



Review Essay

More Office Affairs

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***The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880–1939.* Jonathan Wild. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Pp. ix + 209. \$69.95 (cloth).**

***Working Girls: zur Ökonomie von Liebe und Arbeit.* Sabine Biebl, Verena Mund, and Heide Volkening, eds. Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2007. Pp. 279. €22.50 (paper).**

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Between 1880 and 1920 a dramatic transformation reshaped the field of modern labor. Graham Lowe, a sociologist, has dubbed it “the administrative revolution,” while JoAnne Yates, a scholar of management communication, terms it “a veritable revolution in communication technology” and “an office revolution since unequalled until the advent of the desktop computer.”¹ A bare list of new devices, some quite primitive to our later eyes, confirms her assessment: loose-leaf ledgers, card indexes, vertical filing systems, typewriters, telephones, Dictaphones, adding machines, duplicators. In the U.S., moreover, this enlarged administrative culture with its new technologies found itself lodged in a wholly new kind of building, the skyscraper, itself a confluence of numerous new technologies (central heating, hydraulic elevators, and recently developed systems of ventilation, lighting, and plumbing). Laboring in these new buildings and deploying the novel communications and storage-and-retrieval technologies, a vast army of clerical workers, male and female, crowded the business centers of major cities. It is these workers who form the subject matter of the two books under review here, works that differ sharply in their approaches and conclusions. Taken together, they plainly mark a major advance in contemporary research into cultural depictions of office life; but they also leave unanswered a number of critical questions that badly need addressing if we are to deepen our understanding of this distinctly modern phenomenon.

The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880–1939 (henceforth *ROC*), by Jonathan Wild, works on a deliberately restricted scale, confining itself to literary portrayals of male clerks in British culture. “Lack of space available in a single volume” is one reason behind the



162 geographical limitation, while another is that American accounts of male clerical workers were so different, so much more positive, and moreover have recently been the subject of two recent studies (*ROC*, 6).² (Nothing is said about, say, male clerks in France or Germany.) But Wild also turns this limitation into an opportunity: the self-imposed restrictions on subject matter gives him space to reconstruct in detail the contexts surrounding his chosen works, reconstruction that draws heavily on approaches developed in studies on the history of the book.

Wild's account, spread over eight chapters, is straightforwardly chronological. Following a brief introductory chapter, it begins by tracing "The Clerk's Emergence in Literature, 1880–1890" and concludes by considering "The Black-coated Worker and the Depression." In between are two chapters devoted to clerks in works by George Gissing and comic literature up to 1900; two more that take up male clerks in the Edwardian era; and one more one that explores the clerk in the First World War and its aftermath. Chronological periods are then used to conjure thematic clusters, such as anxieties about degeneration during the Edwardian era. This is a conventional, even reassuring structure that almost conceals the originality of the material that Wild takes up: much of it is drawn from outside, far outside the canon, however generously defined. Setting aside Leonard Bast from Forster's *Howards End* or Edwin Reardon from Gissing's *New Grub Street*, or *The Diary of a Nobody* or *Three Men in a Boat* (these latter both comic works that still have some renown in Britain, though not in the U.S.), the works that Wild takes up are largely unknown even to scholars with extensive experience in British literature of the period 1880 to 1940. By any standard, Wild has performed an impressive feat of research merely by virtue of assembling this corpus of materials.

Chapter Two, treating "the clerk's emergence in literature, 1880–1900," is highly representative. It takes up three works: *All in a Garden Fair* (1883) by Walter Besant; *The Story of a London Clerk* (1896) by an anonymous author; and *The Man from the North* (1898) by Arnold Bennett. In all three, the clerk considers undertaking a career as an author or professional writer, with different outcomes. Wild carefully fills in brief histories of their respective publishers and specifies the target audiences for each. He is also keen on noting the class identities at play. Besant's book is written "from a middle-class viewpoint," while *The Story of a London Clerk* is written instead "for a specific lower middle-class readership" and so is "free from the constraints" informing Besant's book (*ROC*, 24). Arnold Bennett, on the other hand, works with a publisher who aimed at literary prestige, which makes it all the more revealing that at least one anonymous reviewer found the subject matter of the clerk to be too commonplace. "Class-bound criticism such as this," Wild observes, "remained a familiar element in the reception of British fiction depicting the suburban classes until the First World War" (*ROC*, 31). The clerk, in other words, became a figure who prompted a form of literary sneering, culminating in the figure of Leonard Bast.

