

The Political Economy of Early Feminist Journalism: the Disappearance of *The Egeria*, and the Birth of *The Una*, January 1853

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During the last evening session of the National Woman’s Rights Convention, September 1852, the hall filled to overflowing, convention organizer Paulina Wright Davis “read a prospectus for a weekly paper, edited by Elizabeth Oakes Smith, and to be called *The Egeria*.”² She pressed the importance of a paper that would represent the principles of the movement, supplying an alternative to papers like Greeley’s NY *Tribune*, where the answer was, too often, “your articles can wait.” “If Mrs. Smith can be persuaded to edit the paper,” she added, “it will start with a high literary reputation.”³ Ernestine Rose and Samuel May cautioned against the difficulty of supporting such an organ, but they agreed with the idea. Lucy Stone supported May’s resolution in favor of establishing the organ precisely because “we are misrepresented on almost all sides,” appealing to what “truth, resolution and energy, in a paper, would accomplish.”⁴ Two months later, it seems in Davis’s mind, her idea—conceived two years earlier after the first National Convention—had become a material goal: “Since the Convention

¹ Paper presented for the panel “Elizabeth Oakes Smith’s Feminist ‘50s” at the American Literature Association conference, Boston MA, July 9, 2021.

² *The proceedings of the Woman’s Rights Convention, held at Syracuse, September 8th, 9th, & 10th, 1852* (Syracuse: printed by J.E. Masters, 1852): 94.

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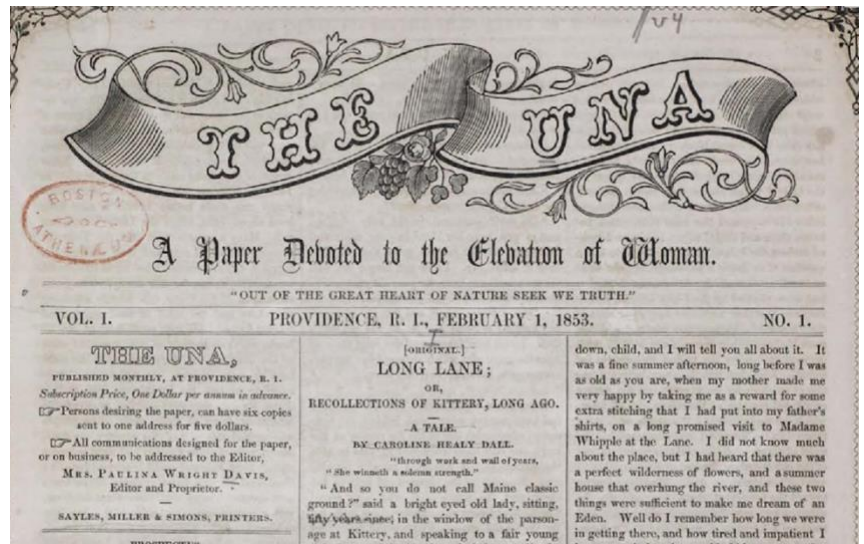
³ *The proceedings* 94.

⁴ *The proceedings* 95.

closed,” she wrote to Caroline Dall on November 11, I have done little else but right [sic] for *The Egeria* and must return to that work.”⁵

The woman’s rights journal that actually appeared the following February was called neither *The Egeria* nor *The Elucidator* (another title Davis briefly settled on), but rather *The*

Una, and by that time Elizabeth Oakes Smith’s name was no longer projected as its editor. If the historical record leaves the disappearance of *The Egeria* and the break between Oakes Smith and Davis a mystery, in this paper I hope to supply these details and



thus to supplement the record of both this aspect of the movement—woman’s attempt to represent their views independent of the legal and economic filter of patriarchal power—and more generally, woman’s struggle to make a living writing in the antebellum US.

