

## Horace Greeley on a woman's reform newspaper, 1851

### Introduction

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In February 1851, suffragist reformer Elizabeth Oakes Smith wrote to *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley about her interest in starting a newspaper dedicated to women's rights issues. Greeley answered with this rather brusque reply discouraging Oakes from founding a paper, attacking Smith's ideas about the business of reform, and refusing a request for financial help to start the paper.

Greeley told Oakes that starting a woman's newspaper was a bad business decision, writing "there are already fifty papers (I think) edited by women." Greeley also wrote that Smith should not hope to earn a subsistence serving reform movements, telling her "Ye cannot serve 'God and Mammon.'" Greeley himself had managed to make living as a reformer, publishing perhaps the most influential reform paper of the time, but he insisted that his financial success was merely a side effect of his work: "If the object of my life had been Wealth . . . I should have taken a very different course."

Smith clearly objected to Greeley's hostile tone; at the top of the letter is a note about its content, written in her hand: "full of conceited assumptions by no means warranted by my communication to [Greeley]. E.O.S."

### Excerpt

Two reasons are assigned by you why a peculiarly Women's paper should be published under your Editorship; first the Sex needs an organ; secondly, you need a subsistence. Now there are already fifty papers (I think) edited by women, but these do not seem to answer the purpose – perhaps I should say the purposes – though Mrs. Swisshelm and Mrs Nichols are among the Editors. Mrs. Halls Miss Leslie and many other fearless and influential women are conductors of or contributors to widely circulated periodicals; and I do not think they would be refused the privilege of discussing the deepest questions if they should claim it. Nor do I think you would.

But, you say, this, though it would evidently afford a much wider scope for the circulation of the Reform ideas, [*struck*: it] would not tend to accomplish the other object to wit, the securing a livelihood for yourself. This is partly true, and partly not, I believe that by writing for the most widely circulated periodicals to which you can gain access and being thus made known as an intellectual champion of the Reform, you would be invited to Lecture, either to mixed audiences or to women only, so extensively as to yield you a far more considerable income than can be realized from a newspaper devoted to the idea – or any periodical that would be founded upon it. My own experience tends to this conclusion – Advocacy of Reforms that are vital cannot (or can

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very rarely and [*illegible*] be made a source of personal gain to the advocate. 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 [*strikeout*] periodicals bore no pecuniary value – but rather the reverse – you argue that they do not subserve there end. A true Reform article must benefit the world at the expense of its proclaimer.

### Questions for Discussion

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Read the document introduction and the transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the following questions.

1. Investigate, evaluate, and list in chart form the contributions of Horace Greeley and the *New York Tribune* to reform movements of the nineteenth century.
2. Considering that he offered support for women's rights, how can we explain Horace Greeley's openly hostile reaction to Elizabeth Oakes Smith?
3. What alternative suggestions did Greeley suggest might be appropriate for Mrs. Smith to pursue?

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## Image

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 inscriptions by no  
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Horace Greeley.

N.Y. Mar. 1st, 1851.

Mrs. Elizabeth Oakes Smith;

I received yours of yesterday  
 soon after it was written, but had not time  
 to open it till to day. I must now be on  
 my way to Putnam Co. in fifteen minutes.

Two reasons are assigned by you why  
 a peculiarly Woman's paper should be pub-  
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Horace Greeley to Elizabeth Oakes Smith, March 1, 1851. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00496.026)

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### Transcript

Horace Greeley to Elizabeth Oakes Smith, March 1, 1851. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00496.026)

Horace Greeley

full of conceited  
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my communication to  
him. E.O.S.

NYork, Nov. 1<sup>st</sup>, 1851.

Mrs. E. Oakes Smith;

I received yours of yesterday soon after it was written, but had not time to open it till to-day. I must now be on my way to Putnam co. in fifteen minutes.

Two reasons are assigned by you why a peculiarly Women's paper should be published under your Editorship; first the Sex needs an organ; secondly, you need a subsistence. Now there are already fifty papers (I think) edited by women, but these do not seem to answer the purpose – perhaps I should say the purposes – though Mrs. Swisshelm and Mrs. Nichols are among the Editors. Mrs. Halls Miss Leslie and many other fearless and influential women are conductors of or contributors to widely circulated periodicals; and I do not think they would be refused the privilege of discussing the deepest questions if they should claim it. Nor do I think you would.

But, you say, this, though it would [2] evidently afford a much wider scope for the circulation of the Reform ideas, [*struck*: it] would not tend to accomplish the other object to wit, the securing a livelihood for yourself. This is partly true, and partly not, I believe that by writing for the most widely circulated periodicals to which you can gain access and being thus made known as an intellectual champion of the Reform, you would be invited to Lecture, either to mixed audiences or to women only, so extensively as to yield you a far more considerable income than can be realized from a newspaper devoted to the idea – or any periodical that would be founded upon it. My own experience tends to this conclusion – Advocacy of Reforms that are vital cannot (or can very rarely and [*illegible*]) be made a source of personal gain to the advocate. All wealth is Conservative; all true Reforms assail it, question its legitimacy, [threaten] its

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security 'Ye cannot serve God and Mammon.' And here is your mistake. Because your contributions to [*strikeout*] periodicals bore 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 proclaimer.

“But,” says Mrs. E. O. S. “you have suc[3]ceeded pecuniously as a Reformer.” No, Madam, I have not; I have succeeded in spite of that circumstance. Every hour, [*struck*: I have] every column, I have given to Reforms that have any depth, I have given at my own pecuniary loss, though I doubt not to my own essential profit. I complain of nothing; yet I have always known as well as now that if the object of my life had been Wealth, Consideration, Popularity, I should have taken a very different course. I might, [*inserted*: on the other hand] have been a more thorough Reformer, but I could not then have established and sustained a daily journal in New York, such is the fact; you have the moral for less than it has cost me, if a non-accumulation of wealth is cost.

But you say to me: “The Tribune is prosperous: What is a few hundreds of dollars to one who is earning [his] tens of thousands?” &c.

That the Tribune is prosperous is very true, though the popular [fables] of its income are enormous exaggerations. I am one among twelve proprietors and own one-fourth of the [*illegible*]; I have a sufficient income, and did not decline a compliance with your request on the ground of non ability to accede to it. But how many people, do you imagine [4] look with hungry if not greedy eyes at the income of the Tribune, first account it all mine instead of one-fourth of it, and next conclude that there would be quite enough left for me after supplying their needs, no one considering that [*illegible*] but are among hundreds who [wrote] the same [coloration] each in his own behalf and in entire disregard of the demands of all the rest. Perhaps I am not liberal – I certainly do not boast of being so; but were my income twice what it is, it would not satisfy the demands made upon it by claimants who think they know better what [*struck*: they] I [want] to do than I can, and who tell me that the sincerity of my professions(!) of Philanthropy, Benevolence, &c. will be tested by my compliance with or refusal of their demands. I used to be annoyed by this; but Time reconciles us to many things which at first stung us.

“My good friend, or enemy, which you will,” says E.O.S. My ‘enemy?’ I have

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sometimes [intervened] to serve, [never] to harm you. I never had a wish to your prejudice. Then why 'enemy?' Your 'friend' I fear I cannot be, since the practical condition seems to be a surrender of my judgment and my [purse] to your requirements. If I were capable of such submission, I should not [profound] the name of friendship by applying it to the result. No, since we cannot be friends and have no reasons and no wish to be enemies, let us be former acquaintances who have chosen our several [battles] and will walk in them to the end.

Yours,

Horace Greeley.

To Mrs. E.O. Smith

[*docket*]

Horace Greeley,