

Good to Think with: Domestic Servants, England 1660-1750*

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Abstract

This article surveys scholarship dealing with domestic service in England at the latter end of early modernity. Neglected by British social historians of 'productive' working classes, servants began to attract serious interest only after demographers of the 1970s showed that in the north and west of pre-industrial Europe youths of all social ranks passed several years in 'life-cycle service'. The concept has proved controversial, but fruitful for study of the family and of the many functions performed within the extended household. In the 1980s feminism, and the revival of servant-keeping, stimulated interest in modern domestic workers, to whom those of earlier times were often assimilated. The focus has since shifted to radical changes (feminisation and proletarianisation) taking place in the later eighteenth century, and away from the complex hierarchies typical of great houses onto middling-sort servant-keeping. Recently historians have investigated the agency enjoyed by eighteenth-century servants, and affective aspects of household relationships. Archival research, facilitated by digitalisation, studies of material culture and household spaces, willingness to read between the lines and against the grain, now offer greater insight into the experiences of and cultural forms used by this group of labouring-class men and women.

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1. *Thinking with Servants*

'Good to think with' is an expression borrowed via Carolyn Steedman (in adapted form) from a passage in which Claude Levi-Strauss proposed that people, animals, any natural species, can be used for cognitive purposes (Steedman 2009, 15n). This is how Steedman applies it to domestic service in England in the long eighteenth century:

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Domestic servants were used – more than any other social group – to write histories of the social itself. This was an important aspect of their function, not the same as dusting, boot-cleaning and water-carrying but, rather, an involuntary labour, by which they were employed by all manner of legal theorist and political philosopher, to think (or think-through) the social and its history. (13-14)

Among the political philosophers in question is John Locke, who in 1689 used a servant cutting turf to show how the products of one man's labour may be appropriated by another, and in 1693 cited nursemaids' story-telling as illustrating barbaric methods of education. In his *Commentaries* (1765-1769), that most influential of legal theorists, Sir William Blackstone, classified the master-servant relationship as the first of the three great relations of private life to come within the remit of the law.

Servants have been used to think (or think-through) key aspects of social life in many times and places. In *Housecraft and Statecraft: Domestic Service in Renaissance Venice, 1400-1600*, Dennis Romano shows how the late sixteenth-century physician and playwright, Fabio Glisenti, used servants, gondoliers and other '*persone basse, e vili*' to 'serve as representations of the senses triumphing over reason', to recommend the importance of a good death, and to justify a static political and social hierarchy (1996, 37, 40). Romano himself uses 'the lens of intimate relations between masters and servants' (xv) to investigate the Venetian shift 'away from egalitarian republicanism and communal values and toward an ever more hierarchical and stratified society' (228). The decision to use domestic service as a key was not difficult, he explains,

since the master-servant tie was one of the most fundamental relationships that characterized European society before the era of the French Revolution ... Like the bonds between lords and vassals, masters and apprentices, even fathers and sons, ties between masters and servants linked tens of thousands of Europeans in relationships imbued with economic, social and political significance. No relationship, with the exception of that between husbands and wives, better expresses the patriarchal and hierarchical ideal of early modern society ... (xv)

Quite different but equally 'social' are the aims of the recently concluded 'Servant Project', a vast network of scholars who have investigated and promoted the social ideals affirmed by the European Constitution of 2004 – human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity – through case studies of master-servant relationships in regions as far apart as Sweden, Japan, Turkey and Latin America, and over a time scale stretching from the middle ages to the twenty-first century.¹

¹ On the aims of the project, see Sarti 2005a, xvii.

One of the organisers of – and principal contributors to – that project (and to this volume) has recently published a survey of fifty years of international scholarship on service (Sarti 2014) which takes into account a much bigger range of work published in many more languages than I am able to deal with. This article tries only to give a sense of what social and cultural historians have been saying during the last thirty years or so about domestic (i.e. live-in) servants in England between the Restoration and the mid-eighteenth century.² Even within those narrow geographical and chronological confines, it does not do credit to the many types of servant whose work later became obsolete (chairmen, for instance) or who were re-configured as professionals (such as secretaries), or discuss the related issues of slavery and indentured service.³ Nevertheless the material is vast and the questions debated many and complex. Was there a crisis in servant-master relations in the late 1700s and early 1800s, for instance? Had contractual, cash-based relations supplanted patriarchal ones? Were servants still considered members of the master's family – if they had ever really been? Did the 'aristocratic style' of servant-keeping, with large hierarchically-organised establishments serving as masters' power bases, survive – and was that style imitated by the newly-rich middling sort? When and to what extent did the 'bourgeois style' of employing small numbers of multi-tasking domestics come to dominate? Was domestic service – already in the eighteenth century – being proletarianised, feminised and stigmatised? Can servants then – ever – be considered 'working class'? Is the notion of life-cycle service developed by demographers applicable to England in this period? How much power, economic, cultural, emotional, sexual, did servants wield? Where and how can we hear the voices of those who left no written record of themselves?

Many of these questions concern chronology, and they relate, it seems to me, to a smouldering debate about the long eighteenth century as whole. All of the studies we shall be looking at see profound changes as taking place in the nature and meaning of service – at some point; they disagree, however, about when those changes took place. The implications of this are broad, because the changes add up to something we call modernisation; where we locate that process thus determines where we set the cut off between early modern and modern. In what follows I shall stress the early modern aspects of domestic service in late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century England, but do my best to keep in mind the example of Daniel Defoe, who liked to see both

² R.C. Richardson offers a lucid overview of scholarship on household servants in early modern England in the first chapter of his book of 2010 (1-20). This article covers some of the same ground but with different emphases.

³ On the difficulty of defining 'Who are Servants' over the course of early modern history, see Sarti 2005b.

sides of any question and rarely came down on one without crossing the floor soon after. Defoe might have called his own time, as he did servants and many other social categories, ‘amphibious’: but that epithet was not meant to be complimentary.