In particular I want to address aspects of literary value often disregarded in such a discussion. In a recent article entitled “Cheap Poe and other Bargains,” Sandra Tomc has adapted Jason Moore’s theory of capital’s appropriation of the “invisibly” produced energy and labor of nature to explain how, in the first half of the 19th century and later, the US publishing industry profited immensely on the free labor of American writers—as if the skies literally rained publishable writing.⁶ Tomc reminds us that even after some decades of “legal” literary

⁵ Paulina Wright Davis to Caroline Dall, November 11, 1852, Dall Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁶ Sandra Tomc, “Cheap Poe and Other Bargains: Unpaid Work and Energy in Early Nineteenth-Century U.S. Publishing,” *ELH* 86/1 (Spring 2019): 189-222. The key phrase here is “as if.” At the panel, the question was asked if there was any truth to the publishers’ claims of this surplus in literary supply. Tomc is careful to point out in her

piracy had enabled the industry to invest in new technologies that put them on a more secure economic footing, publishers continued, well into the 1840s and 50s, to represent the market as so glutted with literary material that there was no need to pay writers fair wages—or often anything—for their work.⁷ Oakes Smith and her husband seem to have avoided this treatment, working in many cases as editors and at times publishers of their own literary work, but Tomc’s argument is undoubtedly germane to Oakes Smith’s feminist work in general, and to her attempt to edit the first woman’s rights journal in particular. Some decades of recovery work has returned to the record many women writers of the 1840s who made more than spending money as literary professionals, but Tomc’s research alerts us to the more prevalent ideology that discounted literary production as compensable labor. Less emphasized in Tomc’s argument, however, and very much germane to the difficulties faced by the first woman’s rights journal, is the value of authorial *reputations* publishers used to attract readers and subscribers, and which established certain writers as those whose labor was worth paying for.⁸

As Melissa Homestead and others have documented, women’s legal exclusion from property ownership made men—agents, publishers, husbands the prevalent deciders of what women might publish and what—or if—they would be compensated for it.⁹ After the publication and popularity of “The Sinless Child” in 1842, Oakes Smith’s name had become

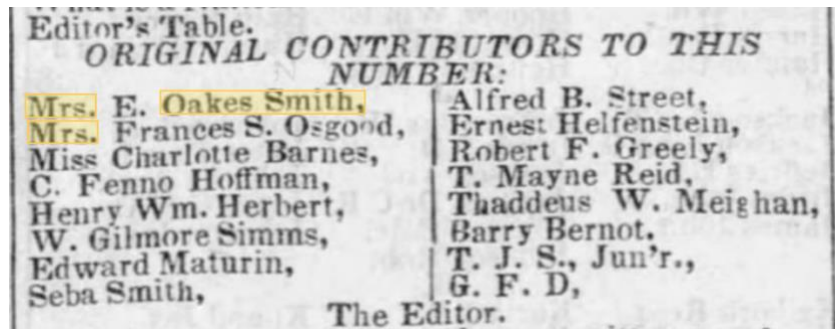
discussion of one of the editors guilty of such a ruse, N.P. Willis, that after making such claims to authors (like his sister) attempting to write for pay, the editor would turn around and burn the midnight oil “filling up” the paper with his own writing.

⁷ See Tomc, 190 and passim: “[R]eports of the valuelessness of intellectual and aesthetic materials. . .do not readily reconcile themselves with accounts of the U.S. publishing industry. The years between 1835 and 1860 saw a revolutionary publishing boom in the US. According to some estimates, the value of books, magazines, and newspapers manufactured and sold in the United States increased from 3.5 million in 1830 to 16 million in 1856.

⁸ Again Tomc: “In the 1840s, some magazines began to pay a few select authors” [one of which was certainly Oakes Smith], but this fact highlighted for contemporaries that no magazine, in Willis’s words, ‘pays for all its contents.’” 208.

⁹ See Homestead, *American Women Writers and Literary Property 1822-1869* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), especially her account of Mary Virginia Hawes Terhune, whose husband, James Hart, was also her publisher (21 and passim).

valuable enough in the literary marketplace that men like Henry Tuckerman, John Keese, Park Benjamin and Rufus Griswold were not only willing to publish her work over it but also to share some of its value with her, as long as she wrote, as we might say today, according to brand. (When she did not, as I have argued elsewhere, they were sometimes willing to look the other way and represent her as if she still was).¹⁰



