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Trailblazing Professionals: Exploring the Rise of Women's Political Journalism Across the Mid-Century

Model Women of the Press: Gender, Politics and Women's Professional Journalism, 1850-1880. Teja Varma Pusapati. New York: Routledge, 2024. 253 pp.

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<1>Teja Varma Pusapati's *Model Women of the Press* concludes with an excerpt from Frances Low's guidebook *Press Work for Women* (1904), where Low's advice for aspiring women journalists blurs practicality with cynicism. Among tips on proofreading and tailoring content to publication venue, Low cautions her readers against any high-minded expectations that they'll participate in only the "finer kinds of journalistic work," instead warning they should resign themselves to catering to the "commonplace needs of a commonplace reading public" if they hoped to live by the pen (qtd. 206). Low's jaded pragmatism seems, at first, a dour note to end an exploration of women's journalism in the nineteenth century. However, the proliferation of advice manuals like Low's addressed explicitly to female journalists reveals the increased public acceptance of women's presswork by the fin de siècle. This recognition attests to the culturally transformative work undertaken by women across the mid-century who legitimized their journalistic abilities in the periodical press — the subjects of Pusapati's engaging new book.

<2>*Model Women of the Press* situates female journalists in more contextualized histories of nineteenth-century authorship; as the expansion of high profile periodicals and the entry of university-educated men into presswork legitimized the field between the 1850s and 1870s, women writers of this period navigated the social stigma associated with paid women's work and presented themselves as adhering to — and even defining — high standards of journalistic practice to become "model women of the press." Through case studies of both well-studied and lesser-known writers, Pusapati focuses her project on women who chose to participate in the traditionally male sphere of political journalism while foregrounding their work as

women's writing. The women whose authorial lives Pusapati examines made their gender known, either by signature or in unsigned work that was still overtly coded as feminine through gender identifying markers or feminine pseudonyms and aliases. Pusapati organizes the bulk of her study around three models of political journalism that emerged as professional avenues for women writers in the mid-century: feminist journalism, mainstream political journalism, and foreign correspondence. Her fourth and final chapter then shifts to the figure of the female journalist in novels from 1840-1880 as an understudied influence shaping Victorian attitudes toward women's journalism. Throughout, Pusapati's attentiveness to a wide range of press genres, styles, and formats, as well as her extensive archival research, make *Model Women of the Press* an accessible, thoroughly compelling contribution to both periodical studies and histories of nineteenth-century women's authorship.

<3>Pusapati begins with an exploration of the *English Women's Journal (EWJ, 1858-1864)*, the first monthly magazine to be owned and operated by active participants in the organized women's movement. Her chapter challenges scholarship on the *EWJ* that has characterized the journal as an amateur reform publication that fought, only somewhat successfully, for financial stability and a respected place in the periodicals market. Arguing that the journal framed itself as a high-minded professional publication, Pusapati's analysis of the origins, dissolution, and lasting impact of the *EWJ* makes a clear case for the journal's role in shaping discourse on professional female authorship. She covers an impressive range of the journal's content — from serialized reprintings of American abolitionist fiction to pieces on conventionally feminine topics framed through the lens of reform (i.e. women's fashion articles that critiqued the working conditions of seamstresses). Throughout, Pusapati attends to the magazine's structure, illustrating how the layout and organization of the journal made implicit arguments for the importance of the journal's causes and for the cultural authority of its female authors. In this first chapter, Pusapati strikes an early balance between championing the women of her case studies as trailblazers without mythologizing them; the *EWJ*'s work to legitimize women writers and challenge conservative competitors is celebrated alongside frank discussions of the journal's promotion of colonial stereotypes and more active roles for English women in the British imperial project, as well as its strong middle-class bias when advocating for women's authorship.

<4>Chapters Two and Three, "Living on Political Journalism" and "Writing from the Field," follow similar structures as each identifies two prominent journalists and maps out the course of their careers. Chapter Two studies the lesser-known Eliza Meteyard and the prominent Frances Power Cobbe to explore how female political

journalists convinced both their editors and the reading public that they were capable of addressing significant social and political issues, establishing the impact of their print personas on the public image of the female journalist. Throughout the chapter, Pusapati's thorough archival work is on full display; she assesses key publications (both professional highs and lows) from the two writers while smoothly incorporating notes from their personal and professional correspondence. Pusapati's reference to Meteyard's application to the Royal Literary Fund in 1851 provides a particularly memorable glimpse into the writer's struggle with her self-image as a "hack of the periodical press" (qtd. Pusapati 85) as the reality of her livelihood failed to align with her aspirations to become an acclaimed novelist. Meteyard and Cobbe prove an excellent pairing for the chapter. Meteyard's struggle to sustain herself through her writing and Cobbe's high profile success enable Pusapati to identify trends in how women presented female political journalists as skilled, passionate professionals while highlighting the range of lived experiences within — and the varying financial viability of — careers in activist presswork.