2. *Masters’ Voices*

It took a long time for the historiography of service to come to England. In early nineteenth-century France scholars were already comparing the conditions enjoyed by servants since the Revolution with those of the past, and in the recently united Italy of the 1860s historians began serious archival research on the history of Mediterranean slavery (Sarti 2014, 280-281). It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that an innovative American social historian told the English-speaking world that servants, past and present, were worth studying (Salmon 1901, 16). The main aims of Lucy Maynard Salmon’s *Domestic Service* were to put popular discussion of the ‘great American question’ (dissatisfaction with servants) on a ‘broader basis’ than that of mere personal experience, and to encourage economists to ‘recognize domestic service among other industries’. Salmon introduced her survey of over 1,000 employers and 700 domestic workers with three historical chapters which clarified differences among the various types of servant-hood into which men and women were sold or sold themselves to labour in North America, analysed changes in the semantics of the word ‘servant’, and investigated the revival of hiring of domestics which followed recent waves of migrants from Ireland, Germany and China. Easy with statistics as with the broader view, Salmon also insisted on ‘going back to the sources’, and had a special ‘gift of finding in the common place something significant’.⁴

Both are illustrated in her use of settlers’ letters to give us a feel of the materiality of everyday life in colonial America, a sense of the strong feelings that could be aroused in the process of getting the work around house and farm done, the sharing of small domestic spaces and kitchen utensils, and regulating sexual behaviour. Here is seventeenth-century Maine farmer John Winter justifying his wife’s having beaten Pryssylla, a servant who – he feared – may have been spreading ‘yll reports’:

⁴ ‘Lucy Maynard Salmon’, in *Vassar Encyclopaedia*, <<http://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/faculty/prominent-faculty/lucy-maynard-salmon.html>>, accessed 23 January 2015. Salmon’s methods of enquiry anticipate the modern interest in material culture: ‘One of Salmon’s favorite historical records was the laundry list. Salmon and her class in Historical Material advertised in the *Vassar Miscellany* before winter break for students’ laundry lists from home. “Laundry lists”, the ad read, “being closely and continuously connected with daily life, reflect custom and change in social conditions, industry, or in language, with a detail and rapidity which other sources seldom do”’.

she had twice gon a meching in the woodes, which we haue bin faine to send all our Company to seeke. We Cann hardly keep her within doores after we ar gonn to beed, except we Carry the kay of the doore to beed with us. She never Could melke Cow nor goat since she Came hither. Our men do not desire to haue her boyle the kittle for them she is so sluttish. She Cannot be trusted to seme a few piggs, but my wyfe most Commonly must be with her. She hath written home, I heare, that she was faine to ly yppon goates skins. She might take som goates skins to ly in her bedd, but not given to her for her lodginge. For a yeare & quarter or more she lay with my daughter vppon a good feather bed before my daughter being lacke 3 or 4 dales to Sacco, the maid goes into beed with her Cloth & stockings, & would not take the paines to plucke of her Cloths: her bedd after was a doust bedd & she had 2 Coverletts to ly on her, but sheets she had none after that tyme she was found to be so sluttish. (83)

Evidently worried about Pryssylla's power to besmirch his and his wife's name in the community, Winter piles on details of faults and shortcomings, sins committed (meching),⁵ duties omitted (milking, tending pigs), repulsive personal habits (getting into bed fully dressed). In the process he tells us a lot about his interesting maid (she seems to have been adventurous enough to run off into the woods at night, fastidious enough to complain about sleeping on goat skins, and though unskilled in animal husbandry, was clearly literate enough to write letters home), and about his surprisingly fussy male employees (who objected to her handling cooking utensils). He also implies a good deal about his daughter (who made journeys into town, and insisted on appropriate bed wear), about his wife's responsibilities on the farm (as well as her disciplinary role), and about his own duties as guardian: he felt bound to organise expeditions to find his maid when she made off, and to prevent further 'mechings'. No distant, impersonal 'employer', he seems to have been closely involved with the members of his extended, hard-working but well-equipped household (not lacking in good feather beds), and was by no means emotionally detached. The death by drowning of another servant aroused Winter's compassion and puzzlement, though it also touched his self-interest:

Tompson had a hard fortune. Yt was her Chance to be drowned Cominge over the barr after our Cowes, & very little water on the barr, not aboue i foote, & we Cannot Judge how yt should be, acocept that her hatt did blow from her head, & she to saue her hatt stept on the side of the barr ... I thinke yf she had lived she would haue proved a good servant in the house: she would do more worke then 8 such maides as Pryssyllea is. (84)

⁵ Presumably meeting a lover: the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the verb 'mech' as one of the Middle English variants on 'match', meaning to 'pair' or 'mate', which is usually – but not always – used transitively.

Salmon's book was, in Sarti's view, to remain the most important work on domestic service in the United States for seventy years or so (2014, 282). By contrast Dorothy Marshall's article, 'The Domestic Servant of the Eighteenth Century', was written from *within* 'the servant problem in its modern aspect' (1929, 6). Relying almost exclusively on employer testimony and the abundant eighteenth-century literature of complaint, Marshall bought into the charges of 'insufferable behaviour' levelled by Defoe, Mandeville and other polemicists, confirming the notion of an eighteenth-century crisis in master-servant relations.⁶ Swift's *Directions to Servants*, for instance, is cited as evidence that servants actually cheated on the shopping. 'The mass of evidence tends to show that the servant body as a whole had got out of hand' she unsurprisingly concluded, indeed 'more than ordinarily out of hand' (38-39), implicitly betraying her own assumption that a degree of insubordination on the part of servants is regrettably inevitable.

It was not for another twenty-seven years that the first full-length study of the subject appeared. In *The Domestic Servant Class in Eighteenth-Century England* J.J. Hecht used a wide range of letters, diaries, newspapers and magazines, travel literature, treatises and pamphlets on social and economic problems to construct an overview of labour supply and demand, servant hierarchies, contradictions in master-servant relations, and servant functions, including that of cultural nexus: the transference of masters' and mistresses' values and customs (manners, dress, tea-drinking, political opinions) to the lower classes, and the 'flow from city to country' (1956, 209-224). In his account the direction of flow is always top-down; like Marshall's, the bulk of Hecht's material derived from employer testimony (xi-xii). The book tells us a great deal about the rich and status-conscious who employed large numbers of servants with a high proportion of males, for many of whom the main function was display – to tell the world that their master was wealthy enough to pay them for doing very little.

