors with her learned brother.[[21]](#footnote-21) Miss Dix and Florence Nightingale are as earnest philanthropists as was John Harvard—you will perceive that the Spinsters are carrying off all the honors.[[22]](#footnote-22) But then Mrs. Somerville who was the only woman in the world able to understand the tables of Laplace was twice married.[[23]](#footnote-23)

I must speak of another worker and a heroine in the sphere of action. Not many years ago there lived in the City of Bangor Maine, at the time the California gold fever prevailed, a courageous, robust woman, the mother of six young children. Her husband was quite the reverse of all this, and the woman saw nothing but an inheritance of ignorance and poverty for her poor children. He was a sort of rock the cradle man—she a manly woman.

She proposed to go out to California and dig for gold, if he would devote himself to the care of her children. He gave his consent, and a few kind neighbors helped her to an outfit. She started bravely on her mission—she reached New York, and mindful of the kind father and little ones, looked about manfully for work. She found an outward bound vessel in want of a cook, and her staid matronly demeanor procured for her the coveted position, when she immediately sent fifty dollars of her funds back to the dear little brood at home.

Great-souled Mother, and true woman! My heart goes out with her on [her] perilous way over the waste of waters. I feel how the heart-strings tug homeward, while the ship bears her farther and farther from all that is dear to her. Were she in France a medal would be awarded her for her virtue, and I would go many miles to kiss the hard brown hand of this noble representative of womanhood.

Now here is a thorough woman and an effective worker, and her story is of value in many ways. It illustrates my position that men and women should be left to do just the kind of work they are best able to perform. This man was better able to rock the cradle than to provide bread for the innocent sleeper within, and the gentle passiveness with which he assumes the womanly duty, and leaves his nobler companion to manly work is quite touching to my mind.

The application is obvious. In this family at least the woman was the hus-bond,[[24]](#footnote-24) and as such was entitled to the higher price of work. She could support the family, he could not, and the dignities of the worker belong to her, not to him, and if either is to be denied suffrage it ought to be this inefficient man, and not this manly woman.

I might cite Clementine Howarth, the Poet, also, as one, who for the sake of her family, and in aid of a blind husband has toiled in manly wise.[[25]](#footnote-25) It is an affecting thing to contemplate this woman, so well able to compete with the best in literature, bending day by day over the wearying labor of caning chairs, to earn her daily bread. There is something wrong in the position of women in a Republic till she is made equal in the law, and thus able to protect herself and aid her suffering sisters.

I wish our women would learn in these enlightened days to spurn the hackneyed twattle about being feminine, which is a half implied reproach, and learn to be womanly—we are on the verge of revolution, when it may be that we shall be called upon to exercise all the manly virtues of 76. I do not believe that men and women were designed to go through the world with their mouths as it were sewed up, lest they should utter something out of the common track; and with their elbows held into their ribs lest they should hit a dull neighbor.

I believe that woman must in this nineteenth century awake to her mission to redeem the world—to reorganize society upon a more humane basis, to render governors more protective to the governed, to do away with legal taking of life—to prevent the effusion of blood amongst 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.

I look adown the gloomy ages of the past and see that there is a dim prophecy of all this, in old Deborah, sitting in judgement under a palm tree, and in these scattered lives which we find in history so much greater than the times in which they lived. I believe in those ancient Sibyls who foreshadowed the reign of equal rights, and divine peace on earth. I rejoice that Paganism was able to develop a Sappho—and Judaism a Ruth, and Christianity a Joan of Arc. I grow into a great triumph at [the] thought of the saintly Martyrs and believe that Saint Margery in her divine purity might tread down the burning plowshare with her naked feet.

I rejoice in all these things for I see in them a great hope, and prophecy of great works to be done by my sex, and I see that when God needs an instrument he does not always look for a man to do his work, but when in the long ages a fitting woman is to be found he takes her to do his work as well.

For myself I believe the human race both sexes was designed for something better than we have yet reached. I do not believe that voting, squabbling for spoils, and fighting for office is the best thing for either men or women, but I do believe that the equality of the sexes must be acknowledged before the better time will be inaugurated—I look upon this movement of the sex for their rights as the stepping stone thereto, and therefore I claim for both, one and equal pay for work, and one and equal political rights in the body politic.