It seems only in 1850, when Oakes Smith definitively outed herself as a defender of woman's rights, beginning a series of ten articles called *Woman and Her Needs* for Horace Greeley's *Tribune*, did she fully appreciate the power of the male-dominated publishing industry to control her voice and that of other women. "Accepting" Oakes Smith's articles and thus adding to his paper a then hugely popular name for seven months, Greeley considered the circulation of the *Tribune* valuable enough to Oakes Smith's cause not to compensate her for her labor in filling its pages. Moreover, Greeley controlled the dialogue that ensued, printing attacks on Oakes Smith's articles while announcing formally that he would not publish defenses of her position, blandly explaining that she was "perfectly competent to help her own defense."¹¹

¹⁰ See my paper "[Uh, Captain--What Captain? Recovering the Publishing Context of Oakes Smith's *The Western Captive*](#)." American Literature Association Conference, San Francisco CA, May 2016. Advertising Oakes Smith's early novel centering on the experience of a young woman freed from white patriarchal norms when she is captured by the Shawnee, Park Benjamin presented a summary of a novel that celebrated "famous battles" "which have conferred lasting glory on the names of Harrison and Johnson," despite the fact that there are no battles depicted, and no "Johnson" in the novel at all.

¹¹ See Oakes Smith's MS autobiography, "A Human Life," Elizabeth Oakes Smith papers, Special Collections, New York Public Library, 544-45: "Mr. Greeley never paid me a cent for them, nor did he protect me from the intense species of cavalling in his own paper, which so outraged several generous souls that they wrote him letters of remonstrance, to which he replied as follows,

Annoyed but undeterred, by June of 1851, even before the last installment of *Woman and Her Needs* had appeared, Oakes Smith had devised two ways of circumventing the power of male editors and owners like Greeley to control a woman's voice—the first, to eliminate intermediary parties as much as possible by delivering her arguments not on paper but in person, in the form of lectures—the second, to establish her own journal dedicated to woman's rights.

The first concrete evidence of this journal yet discovered is a cost sheet tipped into Oakes Smith's letter to Wendell Phillips of October 23, 1851, just after she had shared the stage with him at the 2nd National Women's Rights Convention. To print 2000 copies weekly, the yearly cost of composition, press work, paper and finishing would be \$2340. This cost would be covered with 2000 subscribers paying an average subscription price of \$1.25, with start-up costs covered by 20 shares in a joint-stock company each selling for \$100, two of which shares the publisher, Fowler and Wells, committed to purchase. Oakes Smith's own investment would be two shares, and after inquiring about the possibility of lecture venues for her current lyceum tour, she asked Phillips, even at this early point, if he "felt justified in investing" in the *Egeria*

The Egeria

Composition	\$23.00	
Press Work	2.00	
Paper for 1000	6.00	
Holding Wrappers & Tissue	3.00	
This will be the cost of 1000 for one time		\$34.00
The every additional thousand then		
would be an additional cost of		11.00
The 2000 Weekly		45.00
<hr/>		
Price of Paper for amount to the		
regular subscribers	\$1.50	
To Agents	1.00	
Allowing the average to be \$1.25 two thousand		
would give \$2500.00 The cost of 2000		
Weekly would be, without paying the Editors		
\$2340.00 Three thousand subscribers at 1.25		
would give \$3750.00		
The Cost	2712.00	\$638.00 for Editors
<hr/>		
Stock to amount of 20 Shares at \$100.00 each		
Fowler Wells & Shares		\$200.00

To Correspondents. -- We decline all communications in defense of Mrs. E. Oakes Smith against certain editorial strictures in our columns [word] that of Mrs. Smith herself, which has been for some days awaiting a chance to appear. Mrs. S. is perfectly competent to help her own defense, and has done it thoroughly.

himself. She would spend the next eighteen months of her career writing such letters, seeking investors and subscribers.

The most important detail for the present discussion in this document is the publishers' additional calculation lower on the cost sheet—where 3000 subscribers would yield the journal \$3750 annually, leaving roughly \$800 to pay editors and contributors. This detail was not lost on Horace Greeley, to whom Oakes Smith wrote, surprisingly enough, the same week as she did Wendell Phillips, basically asking him, if he was a supporter of woman's rights, to back up his "moral support" by investing real dollars in a woman-led journal. In his "hurried" response of November 1, he first completely misses the point of Oakes Smith's inauguration of a journal that would give women a true public voice, noting how many female editors there already were in the field without acknowledging the complete control *over* those editors held by publishers like himself.¹² Quickly noting Fowler and Wells' calculation of a salary for Oakes Smith, he cautions her that one "does not get rich on reform,"¹³ further mansplaining that she would be better off supporting herself in a lecture career. Oakes Smith, who had begun her lecture career five months earlier, was way ahead of him, and scribbled at the top of his letter "full of conceited assumptions by no means warranted by my communication."