Hecht was neither the first nor the last to be fascinated by the specialized duties, the precise territorial demarcations and hierarchical organisation of great houses: fixed seating arrangements at table, differences in dress, diet, leisure time and, above all, in opportunities for familiar exchange with employers that signalled distinctions between upper and lower servants, and fine grading in between (35).⁷ But households like these were, by the eighteenth century,

⁶ Defoe (1724), quoted on p. 16; to be fair, Marshall did examine and reject the charge that servants were demanding 'exorbitant wages'.

⁷ As Elizabeth Rivlin points out in this volume fascination with service relations in great houses is evident from the popularity of television series such as *Downton Abbey* (from 2010) and the earlier *Upstairs Downstairs* (1971-1975), as well as films such as *The Remains of the Day* (1993) and *Gosford Park* (2001). Lucy Delap (2011) sees these productions as 'heritage performances' insinuating that domestic service belongs to and in the past.

a small minority. As Hecht acknowledged in passing, below the gentry there were by this time large numbers of households with one or two multi-tasking servants, perhaps a maid of all work and a footboy-cum-apprentice (8). In rural areas duties would be even more varied:

Eighteenth-century domestic servants, the majority of them working in single or two servant-households, did all sorts, in an era when 'housework' did not have the narrow connotations of 'indoors', in a 'house or other dwelling place'. She (sometimes he) mopped the floors, milked the house cow, turned out a bedroom, fed the pigs, hoed in the vegetable garden, washed the babies' nappies, and helped with the hay if the family was growing a cash crop. (Steedman 2009, 31)

It was not for many years that historians began helping us hear the voices of these workers, still longer to begin to hear those who worked as chars or washerwomen on a casual basis.⁸ But then there was not much interest in doing so, even among the great pioneers of 'history from below' in 1960s and 1970s Britain: Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson. 'Very little has been written on eighteenth-century domestic service in England since J.J. Hecht's work' Bridget Hill wrote, somewhat misleadingly,⁹ as late as 1996:

What are the reasons for British historians' persistence over the last forty years in virtually ignoring domestic service? All female domestic servants, it is assumed, performed housework ... Women have performed it since history began. Nothing has changed. To historians concerned with change over time it is of no interest ... essentially unproductive. (7-8)

In the meantime, Hill noted, two excellent studies of domestic service in *ancien régime* France had appeared (Maza 1983; Fairchilds 1984); if there had been no English equivalent it was partly because servants did not fit easily into the powerful narrative of Britain's pre-eminence as 'the first nation to industrialize', and of industrialisation as the seedbed of the working class. Modern historians, she suggested, found it 'puzzling and a little disconcerting to discover that, despite burgeoning manufacture, the most important occupation remained service. What has domestic service

⁸ In *Down and Out in Eighteenth-Century London* Tim Hitchcock devotes some pages to charring – 'the most common, and least discussed, of the beggarly professions' – and finds a 'palpable social boundary' between charwomen and 'such servants as had attended their masters or mistresses' (2004, 61-63). Hitchcock's work reminds us that domestic servants in stable 'places' were highly privileged compared to many of those who did the really dirty work in early modern houses, never mind on farms. Mary Collier's satiric thrust at the sleepy maid who keeps the washer-women waiting in *A Woman's Labour* brings this home. See below, p. 58.

⁹ Because the demographers of the 1970s had indeed given service the key role in their theories of marriage patterns in north-western Europe.

to do with the growth of industry and the rise of factories?’ (8). Steedman traces the roots of the problem farther back:

the plot lines of modern social history have a tenacious grip on us all. Adam Smith’s 1776 formulation of the servant’s labour as a kind of non-work, or anti-work, and Karl Marx’s use of the formulation to analyse the occupational structure of modern (1861) capitalist society, underpins much canonical twentieth-century social history. (2009, 16)

By the 1980s however that ‘tenacious grip’ had loosened under the impact of feminist attacks on the ideology of housework and caring as propensities natural to women. At the same time, after years during which it was assumed that domestic service had or soon would disappear (Sarti 2005c, 251), it was dawning on observers that household help was still commonly employed in many regions of the world, and that even in the north of Europe and in North America the middle classes were again paying people – now known as ‘domestic workers’, ‘helps’ or ‘collaborators’ – to do their cleaning, gardening, nannying and caring. New versions of the ‘servant problem’ were being aired in newspapers, fiction, films and television series, while sociologists were debating the ‘servicing of the middle classes’ and the re-emergence of class divisions (Meldrum 2000, 3). Studies including the expression ‘domestic service’ in their titles shot up from about 50 per year in the 1980s, to nearly 300 in the 1990s, and an astonishing almost 700 per year in the first decade of the new century (Sarti 2014, 303).

The trouble for us is that ‘eighteenth-century domestic servants were not the type of working woman that the twenty-first century sociological imagination reads out of gender history’; they were not the ‘dirty, disgusting others’ of the world of globalised, de-regulated and racialised service (Steedman 2009, 26-27). Nor did they much resemble the employees of nineteenth-century middle-class families that historians such as Theresa McBride (1976), and Leonora Davidoff and Catherine Hall (1987) had described as founded on the ideology of separate spheres, feminine and private on the one hand, public and male on the other. Bridget Hill’s *Servants* has been accused of back-projecting onto the eighteenth century a Victorian model of servants as victims of contractual relations, vulnerable to sexual exploitation, confined to separate spaces in the household and isolated from their own families and from the rest of the world (Meldrum 2000, 6).¹⁰ In cities, Hill wrote, many ‘remained invisible, rarely leaving their households and venturing into the outside world’, while in the country ‘life was largely confined to the household’ (1996, 1); in contrast to that of the master, the servant’s voice was ‘seldom raised’. Like Marshall before her, Hill took the polemics of Defoe, Mandeville and Hanway as evidence that ‘relations

¹⁰ Robert Shoemaker (1998) offers a balanced view of continuity and discontinuities with respect to gender roles in the long eighteenth century; on domestic service see 175-179.

between servants and masters were clearly at crisis point' (2), and saw that crisis as continuous with the 'servant question' of the next century. Her essays did, however, challenge the 'myth of service on an upstairs/downstairs model, with highly specialized servants whose work was defined by their occupation labels, living in households in which a strict hierarchy was preserved' (10), winning recognition of the fact that the overwhelming majority of eighteenth-century servants were women employed singly or in small groups, and bringing attention to previously neglected sources and groups of servants – such as casual day labourers, pauper servants recruited from parish workhouses and philanthropic institutions, and live-in kin.