1. MS located in the Papers of Elizabeth Oakes Prince Smith, Box 2, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In the spirit of “Republican motherhood,” Catherine Beecher expounds a similar glorification of women as the mostly highly evolved spiritual beings, calling them “the constant model of imitation,” and arguing that “just as the wives and mothers sink or rise in the scale of virtue, intelligence, and piety, the husbands and the sons will rise and fall.” But where Beecher uses this characterization to argue that a woman’s place ~~was~~ is in the home, Oakes Smith, along with Fuller, uses it to make a place for women in the public sphere. For Beecher, see “The Education of Female Teachers,” in *The Educated Woman in America*, ed. Barbara M. Cross (New York: Teachers College Press, 1965) 67, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Fuller expresses the idea of the duality of human being in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, writing, “Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman.” See Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Again, Oakes Smith and Beecher note the same phenomenon but make different arguments. Both plea for recognition of traditional women’s work and sacrifice, but where Oakes Smith pleads the case for women to be allowed to do “greater” work, Beecher says of woman that “Her great mission is self-denial.” Catherine Beecher, “The Christian Family,” in *The Educated Woman in America*, ed. Barbara M. Cross (New York: Teachers College Press, 1965) 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Aruru is the Akkadian goddess personifying earth who assisted the chief Babylonian ~~diety~~ deity, Marduk, in the creation of mankind. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Compare Margaret Fuller’s similar hope from 1844: “There inquires the spirit, ‘Is this rhetoric the bloom of healthy blood or a false pigment artfully laid on?’ And yet again we know where there is so much smoke, must be some fire; with so much talk about virtue and freedom, must be mingled some desire for them; that it cannot be in vain that such have become the common topics of conversation among me, rather than schemes for tyranny and plunder” (*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. While Oakes Smith does not directly acknowledge Fuller’s famous “let them be sea-captains” comment and the ensuing outrage against Fuller eight years earlier, one might guess that here and in subsequent references to female sea captains, she is subtly lending her contemporary some support. See Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Anne Le Fèvre Dacier (1647–1720) was a French linguist and translator of the classics, including Homer’s *The* *Iliad* (1699) and *The* *Odyssey* (1708). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Basil Greenhill and Ann Giffard’s *Women Under Sail* provides letters and journals of women on sailing vessels between 1829 and 1949. Most are travelers, but there is some information on women laborers. Although aimed at young adults and not considered scholarly, Linda Grant DePauw’s *Seafaring Women* has good information on women working at sea, with chapters on pirates, warriors, whalers, and traders. Margaret S. Creigton’s article “Women and Men in American Whaling” details women who accompanied their captain husbands, as well as their husbands’ inclusion of “feminine” elements on the ship, even when their wives were not present. Greenhill, Basil, and Ann Giffard, *Women Under Sail* (South Brunswick and New York: Great Albion Books, 1971).Linda Grant DePauw, *Seafaring Women* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982). Margaret S Creighton, “Women and Men in American Whaling, 1830–1870,” *International Journal of Maritime History* 4/1 (1992): 195–218. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. British novelist Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855) wrote under the pseudonym Currer Bell. In 1851, she would have been known as the author of *Jane Eyre*: *An Autobiography* (1847), which features a first-person narrative tracing the resistance of the protagonist to a society with strict class and gender boundaries. Her novel of 1853, *Villette*, for many contemporary critics, including George Eliot, “still more wonderful” than *Jane Eyre*, traces the life of Lucy Snowe,who leaves her family in in the English countryside to live and work in London, then in a fictitious city modeled on Brussels, Belgium. The personal and moral growth of Brontë’s characters as they engage in a variety of vocations over the course of their lives was likely an inspiration for characters like Louisa May Alcott’s Christine Devon in the novel *Work*: *A Story of Experience* (1873) and Liza Jane, the protagonist of Oakes Smith’s own manuscript novel, “The Queen of Tramps.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cunningham was charged with the murder of Dr. Harvey Burdell in January 1857. In the “Editor’s Studio” of *Emerson’s United States Magazine* for September 1857, Oakes Smith expanded her argument that such violent acts were the result of the repression of women, writing, “She is...the product of an atrocious state of society, which, by making marriage the ultimate of a woman’s expectation, and a look to marriage as her only means of support, created in her all manner of falsehood and treachery, indolence and voluptuousness, to be followed, under certain contingencies, by the crimes of unchastity and murder” (323). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Appended in a marginal note: “guilty of crime she should be tried by her peers—a jury half of whom at least should be women.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Oakes Smith’s claim for universal suffrage is more characteristic of early feminist claims than the movement’s schism over support of the Fifteenth Amendment would have us remember. For an acute analysis of the ways early support for universal suffrage have been edited out of feminist history, see Susan Landwer, “Rebuilding the Bridge: A New Archaeology of Women Working toward Universal Rights in 19th Century United States,” MA thesis, Northeastern Illinois University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing,  2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In this and the foregoing paragraph, Smith is describing her own case. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Fuller’s autobiographical sketch of “Miranda,” whose father “cherished no sentimental reverence for Woman, but a firm belief in the equality of the sexes” (*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 27). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A year or more earlier, in *Woman and Her Needs*, Oakes Smith wrote that men should “retire from behind counters and leave a vast field of light occupation for the gentler sex.” Here she does not deny women the right to “rougher avocations.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This stands in contrast to Judith Sargent Murray’s argument that one should distinguish beautiful girls for being beautiful, but also encourage their “intellectual existence.” In *Letters from New York*, Oakes Smith’s contemporary Lydia Maria Child said this of a “gallant” nation in which women were encouraged to live in such “idleness and luxury”: “So far is it from indicating sincere esteem and affection for women, that the profligacy of a nation may, in general, be fairly measured by its gallantry. This taking away rights, and condescending to grant privileges, is an old trick of the physical-force principle” (235). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Van Buren, son of Martin Van Buren and a prominent New York lawyer, was not alone in this assessment. The *Utica Daily Gazette* noted, “It is the opinion of our ablest lawyers that she is as good a lawyer in cases of real estate as any in the State.” Mrs. Bradstreet had fought off insurgents who threatened to destroy her father’s estate in Ireland and killed both of them by agreeing to marry anyone who would protect them. Years later, after moving to the United States with Mr. Cod, the man who accepted her offer, she divorced him and restored her maiden name, henceforth being known as Mrs. Bradstreet. When ~~her~~ the title of father’s Utica estate was under dispute, she taught herself real estate law in order to fight the case. She hired a number of prominent lawyers as advisors, but according to the Gazette, “She did all the declamation” after her lawyer had a run-in with the judge and his practice was suspended. *Utica Daily Gazette* 15/323 (November 19, 1855) and 15/20 (November 26, 1855). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Harriet Martineau (1801–1876) was an English writer and social reformer. After visiting the United States in 1834, she became an avid abolitionist. Regarding Mrs. Weber, Oakes Smith is probably referring to Helene Marie Weber. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Maria Mitchell (1818–1889) was the first female astronomer in the United States and the first woman elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. The king of Denmark awarded her a gold medal for ~~for~~ discovering a comet in 1847. She was a professor of astronomy and the director of the observatory at Vassar College from 1865 until 1888. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Caroline Lucretia Herschel (1750–1848) was an English astronomer known primarily for assisting her more famous astronomer brother, Sir John Frederick William Herschel (1792–1871). Her own accomplishments were considerable: from 1786 to 1797, she discovered eight comets. In 1828, she received the gold medal from the Royal Astronomical Society in Hannover. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. John Harvard was the clergyman whose bequest in 1638 led to the founding of Harvard College. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Mary Somerville was an astronomer whose works included “Mechanism of the Heavens”(1831). Pierre-Simon, de Laplace (1749–1827) was a French mathematician, astronomer, and physicist best known for his investigations of the stability of the solar system. Oakes Smith refers to both Somerville and Mitchell in an article on female astronomers in *Emerson’s United States Magazine* in 1857. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Oakes Smith wrote the word “husband” in this fashion to remind herself to pronounce the word to emphasize the duty of the woman, here, to serve in the man’s traditional duty of keeping his family together, providing for their needs. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ellen Clementine Howarth (1827–1899) was best known for her poems “’Tis But a Little Faded Flower” and “Thou Wilt Never Grow Old.” At age seven, Howarth worked in a factory to support her family. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)