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Telegraphists, Typists, Shop-girls, and Barmaids: Fictions of Sexy, Single Working Girls in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries.

Working Girls: Fiction, Sexuality, and Modernity. Katherine Mullin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 262.

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<1>In *The Mystery of Marie Roget* (1842), Edgar Allan Poe fictionalized the murder of Mary Rogers, a tobacconist's shop employee, also known as 'the pretty cigar girl.' In Poe's story femininity, youth, and sex appeal intersect with commerce and consumerism in a modern cosmopolis and within the new genre of detective fiction. These intersections correspond to the discourses that produce the figure that Katherine Mullin describes as 'the working girl.' But whereas Poe's Marie Roget is notable by her erasure first as bait, then prey, then victim, the telegraphists, typists, shop-girls and barmaids of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that Mullin examines are dynamic, if ambiguously portrayed, agents. Appearing in both popular and literary fictions, the working girl, for Mullin, established a new kind of sexual persona, comparable to but distinct from the better-known New Woman.

<2>In *Working Girls*, Mullin focuses upon the figure of the predominantly working-class working girl, one that gained currency as a manifestation of modernity and a new kind of 'frisky' sex appeal (1). A significant though largely overlooked cultural phenomenon, the working girl became a recognizable social identity invoked in periodicals, genre fiction, cartoons, posters, jokes, musical theatre, and advertisements. The book's three sections address three types of young, working women: typists and telegraphists, shopgirls, and barmaids. One chapter in each section examines the discursive tropes associated with its particular type as they appeared in 'ephemeral cultural, social reforming, and popular fictional representations' (9). These chapters richly contextualize their subjects, drawing upon historical data and a wide trawl through relevant ephemera. A paired chapter examines canonical writers' representations of that occupation, the allegorical work the particular working girl performs in a given literary text, and the authorial anxieties that her character epitomizes about the process, production and reception of literary writing.

<3>While some chronological overlap between the different types of working girls exists, they are discussed in the approximate order in which they emerged as recognizable types. Following the arc of Mullin's study, we can note a class trajectory of sorts appearing in the idea of a working girl, beginning as it does with white-collar workers (office-working telegraphists and typists), and then manifesting over time in lower-class occupations (shop girls and then barmaids). Regardless of class, for Mullin, working girls walked the tightrope between

demonstrating professionalism and parading their sexuality, insofar as the single working girl was intrinsically sexy without necessarily being sexually available or for sale. ('Flirtation,' 'sex-problem fiction,' and 'sexual harassment' are all well represented in the index of *Working Girls*; 'brothels' or 'prostitution' not at all).

<4>New technologies and environments—for example, machine operation, modern department stores, and up-scaled bars—presented new occupational opportunities for working girls, which, in turn, generated commentary on women's perceived aptitude for this or that position and on the need for appropriately monitored workplaces. To give an idea of how Mullin reveals this convergence of technology, public commentary and literary representation for each of her archetypes, let me focus on her chapter tracing the emergence of telegraphists and typists as white-collar occupations eminently suitable for middle-class young women. As early as 1859, advocates for women's employment saw in telegraphy an occupation they deemed 'genteel, sedentary, service oriented' (19). Females brought to the tasks and to the workplace, attention to detail, nimble fingers, compliance to authority and contentment with lower wages. Employers seemed committed to ensuring respectability by presenting offices as being closely monitored, more closely resembling private boarding schools than public spaces that might allow for ungoverned mixing between the sexes. And yet, as Mullin shows, for all the insistence on propriety, the media inevitably tapped into the romantic possibilities and sexual charge of female presence in this new work environment, receiving and transmitting messages across the wire or via dictation from and to anonymous men. The sexualized aspects of the telegraphists' mediation of private conversations contributed to their becoming highly visible new sexual personae, 'bywords, in the popular imagination, for a distinctive brand of self-possessed glamour' (19). But as such, this sector of women workers became objects of social concern, as did, in turn, shopgirls and barmaids. Although working girls might be portrayed as powerful in 'techno-romances' or in advertisements, they were also represented as being vulnerable in editorials and in the literature of paternalistic movements established on their behalf.