As Wild abundantly demonstrates, however, other more humane treatments of these figures from the lower-middle classes were to be found in later literary treatments. But because they were not written by authors who achieved any status or place within the canon, they have been wholly forgotten, sunk in oblivion. The image of Leonard Bast lives on. To a large extent, Wild seeks to counteract it by undertaking a class-driven counterpart to the kind of "rescue work" that was once performed for forgotten women or African-American authors. And in his subsequent chapters he fully succeeds in revealing an entire world otherwise lost and forgotten, in which male clerks were significant protagonists in an increasingly diverse and subtly delineated cityscape.

By way of closing his chapter on the early fictional clerks of Besant, Bennett, and their anonymous contemporary, Wild offers one final footnote (*ROC*, 175 n. 169): "For other fictional studies of clerks in the 1890s see the following . . ." The result is a list of twelve more novels. Notes and even passing comments of this sort are found everywhere in *The Rise of the Office Clerk*. Taken together, they reveal a herculean program of research that will serve as the bedrock for any future studies in this area. Nor was that research of a sort that is easily accomplished. Since there is nothing in the titles of the novels to indicate their subject matter, and no earlier study has taken up this subject matter, the research is not only an impressive achievement, but a pioneering one.

Some readers, however, may have reservations about the ethical standards that Wild invokes in assessing his corpus of clerkish fictions. For him, works are esteemed for their capacity to be broad-minded or accepting of diversity. These values, however laudable, are somewhat anodyne, and it is not self-evident that they have enough analytical power to generate more probing insight into the peculiar status that clerks came to occupy in the British cultural imagination.

Perhaps only a much broader and more comparative study could hope to account for such a curious phenomenon.

Working Girls: zur Ökonomie von Liebe und Arbeit (*Working Girls: Economies of Love and Labor*) (henceforth *WG*) is a very different kind of book. It has three editors, rather than a single author, and it contains twelve essays (as well as an introduction)—in short, it offers the pleasures of diversity, rather than the consistency of a comprehensive narrative or an overarching argument. In theory, at least, it also takes up much broader subject matter: not simply female clerical workers, but all working girls. In practice, however, eight of the essays are about secretaries or typists. (The other four treat the German critic Siegfried Kracauer, the American anthropologist Margaret Mead, sociological concepts of gender difference in work environments, and German films about vacations in Italy during the late 1950s and early 1960s.) Moreover, of the eight about secretaries, six confine themselves to Germany. The two that take up non-German subjects treat the typist in *The Waste Land*, in a poor and ill-informed essay by MaryAnn Snyder-Körber, and the fairly recent films *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and *Working Girl* (1988), in an engaging and discerning essay by Ralph J. Poole. Since the essay devoted to Kracauer is concerned with his earlier writings from the 1920s and early 1930s, it means that seven of the essays are concerned with secretaries or typists in Weimar Germany (1919–1933). And three of those seven examine, or contain extended discussions of, a single book, Irmgard Keun's celebrated novel, *The Artificial Silk Girl* (1932). On closer examination, an appearance of diversity conceals geographical and chronological limitations by no means as stringent as those observed by Jonathan Wild, but discernible nonetheless. Transnational perspectives and questions about globalizability are currently very modish; but the reality remains unchanged that literary scholarship is stubbornly parochial, tightly tethered to national traditions. Yes, several essays in this volume treat Anglo-American subject matter; but that says more about Germany's broader cultural engagement with the Anglo-American world, and less about genuine inclusiveness. It is somewhat shocking to realize how little this book contains about France, and all the more so when one recalls that 2001 witnessed the publication of Delphine Gardey's exemplary study of *La dactylographe et l'expéditionnaire: Histoire des employés de bureau, 1890–1930* (Paris: Belin), only four years before the conference that gave rise to this collection of essays in 2005.