What Greeley refused to acknowledge, as she wrote to E.P. Whipple, was that in her emergence as a woman's rights advocate at the conventions, in her editorial series, and in her lecture career, Oakes Smith's "relations with the public were completely changed."¹⁴ Not only

¹² Horace Greeley to Elizabeth Oakes Smith, November 1, 1851, Gilder Lehrmann Collection, New York Historical Society.

¹³ Greeley went on: "All Wealth is Conservative; all true Reforms assail it, question its legitimacy, threaten its security. 'Ye cannot serve God and Mammon.' And here is your mistake. Because your contributions to pecuniary periodicals have no pecuniary value—but rather the reverse—you argue that they do not subserve their end. A true Reform article must benefit the world at the expense of its []."

¹⁴ Elizabeth Oakes Smith to E.P. Whipple, 12 June 1851, Special Collections, Harvard University.

was she now subject to editorial attacks from a host of major news outlets, her likeness and that of her husband were lampooned, and for the first time in a decade she could no longer depend on income from the literary journals and gift book publishers. “Graham continues to advertise my

name,” she wrote to Whipple, in June of 1851,

“but he no longer accepts my work.”¹⁵

Whether or not in the late 1840s Oakes

Smith’s income was supporting half the

family’s income or, as was reported, far

more than that, a couple with no

property or inheritance that we know

of, and no income other than from

their writing, needed to replace

what would be lost in Oakes

Smith’s “new relation” to the

public, and that was the strictly

“literary” reputation Oakes Smith

had earned, and that George Graham

and others were still willing to profit

from, but not pay for.

It is not clear when Oakes Smith first

discussed *The Egeria* with Paulina Wright Davis, but by the summer of 1852, it is clear the two



Mrs. Turkey having attended Mrs. Oaks-Smith's Lecture on the Emancipation of the Slave, resolves at once to give a start to the New Fashion and in order to do it with more Effect, she wants Mr. Turkey to join her in this bold Attempt.

HALLOO! TURKS IN GOTHAM!

¹⁵ Even before the last installment of her treatise was published in the *Tribune* on June 12, 1851, she had appeared for the first time on the lecture platform, speaking on “Dress: its Social and Aesthetic relations” at Hope Chapel in New York City. Again, press coverage was divided, with some editors provocatively stating they wouldn’t attend unless she promised to sport the bloomer costume on stage.

had joined forces, which would likely have included a discussion of a woman's paper. In a letter to her husband from her lecture tour that summer, Oakes Smith mentions "she will probably preside" at the Convention in September—something she would hardly have anticipated without Davis's initiative--and from her remarks with which I began, it's clear that by the time of the convention that fall, the idea of a "joint stock company" in the manner calculated by Fowler and Wells was mutually agreed upon; finally, in her letter to Caroline Dall on November 11 quoted earlier, Davis not only mentions doing "nothing since the Convention" but write for *The Egeria* but also advertises Oakes Smith's "strong womanly nature" to Dall, saying "she would completely satisfy you as a lecturer"—and predicting that she "must do great work for woman."

Until now, it has remained a mystery exactly when and why Davis finally rejected Oakes Smith as the editor of the journal she had worked to inaugurate for more than a year, leading to the announcement of the publication of *The Una*, and not *The Egeria*, in January of 1853.¹⁶ According to a letter to Dall only a month after her effusive letter of November 11, Davis reported on December 18 that finally, Oakes Smith's attempt to gather enough stockholders and subscribers to fund the paper had failed, and that she would be funding the paper in Providence herself, where it could be produced less expensively than New York. She solicits Dall's contribution for the first number, admitting in two places that though it is "not her intention to ask for entirely gratuitous aid," she is not prepared to pay for writing at present, ending the letter

¹⁶ We owe Tiffany Wayne for spotting the evidence that provides some indication of the source of this split—letters from Davis to Dall on December 18, 1852 and April 1, 1853. The former letter indicates that Oakes Smith's attempt to sell shares in a joint stock company had failed, and that she would be financing the publication of the paper in Providence. The latter is detailed below. See Wayne's *Woman Thinking: Feminism and Transcendentalism in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Lexington Books, 2005), particularly the chapter "Women's Life and Work," which concentrates on Dall and Oakes Smith's efforts to carry forward Fuller's legacy.

