Srole, Carole . ***Transcribing Class and Gender: Masculinity and Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Courts and Offices*****. University of Michigan Press, 2010.**

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1 In *Transcribing Class and Gender*, Carole Srole takes on the difficult task of convincing historians that something they have ignored for years (and frankly, something that sounds fairly boring upon first hearing) is central to our understanding of gender in 19th century America. She succeeds magnificently. Typists, stenographers and clerks don't sound like they'd make a riveting subject for a monograph, but Srole paints a picture of gender in the 19th century office - and by extension, in the 19th century urban world - that is interesting and enlightening. Srole examines professional journals, short fiction, union records, and popular advertising to help her readers to understand the ways in which office workers navigated the complicated gender dynamics of the workplaces and helped to shape the image of the middle class in America.

2 The story of office workers and clerks is central to the transformation of the American economy. As the economy moved away from the small farms and artisans that dominated the late 18th century, more and more Americans went to work in offices. Initially, they worked as copyists, learning the arts of shorthand and handwriting to facilitate business transactions. Later in the century, as the corporate world continued to grow, their work expanded even further, and by the end of the century it included both office work and court reporting.

3 Parallel to the story of the transformation of work in America is a story of the transformation of gender. The 19th century was the era of the "Self-Made Man," a trope that reminded men that, in order to be successful, they had to be prosperous and independent. Ironically, this archetype reached its peak at exactly the time when fewer and fewer men were able to actually strike out on their own and form independent businesses. How did men, and especially male office workers, navigate this transition? With difficulty, as it turns out. As Srole tells us, some did rise through the ranks and lead offices of their own, especially in the realm of legal stenography and court reporting. More often, however, they maintained their masculine identity by re-defining their work as a "profession," emphasizing education and training, and by shutting women and the working class out of the highest echelons of office work.

4 Women's roles underwent a similar transition, as working outside of the home became more acceptable over the course of the 19th century. However, women's work was still degraded and associated with the working class. Thanks to the efforts of men, women were usually limited to the lowest office positions, and many fought to gain access to higher paying, more prestigious jobs. Female office workers, like their male counterparts, had to refashion their own image to include professional standards and training. In addition, women had to adopt new modes of dress and behavior - emphasizing plainness and modesty - to distinguish themselves from working-class stereotypes and emphasize their middle-class status.

5 Srole's depiction of these transformations is intricate and detailed. She uses a group of sources, the "phonographic" journals of the time, to great effect. These journals were tools of the profession, used to train office workers and inform them of the latest developments. But, they also included fiction in which the main characters were clerks and stenographers. Often, this fiction reflected the prevailing views and ambitions of the profession. For instance, male stenographers were depicted as clever and scientific, sometimes solving crimes or outsmarting their bosses. Female office workers were initially represented through the archetype of the "'typewriter girl', a floozy who cared more about dressing to find a husband, especially a rich one, than her job"(8).

6 Srole uses the concept of "gender balance" to explain the way these transformations were accomplished. Rather than simply placing office workers into a crude typography of archetypes (the Self-Made Man, the New Woman) Srole points out that most office workers consciously worked to combine different parts of these identities. These "usable gender balances" (10) also allowed workers to emphasize their middle class status, as the working class was characterized by extreme gendered behavior. In their view, working class men were crude, working class women were frivolous, and they wanted to be neither.

7 In particular, both men and women worked to create a balance of masculine and feminine traits that allowed them to maintain a sense of professionalism and gendered self-respect. The standards of professionalism men created allowed (and required) them to express some "feminine" traits: neatness, dignified behavior, attention to detail. But these were balanced by their emphasis on the hard work of the stenographer, their scientific study and their equation of the mental strain of the office worker with the physical strain demanded of the "strenuous man."

8 Office women manipulated their gender balance to move away from the "typewriter girl" and to create the "businesswoman." A distinctly middle class figure, businesswomen

focused on respectability in an attempt to improve the standing of the women who worked. "By locating all of the negative feminine traits in women they deemed objectionable and accusing them of improper work habits, female commercial educators and the shorthand press helped define the competent female stenographer and typewriter as middle class and respectable" (179). However, women still maintained a feminine identity - they may have taken on masculine traits, but they were not becoming men. Women "merged the vocabulary of business with the feminine ethic of caring" (183) to become effective and indispensible workers.

9 Srole is at her best when discussing the large transformations in gender roles over the course of the 19th century, and her use of sources is magnificent. The disadvantage of this source base lies in its lack of compelling characters. While "the profession" (or the men or women within it) is described as acting as a group, it is sometimes difficult to get any sense of agency. The transformations she describes are momentous and self-conscious, but there aren't any particular activists or individuals driving the changes she observes. She often uses fiction to stand-in for real characters, and this can be quite effective in providing texture. But a more complex understanding of the mechanics of the changes in gender and the profession could be useful and interesting.

10 Srole has succeeded in combining large historiographical and sociological trends from a variety of scholarly literatures, including the stories of professionalization, urbanization, womens' move into the workplace and the anxiety of 19th century men, into a single narrative. As such, this book is suitable reading for a variety of audiences, and parts could be useful examples for undergraduate teaching. Another of Srole's contributions lies in placing men and women in mixed-gender spaces and analyzing their interactions. So much work on the history of gender forgets that, despite the ideology of "separate spheres," men and women did interact for much of their lives. That interaction is at the heart of her story, and makes her book of interest to all scholars with an interest in gender history.