Despite these limitations, the collection has some genuine gems. One of them is “An der Theke” (“At Bars and Counters”), an essay by Verena Mund. A researcher who works in the Film/Video department of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Mund sets out to unpack the iconography that depicts a working girl when placed in the vicinity of bars and counters, along with the shifting social mores informing that iconography. The result is a tour de force, almost vertiginous in range and pace. She begins with the opening scene from Jean-Luc Godard's film, *Vivre sa vie* (1961), in which a solitary young woman sits at a bar; shifts to Rona Jaffe's bestselling novel about young career women and its filmic adaptation, *The Best of Everything* (1958); pivots backwards some twenty years to Jacques Deval's film *Club des femmes* (1936), starring Dannielle Darrieux at her puckish best; shimmies forward slightly to three paintings from the late 1930s by the American artist Isabel Bishop, all showing New York working girls standing at lunch counters and bars; turns to a more extended discussion of Don Hartman's film *Every Girl Should Be Married* (1948), with Cary Grant as the confirmed bachelor who gets his comeuppance from a working girl; and finally comes to rest with a contemporaneous photograph by Esther Bubley, *Rockefeller Center* (1948), one that captures seven women standing behind a milk-bar counter, conversing in small groups of two and three. It draws to a close with the coda that a portion of this photograph has recently been transformed into the cover illustration for a new paperback reprint (2005), issued by Penguin, of the Rona Jaffe book discussed earlier. (See front cover.) It's a heady brew, spiced with many footnotes to Erving Goffman's classic sociological account of *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (1969), as well as (for good measure) its German translation, *Das Individuum im öffentlichen Austausch: Mikrostudien zur öffentlichen Ordnung* (1974). The notes alone make for a lively tour of recent books and essays on bars, saloons, cinemas, and diners. Mund turns the vagueness of the “working girl” as a category to good account, deftly tracing an iconography shared by secretaries, salesgirls, and young career women. But there is also a downside to this procedure: New York in 1960 turns out to be very much the same as Paris in 1936. Perhaps that is even true for this specific iconography: but does that mean that certain iconographic motifs thrive across periods and places, while others don't? And if so, why? Can we

164 discern this same iconography at work in Anglo-German examples from the same period? What criterion is setting the geographical and chronological boundaries?

Sabine Biebl's essay, "Schuld(en) und Sühne" (or "Guilt, Debts, and Expiation"), takes up a novel called *Mr. Brecher's Fiasko*, a work that was first published in 1932 and has recently been reissued, in 2001. (It was also translated into English in 2005.)³ More recently a collection of new essays has reconsidered the career and oeuvre of its author, Martin Kessel, and it seems increasingly likely that the novel will be viewed as a major work in the canon of Weimar literature.⁴ Biebl, then, takes up a work that is well known to scholars of Weimar literature yet lacks a firm or extensive critical tradition. Only two essays and some passing comments about it have appeared before now.⁵ Typically, critics have designated it another *Angestelltenroman*, or novel about white-collar workers, classing it with works such as Erich Kästner's *Fabian, die Geschichte eines Moralisten* or Hans Fallada's *Was nun, kleiner Mann?*⁶ novels in which unemployed and deracinated intellectuals offer ironic comments on the scenes of urban life which they encounter. Mr. Brecher, in such readings, becomes yet another updating of the Baudelaireian flaneur as delineated by Benjamin. Biebl, instead, focuses on the novel's most prominent female character, Mucki Schöppts, a secretary who joins the firm where Hans Brecher works and disconcerts her fellow office workers. Mucki's role—she is the office beauty who provokes ongoing flirtations and who initiates a party with unforeseen consequences—turns her into a locus for meditations on the working world and private life, and into a figure who has a paradoxical status, existing both within and outside the fictional reality shared by the other characters. What follows is an intricate but probing and original reading of the novel.

Another novel that receives considerable attention in this volume is Irmgard Keun's *The Artificial Silk Girl*, a work that in recent years has assumed remarkable prominence within the canon of Weimar literature. (It, too, has been translated into English recently.)⁶ Three essays give it extended discussion, but the freshest and most insightful is that of Ilke Vehling. Vehling takes up an issue that has always been central to any reading of the novel, its distinctive style. She combines an excellent analysis of it with close reading of the figurative language that the main character, Doris, uses to describe her aims and experiences in writing her diary, which constitutes the book. She also situates these within a contextual account that has unusual breadth and depth. The result is a reading of Keun's novel that sets a very high standard and is unlikely to be surpassed for quite some time to come.

One essay that strays far outside the bounds of German subject matter is "Funny Ones 1990" by Ralph J. Poole, an extended examination of the films *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), directed by Sharon Maguire, and *Working Girl* (1988), directed by Mike Nichols. What unites the two films is their heroines' struggles with excess: the excessive alcohol, cigarette, and weight problems that afflict Bridget; the exaggerated hair and speech that characterize Tess McGill. Freedom (excess) and discipline (disguise, for Tess) become the polarities that enable the films to negotiate tensions between work, sexuality, and femininity. Poole offers astute and absorbing readings of both films, and is fully conversant with the recent debates about postfeminism that have informed discussion of *Working Girl*. His observations are wry, sympathetic, and always alert to the forces that generate the two films' comic visions. These very merits only make a reader wonder just what is going on when Poole, to buttress the (mistaken) claim that "There were no female secretaries in the nineteenth century, whether in Europe or America" (WG, 185), cites "W. H. Sprague, *Sex und die Sekretärin: das Sexualverhalten im Büro- und Geschäftsleben im Zeitalter der Sekretärin . . .*" (WG, 185 n. 10). The edition he cites (Munich: Heyne, 1967) is none other than the German translation of an American work containing pornographic fictions that were thinly disguised as psychological case studies, allegedly conducted by the "Associate Director" of "The Psychoanalytical Assistance Foundation," an institution that never existed.⁷ (The pseudonymous Dr. Sprague penned only one other work, *Sex Behavior of the American Housewife*, which was issued in 1961 by Midwood Books, a publisher of fairly raunchy pornography during the 1960s.) Readers will have to decide whether Poole is slyly pulling the reader's leg or inadvertently creating a footnote of great comedic value.

