

## CALL FOR PROPOSALS

### “Progressivism and Literary Entrepreneurship: Limits and Possibilities for Women Writers in the Antebellum US”

American Literature Association conference, Chicago IL May 20-23, 2026

In an 1851 letter to Horace Greeley soliciting support for a projected feminist newspaper she would call *The Egeria*, Elizabeth Oakes Smith inadvertently mentioned her hope to budget enough money to fund the paper and pay herself a moderate editor’s salary. In his reply, Greeley barked “*you cannot serve God and Mammon!*” downplaying his financial success in the next sentence, perhaps anticipating her response that the radical positions he’d taken as editor of *The New York Tribune* had made him a rich man. Instead, he suggested, she might support herself lecturing (a career Oakes Smith had already begun six months previous, with a lecture on women’s dress that Greeley vigorously trashed).

While it is easy to criticize Greeley’s hypocrisy along with that of many in the transcendentalist circle who theorized every individual’s infinite potential through work but could rarely imagine women actually working on anything like an equal footing with men, scholarship recovering the work of American women writers has sometimes (often?) carried forward what Lisa Tetrault (in “The Incorporation of American Feminism”) has identified as a “line of mutual exclusivity...between reform motives and economic earning”—especially in the study of women writers and lecturers in the antebellum period, when the ideology of separate spheres palpably haunted writers like Oakes Smith who simply could not afford to work without pay.

One of the major themes of Mercer University Press’s *Selected Writings* series is Oakes Smith’s career-long attempt to balance progressive positions with profitable work writing and lecturing, but editorial introductions to Oakes Smith’s work in that series cannot take the place of full text-level analyses. More important, while we are interested in the situation of women writers before the Civil War especially, **this CFP invites proposals regarding any woman writer or writers in any decade of the nineteenth-century** balancing the attempt to write in progressive modes, or to introduce progressive characterization or themes, while satisfying the (usually) more restrictive ideologies of editors and popular audiences. Preference will be given to papers that analyze these competing pressures at the level of the text.

Possible themes and approaches:

- Biocritical analyses of writers whose unpublished writing (diaries, correspondence) reveal more radical positions than much of their published work
- Text-level analyses that reveal progressive or radical themes packaged in traditional forms or publications (e.g. giftbooks)
- Text-level analyses revealing the pressure of agents or editors on the revision of the work of women writers.
- Studies of reception demonstrating how nineteenth-century readers and listeners perceived or failed to perceive what are/are not considered progressive themes/characters/forms today.
- Analyses of different modes of writing, or different attitudes toward audiences, demonstrated across the career of a single woman writer for various economic or political purposes

Inquiries, or proposals of at most 250 words, along with a 100-word biographical note, should be sent to either [rjaroff@ursinus.edu](mailto:rjaroff@ursinus.edu) or [t-scherman@neiu.edu](mailto:t-scherman@neiu.edu) by January 10, 2026.