3. *Servants' Voices*

Less impressionistic methods of enquiry than those used by Hecht and Hill had by this time, however, brought to light a more particularised picture of early modern servants' experiences. In 1989 Peter Earle used consistory court archives to study the female labour market in London at the turn of the seventeenth century, showing that women were expected to work for their livings. Seventy-seven per cent were 'wholly maintained by employment' (333), and 'Domestic service ... was the commonest and was also normally the first occupation of women working in London' (339); it was indeed one of the very few that was not 'casual, intermittent, or seasonal' (342). There were other advantages in going into service. Under the Law of Settlement of 1662 and its subsequent amendments, right of settlement, and hence the right to claim parish benefits, could be earned by a year's hiring. Challenging the common assumption that female servants were a poorly-paid, dependent group 'with little control over their destiny', D.A. Kent analysed examinations of women servants claiming settlement rights in St Martin-in-the-Fields (1989, 112-113), and concluded that these benefits, together with the 'diet and board' guaranteed by employers, even quite lowly ones, and the small annual wage, made the rewards of service quite advantageous, even in this 'crowded and shabby' London parish. More so, Kent thought, than those offered by other kinds of women's work (such as needlework and laundering), and indeed by marriage, which placed all earnings under the husband's control; servants, by contrast, enjoyed a degree of 'choice and relative economic independence not enjoyed by most married women' (115). In the light of this, the young Moll Flanders, whom Defoe represents as horrified by the prospect of going into service, seems perverse: 'The women who flocked to London in their thousands', Kent claimed, did so because they understood the basic economic realities and they saw in domestic service the opportunity for personal advantage' (125). Nor was this a merely temporary advantage, for among those claiming settlement there were substantial numbers of older women: 'service was sufficiently attractive that some women chose it as a way of life rather than simply as a stage in their life-cycle' (112).

The concept of life-cycle service, one of the most important – and controversial – with which we have to deal, had been developed in the 1960s and 1970s out of the sociological and demographic historiography of the Cambridge Group for the Study of Population and Social Structure (Sarti 2014, 289). In *The World We Have Lost* (1965) the Group's founder, Peter Laslett, described the 'minute scale of life' in pre-industrial England, putting at its centre a notion of family which included apprentices and servants, and of a home which was also 'the scene of labour' (1971, 13, 53). Also in 1965, John Hanjal (1983) published an essay on European marriage patterns arguing that in the north and west of the continent large numbers of men and women did not marry at all, and that those who did put off doing so until they had accumulated the economic wherewithal, the life skills and professional competence needed to set up independently: domestic service was one of the important means to that end. It also emerged from quantitative data collected and analysed by the Cambridge Group that any one time between the late sixteenth century and the early nineteenth over thirteen per cent of the population of England was in service, and as much as sixty per cent of the population aged between fifteen and twenty-four. In 1977 Laslett identified service, along with late marriage and a nuclear structure, as the three inter-related characteristics of the western family, and in 1978 E.A. Wrigley described it as an essential form of 'ex post facto family planning' for early modernity: families with more surviving children than they could maintain or employ could send their surplus to those with too few for their labour needs (quoted in Kussmaul 1981, 26). In her own pioneering book on farm servants, Kussmaul identified it as 'one of the simplest differences' (3) between the early modern and the modern:

the existence of service in all its forms in early modern England is one of the simplest distinctions that can be drawn between the modern and the early modern worlds. It is also one of the greatest obstacles to the simple application of modern categories to early modern experiences. (9)

The notion of a period of service (or apprenticeship) as a normal phase in the lives of the young of all social ranks seems not to work for southern and eastern Europe, for Latin America and much of Asia (Japan is an exception). But as far as the north and west of Europe are concerned it has proved highly suggestive, especially for studies in the history of the family and of youth. Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos thought that among the labouring poor and among middling groups of early modern England domestic service was 'the most formative in the lives of women' (1994, 155). Extending the range of skills gained under the tutelage of parents, they 'gained a range of social competences, cooperating with fellow servants and apprentices, supervising and sometimes instructing younger ones ... and negotiating with masters', as well as acquiring 'invaluable household skills such as sewing, knitting, brewing, cooking, washing and rearing children ... supervising apprentices, offering advice and managing

shops' (153-154). On the other hand, as Laura Gowing points out, life-cycle service exposed young women distant from their parents to male assumptions of 'right of sexual access to their bodies', and in households employing only one maid could result in 'an ambiguous triangle of domestic relations ... [an] uncomfortable correlation between wives and servants' (2003, 62). These ambiguities were further complicated by the 'physical authority' of mistresses in charge of chastising female servants and keeping watch for signs of illicit sex, illegitimacy and infanticide, a task in which they would often be joined by neighbours: 'their bodies were policed by the investigating eyes and hands of the parish – and, most of all, by those of other women' (71).

Taking a broader view, Sheila McIsaac Cooper mentions a range of functions performed by life-cycle service: the alleviating of family tensions, reduced risks of incest and of epidemic infection, provision of surrogate families for orphans, and the extension of opportunities for social advancement and of marriage choices; service could also feed, and feed upon, client/patronage systems, protect and reinforce religious communities: 'placing a young person, taking one in, facilitating placement – all helped lubricate interaction at a time when social links were crucial' (2005, 64-65). Delpiano and Sarti have explored the two-way educational functions further:

masters' responsibilities towards their servants involved religious, moral, practical and educational aspects. Before the spreading of the school system, indeed, domestic service represented a major channel for the transmission of knowledge and expertise from one generation to the other ... Yet, servants were in turn likely to teach a wide range of things to their employers' children, while governesses and tutors were supposed to do so. As a consequence, the teaching and educational process that took place at home was a circular process, within which the members of the domestic staff were at the same time pupil and teacher. (2007, 490)

The spread of formal schooling during the eighteenth century which led to the loss of this function may have been partly responsible for life-cycle service losing its appeal for children of gentry and middling sort, and hence to the gradual stigmatisation of all service as a lower-class occupation (McIsaac Cooper 2005, 65).

