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Shedding New Light on Female Professionals in the Victorian Periodical Press

[Women, Work and the Victorian Periodical: Living by the Press](#). Marianne Van Remoortel. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 189pp.

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Marianne Van Remoortel's book places itself in a trajectory of critical texts that uncover and analyze the work of women in the Victorian periodical press. This tradition, as Van Remoortel makes clear, goes back to the Victorian period where women like Harriet Martineau in 'Female Industry' (1859) took women of the press as their subject, but modern critical work in this field has taken off in the last two decades or so. Alexis Easley's *First Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media* (2004), Linda Peterson's *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship, Facts of the Victorian Market* (2009) and several others have undertaken much excellent work of this kind, but the critical predecessor to whom Van Remoortel is most indebted is Barbara Onslow. (1) Onslow's *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2000) made a diligent and strenuous effort to trace the lives of individual women at work in a number of capacities in the press from illustration to editing. The research for Onslow's book was undertaken before the widespread digitisation of Victorian periodicals, which makes its vast scope all the more impressive. Onslow concludes that the lives of the back-room workers, the 'handmaids and decorators' (cited in Van Remoortel 3) as she calls them, need to be the focus of intensive future research in order to round out our

understanding of Victorian women's work in the press. It is this challenge that Van Remoortel takes up freshly armed with the tools of digitised records, archives and demographic sources.

<2>Van Remoortel's biggest contribution is to show how demographic sources, such as birth, marriage and death records and census returns can be used, alongside other sources, to shed light on female work – and indeed all work – in the press. Although many periodical scholars have been richly enmeshed in the archives of publishers and individual writers, these official government sources have been less frequently used. It may be that there has been some residual scholarly snobbishness around the use of sites such as Ancestry.com or FindMyPast.co.uk that are predominantly aimed at the amateur family historian interested in their own individual genealogy. Of course, such snobbishness is unfounded and Van Remoortel demonstrates from her first chapter how exploring the census returns can be incredibly illuminating. For example, she shows that only a very small minority of women who cited the press as their profession in her census-sample were actually editors or contributors. The vast majority of almost 80% of women press workers were newsagents, working at the retail end of the spectrum, a profession which, she argues, remains 'largely unstudied' (14). Here and elsewhere, Van Remoortel's work, like Onslow's is highly suggestive of paths for future research. There are limitations with these resources, not least their fee-structure, but Van Remoortel's work with genealogical resources makes us think about what new stories we can tell about the Victorian press, and how we can tell them.

<3>The book's chapters cover a range of women press workers, most of whose careers cut across the second half of the nineteenth century. After a first chapter discussing and demonstrating the methodological strategies the study employs, chapter two provides a greater depth of understanding of Eliza Warren Francis, the editor of the *Ladies' Treasury* who is usually only mentioned in comparison to her competitor Isabella Beeton. Warren Francis, it is argued 'adopted a number of authorial personae which, when mapped onto the details of her life, reveal a continual blurring of the boundaries between fiction and reality' (41). Warren Francis's prolific career was, in some ways, similar to that of Matilda Marian Pullan, the subject of chapter three. Both were needlework designers and both consciously constructed themselves as authorities on middle-class domesticity. Pullan's clever career moves included providing free lessons in fancywork to women who bought materials and patterns at her shop, the nineteenth-century equivalent of posting a vlog to advertise one's product and one's expertise. Van Remoortel's recovery work on Pullan's biography (including illegitimate relationships and emigration) sheds new light on her own, understated, self-reflection such as Pullan's late claim to be able to work better because she is now free of 'other hindrances of a more entirely personal nature' (cited on 66).

<4>Two of the following chapters cover women press-workers who have received greater scholarly interest within and beyond periodical studies: Christina Rossetti and Emily Faithfull and her Victorian Press. Van Remoortel attempts to show how Christina Rossetti's poetry for the press, which has often been consigned (not least by Rossetti herself) to the category of 'potboiler' actually reveals a profound interest in 'the materiality and economics of writing' (72). Here the census does not help Van Remoortel's project, as census returns on Christina Rossetti make no mention of her magazine writing. But turning to Macmillan's archives, to private correspondence and to the publishing context of Rossetti's most frequently-printed poems demonstrates Rossetti's ongoing interest in the materiality of her own work. Census returns and other demographic records play a large role in Van Remoortel's efforts to trace the fates of the women who worked as compositors at Emily Faithfull's Victorian Press. These women, often mentioned as a group, but rarely individualised, are usually subsumed into the symbolic value of the all-female printing house. Van Remoortel's work complicates this picture by demonstrating the complex ways in which these women were involved in the printing industry and the lack of social mobility it seems to have provided in reality.

<5>A chapter on the illustration work of Florence and Adelaide Caxton is significant in the study, particularly as part of Van Remoortel's attempt to uncover those working on the features of the press that receive less attention than the letterpress, such as the engravings or needlework patterns. Here, as in all of the chapters, Van Remoortel works hard to delineate and analyze the working lives of individual women but also to set them within the wider context of their fellow female professionals. Mary Ellen Edwards is a key comparator with Florence and Adelaide Caxton for example and all are situated in the attempts of women artists to gain professional status and entry to the Royal Academy. A few more reproductions of the illustrations under discussion would have been particularly welcome in this insightful chapter.

<6>Van Remoortel succeeds in her aim of highlighting the 'importance of biography for understanding the precise nature of textual performance and the conditions of periodical production.' (134). The book is written with clarity and concision and the diligence of its archival research is only to be admired. While a 'social history' of the 'thousands of men, women and children' (135) who worked in the publishing industry is beyond the scope of this book, its methodologies and analyses do project the possibilities that such work might be undertaken in the future despite the current difficulties of working with demographic records that remain hidden behind pay-walls and which privilege the individual life-history over the capacity for statistical comparison.

Endnotes

(1) Alexis Easley, *First Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), Linda Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of*

Authorship, Facts of the Victorian Market (Princeton NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), Barbara Onslow, *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).[\(△\)](#)