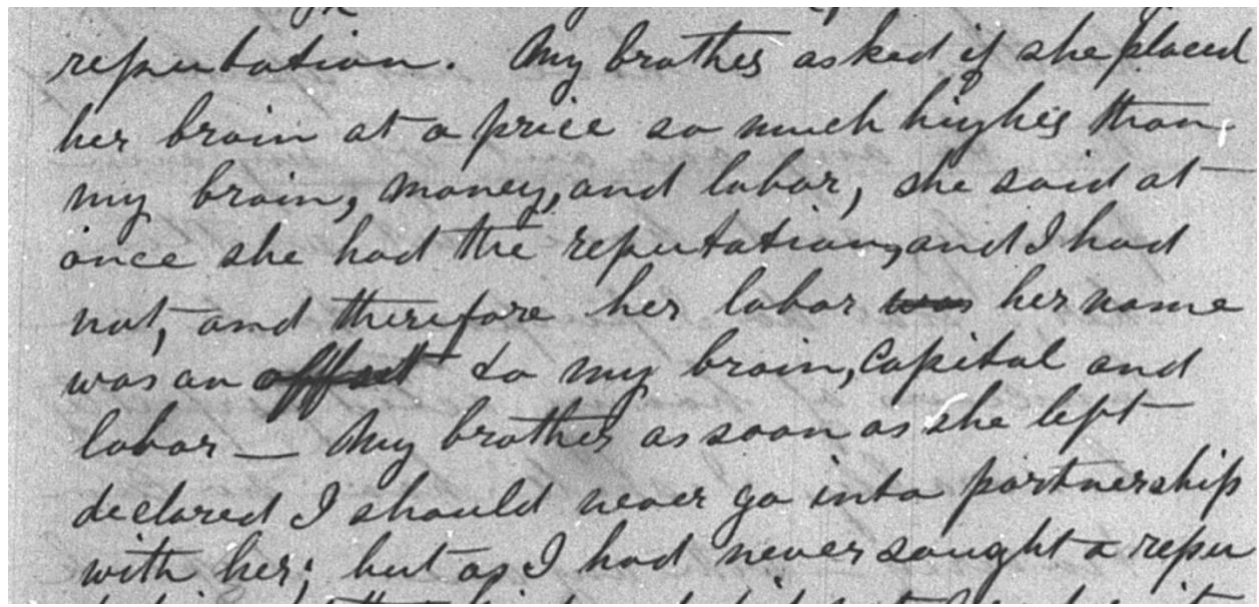
with her assurance that “Mrs. Smith,” “Mr. Channing” and “Mrs. Stanton” would also contribute.¹⁷

As Dall perceived, Oakes Smith did not contribute to the first number, or the next two, and on April 1, Davis admits it “might seem strange to her that Oakes Smith does not appear in the *Una*,” and reluctantly recounts the unpleasant details of Oakes Smith’s departure—which took place in a personal visit by Oakes Smith to her home in Providence “some weeks” before she took the journal on alone. Discomfited even by the memory of the event, Davis writes “I have not spoken of this to anyone out of my own family, and have not written her, nor do I purpose to do so. Conscious of having acted perfectly honorably. I shall have no controversy—with anyone.” “When I proposed to her an equal partnership,” Davis explains, “I finding the capital and doing all the resident Editors’ duties, she demanded a sallery (sic) also, on the ground of her literary reputation. My brother asked if she placed her brain at a price so much higher than my brain, money, and labor. She said at once she had the reputation, and I had not, and therefore her labor ~~was~~ her name was an offset to my brain, capital, and labor. My brother, as soon as she left, declared I should never go into partnership with her.”¹⁸

Davis’s explanation does not end there, but already it would seem time to register how her reaction and, indeed, her apology not to be able to pay Caroline Dall or other contributors, seems to echo Sandra Tomc’s thesis, that for Davis and her brother (and we might add Greeley

¹⁷ Davis to Dall, December 18, 1852, Dall Papers, MHS.