Historians still disagree about the chronology of proletarianisation, stigmatisation and feminisation, all aspects of modernisation. Those who place these changes later in time link seventeenth- and eighteenth-century service and social conditions in general back to those of the fifteenth and sixteenth rather than forward to the class-stratified, industrialised world of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). Meldrum's *Domestic Service and Gender* (2000), still the best scholarly monograph on the subject,¹¹ holds out for continuity, at least in

¹¹ Meldrum's study is not representative of England as a whole in that Londoners had more servants, and more women servants, than did other English households and farms, where proportionately more servants in husbandry were needed. Pamela Horn's *Flunkeys*

London between the Restoration and the mid-eighteenth century. From witness depositions by servants at church courts in the metropolis Meldrum constructed 1,500 biographies of individual servants which confirmed the gender bias (four women servants to every one male), and established the importance of household size (men were only employed in large establishments, and never as ‘drudges’). He also took a fresh look at the insistent complaints about servant behaviour, discussing the norms laid down in conduct literature for servants in the context of the many energetic (but not always successful) attempts to reform and regulate social life, especially as lived by the lower sort. Here, as in describing personal relationships within and without the household, of the concrete realities and fuzzy confines of servants’ work, and of the combinations of cash and other types of remuneration, Meldrum distinguished sharply between the experiences of men and women, and between those employed in great houses and those in smaller ones, but found little sign of chronological change. He contested, for instance, the notion that it was in this century that service became feminised, for it had long been ‘the largest sector of women’s employment’. He also denied the emergence of ‘separate spheres’ and demarcation of separate spaces in houses in the first half of the century:¹² mistresses had always exercised authority over domestic servants, but middling sort and lower sort employers, who were the majority, lived in close proximity with their employees, and they interacted constantly with them (41). Far from living confined and isolated lives, servants, like most non-elite early modern people, lived much of their lives out of doors. Unlike the work of artisans and shopkeepers, which tied them to their places of business, servants’ duties involved fetching, carrying, shopping and errand-running, tasks which brought them into regular contact with neighbours, traders, and other servants. Finally, Meldrum also rejected the idea that by the mid-eighteenth century domestic service had been totally transformed from a social relationship to one governed by the cash nexus: a form of moral economy in which cash wages combined with other, customary forms of remuneration, persisted well into the next century. What did distinguish domestic servants in the capital during these hundred years, both from those that preceded and from those that followed, he argues, was their ‘relative good fortune’:

and Scullions (2004) ranges more widely but is based on published sources, and tends to assimilate the eighteenth century to the early nineteenth.

¹² Amanda Flather’s recent work (2011) confirms that, at least until the 1720s, household spaces were not rigidly segregated according to status or gender, although there were important differentiations in the ways different members of a household could use them. Tessa Chynoweth’s forthcoming Ph.D. thesis on *Domestic Servants and Domestic Space in Eighteenth-Century London* (Queen Mary University of London) will add more to our knowledge of this important aspect of servants’ lives.

Demography and economy, allied to the expansion of London, created for domestic servants in the metropolis and empowered them in the service labour market in ways which may have begun to be undermined even before ... [the] period ended. (209)

The time period and geographical context on which Paula Humfrey has recently focused in *The Experience of Domestic Service for Women in Early Modern London* falls within Meldrum's, and she too stresses independence, mobility, and agency. Humfrey, however, disputes what she sees as the 'prescriptive assumption' built into the life-cycle model (2011, 25) in favour of one of a complex contractual nature, and one which made 'the workforce of women in domestic service ... an engine of capitalist proto-industrialization' (28-29). Her sample of women, whose voices we hear making depositions before London church courts and Westminster settlement examinations, were 'independent women who could rely on service as a means of getting income throughout their adult lives – as single women, married women, and widows – thereby exhibiting a degree of agency that took them well beyond the prescribed ambit for early modern women in civic life' (29). Rather than describing and analyzing this agency, however, Humfrey asks us to dig it out for ourselves from the dossier of statements she edits. If we are, as she asks us to be, 'generous in our attention and acute in our focus' (38), we find that agency here is expressed not merely in terms of opportunities to turn favourable market conditions to their economic advantage, but in terms of knowledge possessed, cultural understanding and power of self-expression: all abilities which put these women in a position to determine their own futures and affect the lives of others, including those of their employers. By interacting and observing, remembering and testifying these women show themselves to be 'highly visible participants of public life' (29), and from their depositions we can pick up a great deal about their daily experiences and self-perceptions.

To take one example, 23-year-old Anne Orran looked after the children of Martha Branch – and almost certainly did a lot of other kinds of work in the house and in the poultry shop which occupied part of the ground floor (82-84). She also had cultural work to do in court when, in 1696, she was called by her mistress to bear witness in a defamation suit against a neighbour, Mary Palmer, who seems to have gossiped about having seen through her window some sort of scandalous behaviour between Martha and Christopher Backhouse, the man who wrote letters for the shop. Anne Orran's voice comes across strongly, precise in command of salient detail, and in perception of the relationships within the household and with their neighbours. She gave a clear description of how the interlocking spaces of the two houses made it impossible for any person to see out of Mary Palmer's dining room into the Branch's kitchen – and would have done so even if there had not been up against the window at the time of the alleged infidelity (it was late August) a trough containing balm and mint plants 'not fallen'. She also reported that on the day in question

Martha Branch went to bed – as usual – before the children, so as to be able to rise at three or four in the morning to look after the shop when her husband was travelling. She was evidently a hard-working woman, and probably her husband, so often away, was too. They clearly relied heavily on others to keep household and business going; Anne Orran's child-caring and housework would have freed Martha to run the shop, while Backhouse was presumably needed to write business letters they were not able to write themselves. Anne signed her deposition with a mark, so there may not have been much of a social difference between her and her employers. She was certainly familiar with her employers' habits, and the kitchen, at least, was clearly still a multifunctional space used by mistress and clerk as well as maid.¹³ Such shared spaces made for a familiarity that 'worked both ways', allowing mistresses to 'keep a sharp eye' on servants' bodies, and vice versa (Gowing 2003, 69). In this particular case, the tables are further reversed in that the 'sharp eye' of the servant saves the mistress from the malicious spying of a neighbour. We cannot be sure what kind of 'emotional and affective relationship' they had (Steedman 2007, 19); this household may even have qualified for the old meaning of 'family' as a unit including servants as well as kin (Tadmor 2001) – though we need to remember that 'servants *in* a household were not necessarily *of* the family: they were there by legal arrangement' (Steedman 2009, 18).