<4>In the second of each paired chapter, Mullin turns to the appropriation of the working girl by canonical writers. Thus, Chapter Two, "Authorial Anxiety and the Threat of Mechanical Writing" opens with Anthony Trollope's techno-fiction 'The Telegraph Girl' (1877). In a persuasive reading of this storiette, Mullin identifies in the competition between two working girls—the bookish, older Lucy Graham and the more technologically adept and younger Sophy Wilson—Trollope's own 'authorial apprehensions about creative integrity and status' (54) and concerns about being 'displaced by younger, more dynamic competition' (57). The rest of the chapter examines representations of telegraphists and typists in an array of works by writers that include Hardy, James, Gissing, Stoker, Conan Doyle, and Joyce. Mullin traces the many varied meanings these working girls held—that is, until their cultural cachet as 'avatars of the new' (11) inevitably faded.

<5>Subsequent sets of chapters follow a similar pattern. The contiguous relationship of shopgirls with their wares made it a short leap to the commodification of the shopgirl herself, though the anxiety over the commodification of books discussed in chapter four seems less

obvious. Edward Linley Sambourne's 1906 photograph of a supposed shop-girl reading a book while walking is evidence of the telling anecdote type. Here, I think more could be developed on the intersection of the working girls with the history (and downward or at least outward trajectory) of glamour. Mullin notes conflicting portrayals of the shopgirl, as liberated from class and gendered norms, or, for reformers, as holding a degraded or even polluted station. Such contradictory depictions manifest in the work of established writers. Emile Zola, Margaret Oliphant and others took up the shopgirl archetype and consciously used these characters to rebel against audience expectations and literary conventions, while provoking such questions as, could one write about or for such a group without degrading the art of writing itself?

<6>Other scholars have not ignored these occupations for women and their cultural and literary implications. See, for example, Christopher Keep's essay 'The Cultural Work of the Type Writer Girl' (1997) and Lise Shapiro Sanders's *Consuming Fantasies: Labor, Leisure, and the London Shopgirl 1880-1920* (2006), both of whom Mullin cites. Mullin, however, takes the study of these three working girl archetypes and their implications for modern literature to a new level. Few specialists who know the literary fictions discussed here will be familiar with the broad context Mullin uncovers. The deft and stylish readings will appeal to audiences that extend beyond the academy.

<7>Situating her work alongside Rosalind Gill and others in the Afterword, Mullin identifies these working girl figures as proto-postfeminist. And here, as throughout the book, Mullin underscores the tensions and reactions that always readily attend to departures from patriarchal norms. We might take, for example, *The Harvey Girls*, a 1946 film starring Judy Garland, which tells a story of the young women first hired in 1883 to serve railroad passengers meals at stops across the American West. Like the first employers of women typists and telegraphists, the dress code and living arrangements for these waitresses insisted on propriety (in stark contrast to the dancing girls in the saloon across from the restaurant). But clearly, the film producers saw at least mildly sexy possibilities in the setup. Further, the single working girl in the city has provided the 'meet-cute' premise of many mid-twentieth century situation comedies like *That Girl* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, well before *Ally McBeal* and *Sex in the City* that Gill analyzes and Mullin points to in her Afterword as revamped images of the faux 'emancipated heterosexiness' (240). Mullin's vision allows her to muse about the attempted 'resurgence of the novel's virility' (244) in the work of Doyle, Stevenson, and Haggard in opposition to the Victorian novel's focus on courtship and domesticity. Mullin shows that working girl fiction, at the turn of the century, carved out a distinct alternative both to what had gone before *and* to the New Woman, even if much of the literature reinforced stereotypes in ways that diffused the working girl's radical potential.