¹⁸ Davis to Dall, April 1, 1853, Dall Papers, MHS. Scholars viewing Davis’s letters to Dall of April 1 and April 2 may be confused by pages mixed in the production of the microfilm. The page numbered “5” from the letter of April 1 seems to be mistakenly included as the fifth page of the letter of April 2.



and other publishers to this list), to expect a salary for the labor of writing and editing here is unrealistic—even outrageous. Indeed, as Terri Amlong has pointed out in her analysis of the dissolution of *The Una* in 1855,¹⁹ if belletristic journals depended largely on clipping and other means of lowering the cost of content, reform journals like *The Lily*, *The Una*, and *The Revolution* relied almost exclusively on these practices to stay afloat. “Doing good,” as Greeley had put it, had to “be its own reward.”²⁰

¹⁹ Terri Amlong, “Universal Human Rights’: the New Rhetoric of the Woman’s Rights Movement Conceptualized Within the *Una* (1853-1855), *American Periodicals* (23/1) 2013: 22-42.

²⁰ This idealist ideology dominates the representation of heroines in women’s writing throughout the nineteenth century, modeled by the retiring Jane Elton of Sedgwick’s *A New England Tale* (1822), continued in Alcott’s Christie Devon in her novel *Work: A Story of Experience* and on to Gertie Farish of Wharton’s *House of Mirth* (1905). Even Oakes Smith abandons, or was willing to give up, the principle of woman’s work for fair pay in her pose to Wendell Phillips, in her letter of December 21, 1851: “Do not fear for a moment any disaffection on my part in regard to the poverty of pecuniary results. I do not go about in the hope of growing rich upon reform. I must live by it in part it would seem just now, but to me it does not seem absolutely essential to live at all, at any rate the best workers should be willing to bear the burden and heat of day, and not feel themselves aggrieved if their pay be no more than that of those who come into the vineyard at the eleventh hour. The privilege is in the labor. I wish my means were such that I could lecture gratuitously—this would be in better accordance with my sense of beauty, and would bring more hearers to the mouth. I gave up one third of my remuneration in Nantucket for this purpose, and thus had a church filled to overflowing and hundreds I was told went away for want of room. I look upon this as yet another and great step in reform.”

Particularly presumptuous—indeed, worthless—to Davis and her brother would seem to be Oakes Smith’s claim for the value of a *literary reputation*. Indeed, Davis admits that beyond the fact that Oakes Smith had been “tried” that [Davis] “had started the paper—because it had been a favourite project with her for years”—she thought it “quite probable” that she had offended Oakes Smith personally in the editor’s “Introduction” in the first issue of *The Una*, where she declares “we have resolved not to be disturbed by untoward circumstances, for we have counted the cost ere we commenced our work,” following that pointedly with, “we have no literary reputation of which to make an offering; and none to take care of in our progress.”²¹

While much work remains to even ballpark Oakes Smith’s income for the decade following her breakout poem “The Sinless Child” in 1842, Davis’s comments appear short-sighted at best. If the majority of writers before 1850 were left to settle for little more than the privilege of seeing their names in print, what made it possible to make a career writing for those like Oakes Smith was precisely a literary reputation that, having drawn readers, also drew subscribers and thus the possibility of, if not “riches,” regular compensation. By the late 1840s it could be said Oakes Smith’s name and literary reputation were her main source of capital; in fact, for nearly a decade, publishers had paid in more than promises to have that name set in type for myriad advertisements of their monthlies and annuals.