That 'the law – its assumptions, principles and practices – was a certain presence in plebeian lives' is a recurring theme in both of Steedman's books on servants, for it both 'shaped the course of them' and 'demanded self-narratives (autobiographies) of applicants for poor relief, for example, and in this way forced self-reflexivity on many people (who may very well have rather done without it)' (2009, 30). What is explicit here is implicit in the work of Earle, Kent, Meldrum, Humfrey and countless other historians of domestic service of the last thirty years, for if they are able to balance the employer testimony in the form of letters, diaries and essays that dominated the work of say, Hecht, it is thanks to their sifting through the mass of legal and administrative records which, though mediated by clerks and reporters, can bring us close to the experience of servants themselves.

Douglas Hay and Paul Craven have studied another aspect of the law relevant to domestic service. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries the employment of labourers (hired by the day, perhaps working for several masters) as well as servants (usually hired by the year, usually young and

¹³ Flather describes the Restoration kitchen as 'a highly integrated social space in which different household members coexisted and went about their respective tasks within a gendered division of labour with very little apparent segregation according to status or strict patterns of control' (2011, 176). In smaller early modern houses all rooms 'were multifunctional and often multi-occupied. Bedrooms might be shared not just by husbands and wives, but by servants and apprentices as well' (Gowing 2003, 60).

living in their masters' households), was regulated by statute, administered by magistrates and enforced by means of penal sanctions. As Douglas Hay and Paul Craven explain, labour was not 'free' in early modern England:

Master and servant law was carefully designed to create labor markets that were less costly, more highly disciplined, less 'free' than markets on which the master's bargain was not assisted by these terms ... Master and servant legislation was a catalog of constraints and disincentives: the penal sanctions, of course, but also minimum terms, maximum wages, discharge certificates, obligations and offenses ... all constitutive of the boundaries of the market within which bargaining could take place. (2004, 32-33)

It was not through civil remedies that employment law was administered by magistrates and enforced by means of 'Imprisonment and whipping and fines', Hay goes on to explain, but 'The law also gave remedies to workers, a fact of great significance for the public perception of the law' (2004, 61). In *Master and Servant* Steedman underlines the positive significance for servants of legal regulation, arguing that it made pre-industrial workers 'legal bodies with legal personae, in a way that their nineteenth-century counterparts were not' (2007, 14). And in a way in which twenty-first century domestic workers are not either, she adds in *Labours Lost*:

the young woman or man who was a permanent servant in the eighteenth-century household was a contracted employee who possessed rights within the relationship that could be – and sometimes was – upheld by law. The story of nineteenth-century and indeed, twentieth century domestic service, is to do with those legal rights being substantially lost. (2009, 28)

It was in legal hearings that such rights were articulated and applied. When employers charged their 'runaway' servants before magistrates with leaving before their agreed time was up, when servants charged their employers with failure to pay wages or withholding their possessions:

The law provided the formal means for both the making and understanding of social relations, personhood and identity. It told masters and mistresses, and men and maids, what was the godly and legal nature of what had passed between them when she had agreed at the hiring to wash the baby's nappies for 2s extra a year and a new gown; and he, to churn butter, but not to milk the cows. (14)

As even this brief quotation shows, Steedman likes to work with the material and the active; she is continually pushing home that things (nappies, new gowns, butter) animals (cows) and physical actions (washing, milking) are also 'good to think with'. We have been told umpteen times that the rising middle-class demand for domestic servants put those seeking work at an advantage, and that servants were highly mobile; eighteenth-century pamphlets rant bitterly about this, while conduct books for servants repeat *ad nauseam* (and inaptly)

that ‘a rolling stone gathers no moss’. What *Masters and Servants* and *Labours Lost*, and other recent social histories, are adding to the massive scholarship that underpins them is an imaginative ability to read between the lines and give documents, rulings and statistics the feel of the lived experience of ordinary people. The great fear of eighteenth-century mistresses, for instance, was

that the servants would leave, ‘run away’ to a place that gave her 1s a month more, tea to her breakfast and a new pair of stays, leaving her frantic, with no cook for the dinner, the house cow unmilked, slut’s wool under the beds, and a screaming, dirty baby. (Steedman 2009, 23)

4. *Cultural Forms*

A passage like this recalls Swift’s *Directions for Servants*, in which a fictional footman mercilessly points up the vulnerability of employers by homing in on physical details: chamber pots, hairs in the food, breathing in mistresses’ faces, dogs getting the joint. ‘The most available form for articulating this relationship [between owners and workers, masters and servants] was the comedic – and that it was thought of by means of things’, Steedman suggests (2009, 34). Comedic in mode, hugely various in form:

jokes, rude poetry and much ruder skits and satire upon servants that employers told in tap rooms to amuse their companions and ladies (High Court judges and the like) and locates it in the everyday world, in kitchens in particular. The invented voice of a servant in a novel, some actually existing maidservant’s impolite poem about her employer’s literary and culinary tastes – these were some of the forms with which the service relationship was articulated and argued about ... (15)

During the last twenty or so years literary scholars of post-Restoration England have been broadening the canon to include some of those voices and forms. Those of the ‘actually existing’ are mainly to be found in volumes of verse published by subscription, which is where Donna Landry found the poems by and about women of the labouring classes that are the subject of *The Muses of Resistance* (1990). One of these is Mary Leapor, a kitchen-maid who was dismissed for writing poetry, and who wrote some angry poems about the standards of beauty demanded of women; her ‘Crumble Hall’ satirised both boorish men servants and improving estate owners (1751, 111-122). Mary Collier was one of those who did some of the hardest drudgery in early modern England, laying her hand to any casual work available, from hay-making to beer-brewing and doing the wash. Her best-known poem, *The Woman’s Labour* (1739), is a sardonic riposte to (by now ex-farm labourer) Stephen Duck, who had written dismissively of women ‘prattling’ idly in the hay-field (1731, 6). Collier sets out to make ‘great DUCK’ and his like feel how it was to make hay

or glean corn all day only to return home to set the home in order 'Against your coming Home', to boil the bacon and dumplings, to feed the pigs, and mend the children's clothes (11). Even harder are the days on which the women rise in a freezing winter dawn to wash at 'the House' the latest new-fangled fashions in lace-edged muslins and ruffled shirts. Their men, by contrast, sleep till sun-up, their dreams perplexed at worst by thistles. But it is not only gender that brings privilege and earns Collier's sarcasm. 'Oppressed with Cold' the washer-women stand at the great house door calling in vain until 'the Maid, quite tir'd with Work the Day before / O'ercome with Sleep' (12) makes her appearance; the mistress appears later still, 'in her hand, *perhaps*, a Mug of Ale', and on her lips, recommendations to '*save her Soap, and sparing be of Fire*' (13-14).

