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Guest Edited by F. Elizabeth Gray and Nikki Hessel

The Politics of Print in Turn-of-the-Century Britain

[*Slow Print: Literary Radicalism and Late Victorian Print Culture*](#). Elizabeth Carolyn Miller. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. 392 pp.

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<1>With the title of this study, Elizabeth Carolyn Miller tries to give a useful new name to a familiar late-nineteenth-century phenomenon. As she explains, “What I call slow print is print that actively opposed literary and journalistic mass production” and that was, moreover, “often explicitly political in objective, as socialist, anarchist, and other radical groups came to believe that large-scale mass-oriented print was no way to bring about revolutionary change” (2). “Slow print” includes, therefore, everything from inexpensive leftist papers for working-class communities to the costly and beautiful books produced painstakingly at William Morris’s Kelmscott Press for elite audiences. Unfortunately, Miller’s label probably will not stick, for the word “slow” in this phrase requires too much explanation. Most everyone will go on associating “slow” merely with absence of speed, rather than with resistance to capitalist principles, despite Miller’s earnest attempts at redefinition. Readers may be doubly puzzled by Miller’s counter-intuitive usage of this adjective, since many of the radical newspapers and magazines discussed here were turned out hastily and urgently, to respond to current events — everything from labor strikes to the conviction of Oscar Wilde for “gross indecency” with men. They were indeed small-scale guerilla efforts, setting themselves against the soulless industry giants of the so-called “New Journalism” that revolutionized the kind and the volume of information circulating throughout Britain, and that depended upon (and were controlled by) advertising. Yet most of the radical ventures—whether in the form of weekly or monthly magazines — also aimed at appearing on the scene not in a leisurely, but in a rapid, fashion. (And, as Miller tells us, they usually disappeared just as quickly, given their lack of financial resources, avenues of distribution, or paid staff). So there is doubtless room for a future critic to improve upon Miller’s choice of phrasing.

<2>Few scholars, however, will be able to improve upon her careful, well-researched, synthetic presentation of arguments and evidence, in showing both the depth and breadth of late-Victorian

resistance to the takeover of periodicals and book publishing alike by forces associated with Big Business. The sources of evidence, moreover, are diverse and sometimes unexpected. On the one hand, there is nothing surprising about her solid, nicely documented study of William Morris's protest on two fronts against the complicity of mass-market British publishing with capitalism. Miller examines and to a large degree reconciles the seeming contradictions between Morris's commitment to editing a socialist paper, *Commonweal* (1885–90), that addressed political controversies of the day and reached out to readers of modest means, and his dedication to the letter-press printing of editions of writers such as Chaucer for a select group of *aficionados*, as a way to restore the art of beautiful book-making that commercial interests in the publishing industry were destroying. This is, of course, the sort of material that a study such as *Slow Print* would be likely to explore. On the other hand, few readers will have anticipated the lengthy focus here, in the second and third chapters, on the career of George Bernard Shaw. He was neither a printer himself nor editor of a paper, although he was an active journalist, writing for socialist periodicals (as Miller points out) — but also for high-end literature and arts monthlies such as the *Savoy* (1896), which was a rival to the quarterly *Yellow Book* (1894–97) in the mid-Nineties (a fact that she does not record). According to Miller, however, Shaw was someone who reacted against what he saw as the failure of print to create a counter-public of politically engaged readers, ready to dismantle the existing capitalist system, and who, therefore, turned to the theater instead as the place where revolution supposedly could be fomented. Thus, she sees him as central to her argument about hostile responses among socialists to the spread of print to the masses and as crucial to end-of-the-century debates over whether the novel was inherently too bourgeois a form to be a useful political instrument. Shaw was, after all, the author of five novels himself, before he abandoned fiction for drama, and Miller's contribution to revisionist history here is to claim that, even in those early works, he was self-consciously writing against the novel as a politically viable literary genre, to undermine its power from the inside.