When in 1855, P.T. Barnum stole Oakes Smith’s name for use in an advertisement for his infamous “Baby Shows” at his museum, she threatened a lawsuit, and the editorial debate over the appropriation went on for weeks.²² Thus even if—or especially if—Oakes Smith’s name had become a particular editorial target as she

Barnum's **Baby-Show**—A Protest by Mrs. E. Oakes Smith.
We are delighted to see that Mrs. E. Oakes Smith has declined to act as one of the judges of **Barnum's baby-show**. We have long admired this lady as a poetess and writer of fiction. Her productions have always been characterized by unusual womanly grace and purity, and we found it difficult to reconcile the authoress who was capable of such delicious utterances with the woman who could consent to act as a judge of “**model babies**.” Barnum, with his accustomed impudence and effrontery, placed her name on the published list of judges without having heard from her. This compelled her to make public

²¹ “Introduction,” *The Una* 1/1 (Feb 1853): 4.

²² The story circulated nationally. See for example the *Louisville Daily Courier* May 18, 1855, 4:3.

made public moves to support the woman's rights movement in the early 1850s and she lost the support of conservative female editors like Sarah J. Hale, publishers like Louis A. Godey and George Graham, calculating on the value of publicity in any form, wisely continued to advertise Oakes Smith's name into the 1850s. Moreover, the putatively "mercenary" reckoning of the value of literary reputation was hardly limited to male profiteers. In a letter arranging for Oakes Smith's lecture tour in Philadelphia in the spring of 1852, abolitionist leader and activist Lucretia Mott, suggested that precisely because Oakes Smith's previous reputation was *not* associated with the "ultraists," she would likely appeal to a wider audience than were normally moved to attend woman's rights meetings.²³

As Terri Amlong has pointed out, the difference of opinion that finally scuttled *The Una*—this between Paulina Wright Davis and Caroline Dall in 1855—likely involved the amount of its "literary" content, and thus it may be the "literary" and not the "reputation" issue that Davis originally objected to in Oakes Smith's claim.²⁴ Like Dall, Oakes Smith wanted a journal dedicated to bringing women not only the details of woman's current political struggle, but *to that end* and over the longer term, a broader and deeper sense of their history and experience. By contrast, Davis's "Introduction" in her first issue warns readers that *The Una* "will not cover so wide a field as the paper proposed at the convention, nor is it offered as a substitute for that."²⁵ Without a broader literary feel and without an editor to even represent that possibility, the audience for the first woman's rights journal may have limited itself to readers already committed to the cause.

²³ Lucretia Mott to Elizabeth Oakes Smith, February 23, 1852, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

²⁴ See Amlong, 34-39 and *passim*.

²⁵ *The Una* 1/1 (Feb 1853): 4.

Ironically, it may have been one of the main planks in the movement's platform—that women should demand fair wages for their work in the marketplace—that mitigated against the circulation of this and other tenets in the first woman's rights journal. Whether from need or principle, Oakes Smith was not the only writer unable or unwilling to write for *the Una* without compensation. As Davis records in her history of the conventions in 1870, "The poverty of women, as usual, caused the failure of [our original] scheme....and few writers had sufficient consecration to contribute to the paper without pay. The circulation was not sufficiently large to give fame, and the bank of the editor could not furnish the needed inducement."²⁶

But there is a wide space between what Davis called "poverty" and Greeley called "wealth," between obdurate conservatism and radicalism, and between a fair salary and "getting rich on reform," and it is arguable that as editor of *The Egeria*—or *The Una*—Elizabeth Oakes Smith might have managed to occupy that space between and thus, as Mott suggested, might have drawn a broad audience of men and women into it. The capitalist mode of literary production was a game of unfair advantage from the start, but whatever wages were actually paid to papermakers, composers, printers, draymen and others involved in the production and distribution of the first woman's rights journal, it is certainly arguable that paying for the labor of writing and editing to the same degree might well have improved its chances of success.

²⁶ Eulogizing pioneer organizer Sarah Tyndale at the convention of 1870, Davis recalled the "great social sacrifice" Tyndale accepted "in taking up a cause so unpopular;" and yet for Oakes Smith, the sacrifice was social and economic. Paulina Wright Davis (compiler), *A history of the national woman's rights movement for twenty years: with proceedings of the decade meeting held at Apollo Hall, October 20, 1870, from 1850 to 1870*, with an appendix containing the history of the movement during the winter of 1871, in the national capitol (New York: Journeyman Printers Cooperative Association, 1871) 17.