There is nothing 'simple' about this poetry of protest. As Landry, and more recently Richardson (2010, 52-53) have noted, it eschews the traditionally 'popular' forms of the ballad and song, 'ventriloquizing' the dominant, satiric mode of Augustan literature and its favourite tetrameter metre, and thus challenging the 'verse forms and values of mainstream culture'. Collier 'turns the georgic to plebian feminist use'; Leapor 'turns the pastoral dialogue, the neo-classical epistle and the country-house poem to surprisingly unconventional ends'. A 'far from servile discourse' Landry call these poems:

The clever, skillful, sometimes brilliant appropriation of mainstream literary culture by these women, these examples of *les voleuses de langue*, the thieves of language who steal and fly, produces a discourse potentially more culturally critical in its implications than many later, more 'authentic' working-class self-representation. (Landry 1990, 13)

If we now find this sophistication strange, and even find it strange that plebian women wrote in verse at all, it is perhaps because we blot from our consciousness the fact that poetry was 'the most influential literary genre in eighteenth century England' (Weiss Smith 2014, xiv), accounting for forty-five per cent of published titles. In his Preface to his poem 'Servitude', Robert Dodsley, footman turned publisher, explained that he had written in verse in order to 'induce some of my Brethren to buy it, who other wise would not' (1729?, 3). If we do not take such statements seriously it may be due to our having embraced 'the notion that the rise of the novel is the central literary episode in the story of modernization' (Schmidgen 2014, 88). Over the past thirty years this notion has, Schmidgen argues, offered 'precious public legitimacy' to eighteenth-century literary scholars left bereft by loss of pride in the enlightenment. Yet novels accounted for less than eleven per cent of material published in the long eighteenth century. As far as I know no servant or labouring-class writer produced one, though probably many read them, in full or abridged versions, or had them read aloud to them in houses like the Berkshire rectory where George Woodward's twelve-year-old son read *Tom Jones* to an 'Audience in ye Kitchen' (quoted in Mullan and Reid 2000, 7).

That audience would have heard a lot about invented servants of various kinds. In 1986 Bruce Robbins, following in the tracks of Auerbach's *Mimesis*, examined the 'repertory of aesthetic functions' (103) performed by servants in narrative fiction from Homer to Woolf: framing, narrating, moving the plot, permitting ending. A synchronic study which explicitly eschews a historical perspective, *The Servant's Hand* nevertheless noticed the special powers wielded by servants in major eighteenth-century fiction. Robinson Crusoe, unable to answer Friday's rational objections to the Christian God's failure to kill the devil, pretends to be deaf in his efforts to evade his slave's penetrating questions (62-63). It is servants who bring about Tom Jones's restoration to name, family, love and land, and who, in a great rousing chorus, proclaim the happiest of happy endings; they can only do so because, unlike the heroes of Victorian novels, Tom drinks in the kitchen, a space not yet exclusively assigned to the labours of the lower classes (79). And while in the Victorian novel servants' verbal confrontations with their employers diminish 'in length, frequency, animation and centrality', eighteenth-century ones are filled with 'loquacious' master-servant pairings in which the two speak the same language:

No class-based distinction of dialect infringes ... on the long confidential session of Roxana and her maid or the quibbling, wordy battles between Pamela and her master ... As far as linguistic equipment is concerned ... [they] fight on more equal terms than any nineteenth century master and servant. (82)

In the summer house scene in *Pamela* Mr. B, unable to beat down his maid's arguments, tries 'shut[ting] down the conversation' with 'Do you know whom you speak to?', only to receive the answer 'Yes I do sir, too well!' (Richardson, 1958, 16). In the novels of the next century, Robbins suggests, such a dispute would never have started (1986, 83).

Much more recently, Kristina Straub has dealt with the problematic intimacy in master/mistress – servant relationships at the heart of five eighteenth-century canonical novels, as well as in theatrical contexts and in the conduct books and polemic writings through which moralists tried to contain not merely servants' economic and social aspirations but also their emotions and their sexuality. *Domestic Affairs: Intimacy, Eroticism, and Violence in Eighteenth-Century Britain* started out, Straub explains, as 'a cultural study of power relations', but ended up as a narrative

as much about love as about class conflict, as much about a desire for connection as about the creating of modern class differences ... polemical and imaginative literature on domestic service, servants and their employers often oppose, exploit, and even do violence to each other, but these stories also portray people who live with, work with, and often care a great deal about each other. (2009, 1)

An obvious example is *Pamela*, where Straub sees Richardson as constructing a radical third alternative to the servant as either whore or innocent child (stereotypes which dominate the advice books and pamphlets) in the person of a girl whose prudence, moral responsibility and polite sensibility contain and coexist with her sexuality, enabling desire to both feed on and float free from class difference. Straub sets the novel and the 'media event' it generated beside the two-year controversy over the disappearance of Elizabeth Canning. This eighteen-year-old servant girl claimed to have been kidnapped by a gypsy, Mary Squires, with the intent of forcing her into prostitution. The two stories are linked thematically, but also through Henry Fielding, first and foremost of the anti-Pamelites, first and foremost of the pro-Canningites. He was the Justice who first examined Canning, and he believed her; Squires went to trial and was convicted. But the verdict was fiercely contested by a lobby alleging that Canning had run away from her place in order to give birth to a bastard child. The 'Egyptians' eventually won out; Squires was released, Canning tried for perjury and transported.

