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Transcribing Class and Gender: Masculinity and Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Courts and Offices (review)

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Transcribing Class and Gender: Masculinity and Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Courts and Offices. By Carole Srole (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009. viii plus 324 pp.).

Before the advent of the hit television series, *Mad Men*, few would have considered the day-to-day details of office work and office politics to be sexy. This assumption also prevails among historians in regard to the history of clerical work. Compared to the interest shown in factory labour and worker politics, as well as the rise of the professions, the world of typists and stenographers has attracted scant attention. Carole Srole's *Transcribing Class and Gender* shows what we have missed through this inattention. And she demonstrates that office labour is surprisingly sexy, not just historically but historiographically.

This book develops research Srole conducted for her 1994 PhD thesis on the feminization of clerical work in Boston, from 1860 to 1915. This study tells a larger story by stretching back to the antebellum period and widening its frame to the nation. In addition it reflects major historiographical trends since the 1990s: social history has seen its twilight; cultural history has hit full stride; and gender history has overtaken women's history.

The enduring utility of census records is demonstrated in Srole's charts of the micro shifts in the nineteenth-century labour market for stenographers, typists, amanuenses, and court reporters. These shifts underlay a macro-historical trend in the gender distribution of office workers, from a field dominated by men in the pre-War years, to one in which women developed a significant presence and, in the lower rungs of the field, began to dominate. This was a national trend, Srole shows, but it occurred over a contracted period in the cities of the Eastern seaboard, where the rise of commerce and the expansion of state governments and the federal government created a demand for labourers who could copy letters, type reports and record court proceedings. The urban East and Midwest were also the places chosen by proponents of stenography, who set up training schools with rival systems of shorthand. For aspirants with the right character and training, respectable employment and advancement prospects awaited. Or so the circulars claimed.

In the pre-War years employers thought only of men when they looked for clerical help. By moving her time frame to the antebellum period Srole analyses how the apprenticeship model operated: young men in shops or businesses learned how to keep accurate accounts, prepare invoices, and draft correspondence, in the hope, one day, of becoming partners or owners. As enterprises grew and a broader pool of clerks was recruited, few had the chance to own their own businesses. This is where the sex comes in. The floating pool of male clerks, untethered to home or community restraints, made the city their playground and generally gave clerking a bad name. How, then, did office work become respectable, and a field in which both women and men worked?

Transcribing Class and Gender revolves around these questions. To answer them Srole uses an array of sources, including company records, novels, advertisements, cartoons, poetry and photography. Her exploration of the changing labour market's cultural dimensions aids her deeper objective: to demonstrate the mutual constitution of class and gender through the experiences of clerical workers over a volatile period, in which old forms of labour (such as copying) generated novel class and gender implications, in which new forms of labour

(particularly typewriting) transformed from masculine to feminine specialties, and in which some techniques (rapid transcription, for instance) came to be associated with professionalism.

In this topsy turvy landscape women and men struggled to find their feet, first of all to secure employment, and secondly, to find a “gender balance.” Srole uses this term to describe how men and women “tried to strike a certain combination of contemporary masculine and feminine traits that embraced elements of conventional definitions of both manhood and womanhood and carved gender difference out of both” (5). Moreover, this “gender balancing enabled the molding of the middle class” (5). This argument shows the progress made since the early 1990s, when “feminization” histories had run their course. At that point women's historians had barely begun to study the initial masculinization of labour fields, or men's shifting gender identities as they resisted women's movement into their fields, or abandoned them for greener pastures. Srole has produced a far richer study of inter-gender relations, whose precedents lie in socialist-feminist work on factory and sweated labour, on the one hand, and feminist studies of the higher professions, on the other. This book charts a distinct form of labour in which women and men by the hundreds of thousands staked out territory, where trade unions made little impact, and where no professional organizations or accreditation policed entry or advancement. The fluidity of the market for officer workers and the large pool of men and women who filled it had different implications for male and female aspirants, who looked to clerical work for middle class status and job stability.

There are two pitfalls to Srole's approach, however. The first is conceptual: the balance metaphor reinforces, rather than analyses dualistic thinking. “Manly” and “feminine” are too often treated as costume trunks for gender performances, rather than unstable and overlapping clusters of characteristics. The second is dualistic thinking, which seems to explain why race, ethnicity, and religion do not appear on Srole's scale. Granted, the vast majority of clerical workers in the nineteenth century were white, native born Protestants, but the concepts of “the self-made man”, the “professional business woman” and the professionalization of clerical work as a route to middle-class status surely hinged on these cross-cutting categories of identity in association with gender? Because Srole's “gender balance theme” is the book's explanatory device (the phrase appears in every chapter, as often as five times in fifteen lines of text) her lack of engagement with whiteness studies, with all the pitfalls and prospects, is curious.¹ Srole has remedied “the simplicity of our current vocabulary of gender and class in the context of the middle-class workplace” (13) but room remains for greater complexity.

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Endnote

1 Eric Arnesen, “Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 60 (Fall, 2001): 3-32.