<3>The most valuable section of *Slow Print* is “Measured Revolution: Poetry and the Late Victorian Radical Press” in which Miller offers fresh information about the ubiquity of political poetry across the spectrum of British socialist and anarchist periodicals. Here, she supplies both descriptions of and excerpts from a variety of examples that are sure to be new to most scholars of the period — everything from J. L. Joynes's “The Roll Call of the Ages” (1884) which, as she explains, “advocates a Marxist theory of history” (175) and does so in the same journal *To-Day* (1883–89) that had “serialized sections of Karl Marx's *Capital* in 1883” (173), to a variety of turn-of-the-century parodies of Tennyson, including P. E. Tanner's “Discharge of the Dark Brigade” (1912) from the Glasgow-based *Anarchist*, which concludes with the following fiery incitement to revolution: “Governments of every shade;/ Too long on us they've preyed,/ And we've been plundered!/ Let us raise flaming hell!/ Engulf the lot pell mell!/ Already they know full well/ Their days are numbered!” (189). This chapter also allows Miller to exercise her considerable talents as a storyteller. She constructs an affecting biographical narrative about the working-class poet Tom Maguire, whose career as an author, as well as editor of “his own short-lived paper, *Labour Champion*” (205), made him at least briefly a figure of some importance. Indeed, Miller reports, “Alf Mattison, a Leeds socialist, recalled the influence of Maguire's songs among the workers he organized: When Maguire spent several months ‘organising a strike of the Jewish workers in Leeds . . . a great feature of the strike was a song written by Maguire, entitled “The Song of the Sweater's Victim” —

the singing of which by several hundred Jews in their broken English may be better imagined than described” (217). Nonetheless, “Maguire died alone in a state of depression and alcoholism” (219), his sad end aligning him with the fates of a number of contemporaries among the Aesthetes and Decadents, who also died prematurely during the waning years of the Nineties.

<4>Following this superb chapter on the working-class singers of radical ballads, Chapter Five, which is devoted to overlaps between the theosophical movement and late-Victorian socialism, comes as something of an anti-climax. Although it is the only section that concentrates at length on a woman author or editor — specifically, on the conversion of Annie Besant to theosophy and on her subsequent modes of self-representation in her *Autobiography* (1893) — Miller does not make Besant spring to life as an interesting character (though Besant was indisputably a fascinating figure), as she does with Tom Maguire. Even here, moreover, Miller chooses to divide the focus in gendered terms and to give over the latter half of the chapter to yet another man of the period: Alfred Orage, editor of the influential *New Age*. Florence Farr does appear briefly, as a contributor to Orage’s paper and as someone whose writings “connect her theosophical socialism to a kind of occultist feminism” (254), but this is one of the rare occasions when Miller mentions the role of feminist perspectives in the radical press.

<5>Even in the final chapter, “Free Love, Free Print: Sex Radicalism, Censorship, and the Biopolitical Turn,” the emphasis remains on the issue of heterosexual unions outside of marriage, and on the male authors who were advocates for these, rather than on the related topic of how the rejection of wifehood, of prostitution, and of the sexual double standard served as key platforms for feminist activism. There is no in-depth consideration of the figure of the “New Woman” in *fin-de-siècle* radical periodicals. Miller skews in questionable ways the account of the uproars over Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1895) and Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895) by seeing their reception merely as illustrating mainstream hostility to “free love” and to outspokenness about it in print. More was at stake, for the public outcry was directed just as fiercely at the notion that these novels were presenting sympathetic representations of “New Women,” who insisted upon defining morality, religion, and social values (not sexual conduct alone) without interference from others, who talked back to patriarchal authority and asserted themselves with unconventional vigor, and who educated themselves to a standard ordinarily reserved for middle-class gentlemen. Instead of exploring these matters, however, Miller turns to dissident visions of masculinity and to positive articles about male homosexuality in the *Adult* (1897–99) as having defined the frontiers of radicalism and of free speech in the press at the end of the nineteenth century.

<6>*Slow Print* has much to recommend it, but the subject of gender is not its strong suit. While demonstrating effectively the links between antipathy to mass-circulation print in the late-Victorian radical press and the birth of literary modernism, it has little to say about how any of this informed or affected the suffrage press, which also arose after the turn of the century. Feminism in its various incarnations gets short shrift throughout. In the chapter on radical theater, the role played by Elizabeth Robins, for instance, is inexplicably absent from the discussion of how Ibsen’s work spread in advanced British circles. Not even the sections on Shaw, who later proved so significant to suffrage periodicals and theater alike, draw connections between radical socialist activism and growing political agitation on

behalf of women's rights. Gender is also a blind spot, when Miller analyzes visual images of the "artist-worker" from periodicals such as the *Workman's Times*, for she neglects to consider how and why the "illustration of a manual artisan" (32) is always a drawing of idealized masculinity and thus conservative in the end. For more about how gender shaped the histories examined here, curious readers will need to look elsewhere.