Reading the *Pamela* and Canning controversies side by side helps us understand how servants' sexuality was debated within and without fiction, and how interpretation could be determined by eighteenth-century expectations about servant-maids' eroticism (the supposed ease with which they were seduced and tempted to infanticide), and stereotypes of gypsies as criminal predators on appetising young women. In this sense, Straub's study does what Lucy Delap's book on twentieth-century servants has been praised for: weaving together 'lived experience and cultural representation', so reaping 'the benefits of bringing cultural and social histories into closer alignment' (Peel 2014, 444). Yet, for a book that is as much about emotions and sexuality as economics and labour relations, *Domestic Affairs* remains rather 'removed from ... materiality' (Lloyd 2009). If, as Steedman suggests,

The servant's dream, 'the endless longing of the underprivileged that history (and life) be different from what it has been, and what it still is', was more available to eighteenth-century domestic servants than other categories of labouring people. (2009, 5)

– shouldn't we be asking whether actual servant girls like Canning dreamt of following in *Pamela's* footsteps, and attaining the high life? What about Fielding, the aristocrat whom Richardson had likened to a hostler, who got his own servant pregnant and married her, who as polemicist joined the chorus of disapproval of servants, but in practice took the part of many, and gave them agency in his fiction? The awful stories of Canning's disappearance (both are awful, no matter which was true), of the trial and conviction of Mary Squires, of the subsequent trial and conviction of the servant, are discussed as enigmas, interpretative cruxes and problems of narrative plausibility – which of course

they are; but they are also stories about real people whose lives depended, quite literally, on which of them was believed by judge and jury.

5. *And Where Do We Go From Here?*

I have here copied the title of the final section of Elizabeth Rivlin's essay in this volume in spite of the fact that I have chosen to survey studies of domestic service in post-Restoration England from an angle very different from that chosen by her in surveying studies of the earlier period. This is partly a matter of personal preference, and partly because I think it fair to say that long eighteenth-century studies have not, over the past thirty years or so, produced the wealth of excellent literary scholarship of the kind dedicated to the aesthetics and ethics of service in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England. Eighteenth-century historians, on the other hand, have gone a long way towards showing that servants can help us think (or think-through) the social; so, for that matter can the middling and lower-sort people who employed them (these have been rather neglected, as have the men and boys who constituted a minority, but still an important proportion of domestic servants). It is not, as was once thought, impossible to understand the lives and culture of the ordinary and less-than-literate people who made up the vast majority of the population. If we read with imagination and patience, read between the lines and against the grain, paying attention also to the givens, and at what the things and spaces can tell us,¹⁴ we can see a great deal of their side of the story, of their relations with each other and with those richer and in a better position to determine how the future would remember them.

It is now becoming easier to do this kind of study thanks to the digitalizing of archives. Kussmaul, Earle, Kent, Meldrum, Steedman, Humfrey and countless others had to plough through manually (though material documents always tell us more than we can get through a computer screen). The *Old Bailey Online* and its sister archive, *London Lives*, now makes it possible to write short biographies of most of those who spent part of their lives in London between 1672 and 1913 (a large section of the population of England), and the *Digital Miscellanies Index* allows us to study reception and reading of poetry like that of Leapor and Collier more

¹⁴ As Amanda Vickery writes, "The backdrop of a life is rarely the fodder of diaries and letters, just as routine are less interesting to record than events. They were taken as read at the time, and so remain elusive"; nevertheless with a certain 'versatility of approach' criminal records, for example, 'can be used quantitatively to chart the pans, teapots and boxes ordinary people had in their possession to begin with, and they can be read against the grain to rebuild boundaries that Georgian people, rich and poor alike, sought to defend' (2009, 4-5).

systematically. We now need to learn how to use these resources without getting lost in the big data, and use them in connected ways. Elizabeth Rivlin's call in this volume for better collaboration between literary scholars and historians is very much in the spirit of *JEMS*. She offers as an example a suggestion that geospatial mapping might be used to study the daily routes and migratory patterns of men and women in early modern London, and be read alongside discussions of women's work in early modern drama, such as that of Michelle Dowd (2009). Analogously one could compare the voices of servants accusing, defending and giving evidence at the Old Bailey with accounts of 'insufferable behaviour' contained in the polemics, and the more complex voices we hear in novels. In Defoe's fiction, for instance, domestic servants take on surprising functions. Robbins wrote of Friday putting to his master rational theological arguments Crusoe is unable to answer, Straub of Amy, a maid loyal to the point of (perhaps) committing murder to save a 'Mistress' who is indeed a 'Fortunate', if devotion is the most prized quality in a servant. In *Moll Flanders* service takes in various guises: as a girl Moll is reluctant to serve, but she does acquire an advantageous marriage opportunity by doing so, and when both marriage and needlework fail to provide the older woman with a means of livelihood and she takes to thieving, she is eventually caught and sent for trial, thanks not to any constable or to the broker whose damask she had meant to steal, but to two determined 'saucy Wenches' whose wages, as maid-servants to the broker, amount to £3 a year (2004, 214).

One might never have expected the author of *Every Body's Business is Nobody's Business*, *The Great Law of Subordination* and *Augusta Triumphans* to have invented maid-servants so zealous in policing their employer's property. But then we should perhaps be looking, both in fiction and out of it, for servants, and other ordinary people, behaving in unexpected ways; looking beyond what (we think) happens 'normally' and 'usually', to people such as the Anglican clergyman, John Murgatroyd, who allowed his servant, Phoebe Beatson, to bear her illegitimate baby in his house, kept her in his employ and left her a good sum in his will (Steedman 2007, 1). We have seen other examples of behaviour which might seem strange to us: an illiterate but sluttish maid in Maine, repeatedly running off to the woods, complaining about her bedding; a London poulterer's servant testifying in court to her mistress's sexual propriety, and against a nosey neighbour; a washer-woman writing disrespectful verse satire on husbands, mistresses and live-in maids. We might be better prepared to find more people like these, and see how they relate to cultural representations if, as Schmidgen urges, we stopped demanding 'modernity' from eighteenth century writers, stopped searching for 'bounded individuality' in the characters they invented, and distinct generic unity in their texts. 'Novelism', Schmidgen claims, has blinded us not only to the uses made of poetic genres by all

classes of society, but to the aesthetic Defoe's title pages lay claim to: an aesthetic of the strange and surprising, an aesthetic of inconsistency and endless, limit-defying variety (2014, 95).

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