<5>Chapter Three's study on women as foreign correspondents also provides a fascinating duo of case studies. Identifying a gap in histories of women's foreign correspondence, where scholarship has tended to focus on the twentieth century, Pusapati claims that Victorian women foreign reporters in the periodical press were more than precursors to later, higher profile newspaper journalists. Through Harriet Ward, a military wife and foreign correspondent in South Africa, and Harriet Martineau, a prolific writer who reported on post-Famine Ireland and acted as a European correspondent on American abolition, Pusapati demonstrates how mid-century women seized opportunities in the male-dominated field of foreign correspondence. Pusapati's work with Martineau is excellent. Her examination of Martineau's falling out with the *Standard* revisits previous studies on the breakdown of that professional relationship, including Deborah Logan's, and recasts Martineau's exit as partly due to the difficulty of speaking authoritatively on American abolitionist discourse while living in England. However, I particularly enjoyed the chapter's section on Ward; prefaced with concise contextualization on colonial tensions in the Cape Colony, and drawing from Hillary Callan's concept of incorporated womanhood, Pusapati charts Ward's rise as a foreign correspondent turned war correspondent during the Seventh Frontier War. Pusapati meticulously tracks how Ward leveraged her positionality and persona as a military wife to argue that she could better report on developments in the region, as she was both proximate to but separate from battle, and how she ultimately roused sensationalist fears in her London readership to justify British atrocities abroad.

<6>While similar studies have been conducted on fictional representations of women novelists, Pusapati's final chapter marks the first project to focus specifically on female journalists in mid-Victorian fiction. Pusapati primarily assesses three novels from the 1860s that depicted the power, and potential dangers, that presswork presented women: Camilla Crosland's *Mrs. Blake: A Story of Twenty Years* (1862), Charlotte Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865), and Eliza Lynn Linton's *Sowing the Wind* (1867). Across these texts, the authors draw from their own experiences in journalism as their characters navigate the periodical market, mixed-gender work relations, threats of harassment, and issues of adequate pay and recognition. Readers invested in the controversial figure of Linton will find Pusapati's section on *Sowing the Wind* of particular interest, as she joins scholars like Nancy Anderson and Valerie Sanders in arguing for a more nuanced view of Linton's politics. As the first focused study on fictional female journalists, Pusapati's readings of these key novels are engaging and detailed, and the chapter invites further work on the subject. While the topic of any of Pusapati's chapters could likely sustain an entire book on their own, I left her fourth chapter particularly eager to read more — more insights into the reception of these novels amongst critics and the writers' readerships and further investigation into competing representations of female journalists made by male novelists in this period, which Pusapati provides a quick but provoking sketch of near the chapter's close.

<7>While the periodical press's role in enabling women to take part in political debates has received extensive scholarly attention, Pusapati's book ultimately argues for a more nuanced evaluation of Victorian women journalists' authorial agency within the press. Considering the gendered constraints of political writing and the constraints of periodical formats, Pusapati demonstrates how her subjects' writings were shaped by market demands, reader expectations, editorial input, and attitudes toward women's professional authorship. Her approach to the periodical press as a literary field "rather than an archive of content" (12) results in a remarkably thorough and well-supported project. Pusapati reads across both feminist and general-interest magazines, as well as the personal and professional correspondence of women journalists (which provide some of the strongest, most vivid moments in Pusapati's case studies), to illustrate how women writers cemented their place in professional journalism.

<8>I heartily recommend *Model Women of the Press* to anyone with an interest in Victorian women's writing and the history of female authorship, regardless of their familiarity with periodical studies. One of the book's strengths is Pusapati's gift for well-balanced contextualization; while her book offers fresh insights for those working on gender in the periodical press, her care in situating her arguments opens

her readership to those less versed in that field. Her introduction, for example, provides an ample but digestible overview of the periodical press and its differences from Victorian newspapers. Her first and fourth chapters strike me as a particularly valuable entry point for undergraduate readers or early career scholars beginning to explore women's journalism in the nineteenth century. Pusapati's case studies are cleanly laid out, scrupulously researched, and compellingly told, making her work an exciting new contribution to the field.