Heide Volkening begins her essay with a striking juxtaposition: a photographic feature from a popular magazine in 1930, one that depicts a young woman named Lieschen Neumann, a girl who wants to go far in her career as a photo model; and a series of press accounts from six months later that concern a sixteen-year-old named Luise Neumann, who was charged with

murdering a watchmaker who had taken nude photographs of her. Volkening deploys the juxtaposition to explore questions about the illusions and realities that surrounded young working women in the 1920s and 1930s, doing so with special reference to Keun's novel *The Artificial Silk Girl*. The novel's open ending—our last glimpse of the heroine, Doris, finds her slightly tipsy and attempting to make a decision, but never reaching a conclusion within the confines of the text—becomes a spur to further meditations on the place of contingency and the status of endings in narratives about young career women.

Taken together, the essays in *Working Girls* constitute a decisive advance in our understanding of cultural representations of women workers in the 1920s and 1930s, and occasionally in later periods as well. It opens up a genuine and impressive wealth of new, seldom consulted materials, in stark contrast to another essay collection, this one in English, that dealt with the same subject matter two years earlier, *Literary Secretaries/Secretarial Culture*.⁸ It also turns its receptiveness to a variety of theoretical positions to good account, exemplifying an array of reading and viewing styles that might be used to address them. Some readers will regret that more attention is not given to German films from the Weimar era, which often took up this sort of subject matter in highly polished comedies. But that minor regret will not detract from a recognition that this volume's three editors have fashioned an important, impressive, and engaging scholarly achievement.

Questions, of course, remain. Essays are necessarily brief and speculative, averse to the kind of deeper, broader, and more probing conceptualization that may be required to tackle a subject matter that was enormous in scale and scope. Secretaries filled the offices of all the advanced economies of the West for most of the twentieth century. They also became the imaginary protagonists of literally hundreds of novels and films, many directly addressing their real-life counterparts. And they did so within a constantly changing media ecology, one in which image and song and text interacted, complemented, and competed as never before. Still more, a comprehensive approach to such subject matter may well entail forays into areas of material culture not normally comprised by literary studies—the history of office design, or fashion history, for example. Both these recent studies by Wild, Biebl, Mund, and Volkening identify new territory that will be indispensable to future work in this area. But there is still a great deal to be done.

Notes

1. Graham S. Lowe, *Women in the Administrative Revolution: The Feminization of Clerical Work* (London: Polity, 1987); and JoAnne Yates, *Control Through Communication: the Rise of System in American Management* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 39, 63.

2. See Christopher P. Wilson, *White Collar Fictions: Class and Social Representation in American Literature, 1885–1925* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992) and Graham Thompson, *Male Sexuality Under Surveillance: The Office in American Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003).

3. Martin Kessel, *Herrn Brechers Fiasko* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1932; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1956, 1978; Frankfurt am Main: Schöffling & Co., 2001). Martin Kessel, *Mr. Brecher's Fiasko*, transl. Brigitte Goldstein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

4. Stefan Scherer and Claudia Stockinger, eds., *Martin Kessel (1901–1990)* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2004).

5. Bernhard Spies, "Die Angestellten, die Großstadt und einege 'Interna des Bewußtseins': Martin Kessels Roman *Herrn Brechers Fiasko*," in Sabina Becker and Christoph Weiss, eds., *Neue Sachlichkeit im Roman: Neue Interpretationen zum Roman der Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995), 235–54; Walter Delabar, "Einege Überlegungen zu *Herrn Brechers Fiasko*," in Schere and Stockinger (see n. 4), 211–32.

6. Irmgard Keun, *The Artificial Silk Girl*, transl. Kathie von Ankum (New York: Other Press, 2002).

7. W. H. Sprague, *Sex Behavior of the American Secretary* (New York: Midwood, 1961).

8. Leah Price and Pamela Thurschwell, eds., *Literary Secretaries/Secretarial Culture* (Burlington, VT and Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005).